

Where in the World? Adult Educator Learning and Professional Development Leading Study Abroad Programs

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Abstract

In this summary of on-going research, we discuss our investigation about adult educator motivations and professional development to lead study abroad programs for adults.

Key words: adult study abroad, international adult and higher education, faculty professional development, international teaching

Global intersections of economies, politics, and education require adults to develop cognitive and affective flexibilities to interact effectively across work and living situations. A way to support this learning outcome in adult higher education is to offer education abroad programs – often short-term international field experiences led by faculty for adult students who cannot afford the time and costs associated with longer programs. The influence of study abroad participation on students' ability to acquire 21st century professional skills is well supported within the literature (DuVivier & Patitu, 2017; Sisavath, 2021); as such, higher education (HE) is engaging internationalization strategies providing learners with global competencies that align with new professional requirements and heightened citizenship expectations.

Arguably, critical to successful internationalization is sufficiently supported and motivated faculty (Rasckosk & Robinson, 2019). Broadened academic experiences of students and academic staff is necessary (Knight, 2004). As such, it is critical institutional leaders understand faculty's needs and motivations through well-developed professional development. Motivating factors for leading study abroad programs may spur from previous personal international experience, professional growth in disciplinary knowledge, personal learning, increasing creativity in teaching, and personal growth (Loebick, 2017). As well, while a general acknowledgment of the importance of faculty professional development (PD) is implied across the study abroad literature, very little exists detailing what PD should look like in preparation for leading a study abroad program (Tovar & Misischia, 2020). However, we do know that faculty must be prepared to design the learning including outcome goals and preparation for international experiences predeparture (internationalization at home), during (curriculum design and experiential learning), and after they've returned home (reflection) (Coryell, 2013).

In the current study, we were interested in the experiences of adult education faculty who have experience teaching in study abroad programs. Faculty who teach adult students abroad participate within a variety of communities of practice that may (or may not) help them to prepare to engage students in cross-cultural experiences in another culture and country (Romero & Vasilopoulos, 2020). Correspondingly, we asked the following research questions through the theoretical lenses of communities of practice and experiential learning: What motivations do adult educators have to teach students abroad in their programs? And, in what ways, and with whom, do adult educators learn about and prepare to teach students abroad? This qualitative study involves an interpretive exchange process that enables researchers and respondents to make meaning of the phenomenon being investigated (Merriam, 2009). We employed

interpretive phenomenology, and data were gathered through participant interviews. Preliminary thematic qualitative analysis was used to analyze data gathered from five faculty participants (three women and two men) who work in adult education/HRD programs across the U.S.

Participants led courses in Thailand, Mexico, Paris, Russia, Vietnam, England, and the Netherlands. The decision to engage in faculty-led study abroad was often borne from previous connections to a foreign location, whether personal, professional, or both. Importantly, having an opportunity to bring adult students to engage in cross-cultural learning within the contexts of language learning, community research, comparative post-secondary education, and organizational leadership was highlighted. As well, three of the five participants discussed intentionally engaging in this work so that their students could come into contact and build problem-solving relationships with like-cultural communities in the foreign country: Black Americans learning about Black existentialism in French Black communities, indigenous Americans learning with indigenous Russian communities, and Latinx students living with researching alongside Mexican community members. PD for teaching in these programs came from formal training and academic programs in cross-cultural learning and teaching (1 participant), but for the others, instructional development and understanding about the logistical nuances of teaching in a foreign environment came from informal learning experiences: on-the-job circumstances and happenings, and importantly, from other professors who acted as mentors, co-instructors, confidants, and friends. All of the participants emphasized their deep-seated desire to provide opportunities for “meaningful” and “reflective” “authentic experiences” for their learners. And, importantly, most learned the importance over multiple iterations of their programs to be more intentional in their learning and curricular designs to reach these important yet complex outcome goals.

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