

DOI: 10.5191/jiaee.2011.18102

Identifying Best Practices for a Successful Study Abroad Program

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the best practices of study abroad programs before, during, and after the experience. The results of this study will add further to implementing quality educational programs in agricultural and life sciences. A qualitative methodology with participant observation was employed to provide a thick and rich examination of a study abroad experience conducted in Latin America. Results provided specific best practices for activities before, during, and after such an experience. Recommendations and implications are provided.

Keywords: Study abroad, globalization, educational programs, international experience

Introduction

Globalization is not a new concept. It has been around for centuries beginning with the discovery and colonization of new continents. However in the past few decades, it has become an important process that impacts everyone. Inada and Rosaldo (2006) defined globalization as “spatial–temporal processes, operating on a global scale that rapidly cut across national boundaries, drawing more and more of the world into webs of interconnection, integrating and stretching cultures and communities across space and time, and compressing our spatial and temporal horizons” (p. 12). It is the role of education to provide students with experiences that they can apply in a culturally diverse work place. Being culturally aware can have impacts not only globally, but locally as well. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Report on Global Engagement (2006) provided the following data: immigrants now supply from 12% to 22% of the U.S. workforce in highly skilled occupations; foreign born workers make up 44% of the U.S. workforce in agriculture. One does not even need to leave home to encounter cross–cultural issues.

Theoretical Framework

Study abroad programs are an ideal demonstration of experiential learning. Kolb (1984) defined it as: “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (p. 41). Beard and Wilson (2006) further defined experiential learning as “the sense–making process of active engagement between the inner world of the person and the outer world of the environment” (p. 2). During a study abroad, the student is constantly engaged as a whole person: thoughts, feelings, and physical activities. This active engagement is one of the basic components of experiential learning (Beard & Wilson, 2006).

Roberts and Jones (2009) examined the relationship between study abroad experiences and experiential learning and created “a theoretically–based experiential framework for international experiences based on cognitive science” (p.405). The authors developed a framework as a guide to experiential learning for international experiences. The model is divided into three main events: before, during, and after an international experience. Each event has specific components meant to facilitate the learning process throughout the experience. Roberts and Jones stated that “implementing this framework should enhance learning and thus make graduates better prepared for a global society” (p. 409).

Previous Research

There is much that is needed to prepare the student before they embark on a study abroad. McGowan (2007) stated that “without the proper preparation and knowledge of what to expect when entering another country, one will not reap the full benefits from such a program” (p. 62). The outcomes of an international educational experience are highly dependent on the amount of preparation the participant received prior to traveling (Tritz & Martin, 1997). Not only should a student be prepared logistically, but they should also be prepared for learning (Roberts & Jones, 2009).

The first step to prepare a student for an international experience is reflection. Jones and Bjelland (2004) defined reflection as “the process of being consciously aware of the expectations associated with the learning experience” (p. 963). If a student is made aware of their expectations beforehand, they are more likely to meet them throughout the experience and accordingly will be more in tune with their learning process. “Students who are involved in facilitated reflection will be able to utilize the process of reflecting upon concrete learning experience in a greater degree than will those students who receive no reflection facilitation” (Jones & Bjelland, 2004, p. 963). This method of reflection allows students to prepare for

learning. “By preparing learners in advance, they can be better prepared to interpret the plethora of data and focus on aspects most important for their learning” (Roberts & Jones, 2009, p. 405).

Along with reflection and learner preparation, it is important to address a student’s emotional state. If the student feels worried about or feels threatened by the experience, they will not be receptive to learning. Fear and other primary emotions have an important impact on learning (Beard & Wilson, 2006). By addressing a student’s emotions, they will be able to focus on other aspects of their experience.

As unique human beings, every learner being has previous experiences and knowledge that they call upon when learning something new. “Each experience is influenced by the unique past of the learner” (Beard & Wilson, 2006, p. 21). Learners build their new knowledge upon existing knowledge, accordingly, it is important to be aware of a student’s previous experiences and stereotypes if any (Roberts & Jones, 2009). “Allowing students to use their background experiences to interact provided a positive learning environment . . .” (Wingenbach, Chmielewski, Smith, Piña, & Hamilton, 2006, p. 80).

As a student is engaged in their international experience, it is important to aid in the synthesis of information they are receiving. Reflection is a crucial part of experiential learning. Beard and Wilson (2006) contend that without reflection, “the experience will tend to merge with the background of all the stimulants that assail our senses . . .” (p. 20). The international setting could potentially be overpowering to the student. To help the assimilation of new knowledge, at times guided reflection is necessary. Roberts and Jones (2009) said that “with an overabundance of culturally and cognitively complex situations that occur in an international experience, learners (especially novices) may need guided reflection” (p. 407). Guided reflection may be implemented through directed journaling or group reflection sessions.

An international experience does not end with the student’s return to their home country. Everything seems to move so quickly during their stay, that at times, the reflection after their experience will help make certain connections and lead to realizations that perhaps they had not had the time to make during the experience. By reflecting once again, they are able to somewhat relive their experience which can prove to be very beneficial to their learning process. This further reflection will continue the learning experience for the learner by keeping their attention to the experience for a longer amount of time (Roberts & Jones, 2009, p. 407). Not only is reflecting on the experience important, but also to ensure that the reflection connects “back to the goals established during reflection” (Roberts & Jones, 2009, p. 407). Looking back at the goals set at the beginning will refocus the student and help them make further forward progress towards those goals. A student’s awareness of their learning process, their goals and accomplishments, will likely encourage motivation for further learning.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify the best practices of study abroad programs before, during, and after the experience. A single research question was answered. What are the best practices for conducting a study abroad experience?

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was implemented to achieve the research purpose through a thick, rich examination a study abroad case study. The goal of qualitative research is to understand the phenomenon from the participant’s perspectives, not the researcher’s (Merriam, 1998). This study used words and pictures rather than numbers to convey the findings from the research.

This case study was comprised of seventeen participants recruited to take part in this study abroad from four different North American universities. Of the participants, eleven were

female and six were male, ranging in age from 20 to 27 years. Thirteen of the participants were undergraduate students and four of the participants were graduate students. There were two lead professors from different universities working closely with the students during their study abroad. The researcher was a participant with a role as the teaching assistant. Merriam (1998) defined an ‘observer as participant’ as the researcher observing and interacting “closely enough with members to establish an insider’s identity . . .” (p. 101). In this role, the researcher was able to get to know the students on a personal level. Her teaching assistant responsibilities also allowed her to observe the students in all aspects of their study abroad experience.

The students spent three weeks in the Latin American country. Not one of the students had been to that particular country, many had never been to Latin America, and several were embarking on an international journey for the first time. The goals of this case were to give the students a solid interdisciplinary view of sustainable agriculture and entrepreneurship in the tropics. The students were engaged in various activities to learn more about topics such as crop production, Latin American reality, and entrepreneurship. Content also explored plant medicine, soil sciences, and sustainability.

During the international experience, the students were asked to keep a journal not only for research purposes, but also as a fundamental part of the course. This journal was private to the individual, required for every day, and served as a personal reflection of the day’s activities, etc. The researcher also held five reflection sessions to guide students to think about the information gathered and make connections.

Data Collection

The researcher had unlimited access to the participants throughout the experience. Merriam (1998) stated that observation is useful in many ways, one being that “the participant observer sees things firsthand and uses his or her own knowledge and expertise in interpreting what is observed rather than relying upon once-removed accounts from interviews [or journals]” (p. 96). Accordingly, the researcher took detailed field notes every day. “What is written down or mechanically recorded from a period of observation becomes the raw data from which a study’s findings eventually emerge” (Merriam, p. 104). The researcher also carried a digital camera to capture data in the form of photos.

Based on the researcher’s observations, key individuals were identified for semi-structured interviews. As a semi-structured interview, Merriam (1998) stated this format “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (p. 74). It was chosen in order to clarify an observation reflected in the field notes while also having the freedom to explore other topics of interest revealed in the interview.

Lastly, the researcher collected daily journal entries from each of the students through means of a wiki page. Klien, Lawver, and Davis (2007) emphasized that “journals offer accurate perspectives of participants at a specific time, eliminating any change of perspective due to post phenomenon experiences” (p. 101). Access to the student’s personal journals was given to the researcher. Merriam (1998) gave support for using all three methods of data collection: “[Observation] offers a firsthand account of the situation under study and, when combined with interviewing and document analysis, allows for a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated” (p. 111).

Denzin and Lincoln (1995) stated that in order to develop an intertwined set of data to give a better perception of the phenomenon, various methods should be implemented. Merriam (1998) further corroborated stating that the use of triangulation in a qualitative study would allow for a holistic understanding of the situation. Accordingly, the researcher used student journals, her own field notes and personal journal, along with personal interviews and reflection

sessions. This use of triangulation allowed the researcher to see the phenomena from a number of different views.

Data Analysis

Merriam (1998) stated that “data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research . . . Analysis begins with the first interview, the first observation, the first document read” (p. 151). With this in mind, the researcher engaged herself in rudimentary data analysis throughout the experience. This allowed her to identify students to interview based on researcher field notes, guide conversations during the reflection sessions, and to further investigate interesting leads. The researcher attempted to transcribe the reflection sessions as soon after the event as possible, that way again, she would be engaged in the analysis process throughout. At the end of the experience, she then transcribed her field notes, personal journals, and compiled student journals into a reader friendly format. Some system to keep track of and organize all data should be identified early (Merriam, 1998). For this study, the qualitative data analysis tool called Weft QDA was used to store and organize data.

Trustworthiness and Transferability

Trustworthiness in a qualitative study is defined as being the reliability of a qualitative study; “the extent to which data and findings would be similar if the study were replicated” (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006, p.509). Guba (1981) recommended specific strategies be used to attain trustworthiness such as peer debriefing, prolonged engagement and persistent observation, audit trails, and member checks. In this study, participant observation, an audit trail, and member checks were employed. The audit trail allows an independent party to examine the study and attest to the dependability of the researcher’s procedures and determine whether the findings were grounded in the data collected (Ary et al., p. 509). Member checks are defined by Merriam (1998) as “taking data and tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived an asking them if the results were plausible” (p. 204). Transferability is “the degree to which the findings of a qualitative study can be applied or generalized to other contexts or to other groups” (Ary et al., 2006, p. 507). In order to increase transferability of this study, the researcher provided a thick, rich, detailed description of the context and participants so that potential users could make judgment about similarity (Ary et al., p. 507).

Findings

Before the Experience

As previously stated, there were four pre-sessions for this experience. The first pre-session dealt with expectations where students were given both course expectations and overall expectations. The importance of activities before an international experience can help ease student worries:

I have never left the country before and I don't know what to expect. . . Where am I living? Do I need more money? Do I have my passport? These questions race through my mind even though I am staring at my passport. I don't understand it. I am normally very independent. . . (10)

The second pre-session was dedicated to discussing how to reflect using a journal and identifying perceptions. The students discussed the value to having a journal and how to use it as tool for self-regulated reflection. When identifying perceptions, the students were asked what they thought their host country would be like. Many students believed that it would be

underdeveloped with poverty prevalent in most of the country (6, 8, 10, & 13). Part of perceptions is to address concerns as well. Some students expressed concern with personal safety, food availability, and water safety (9 & 12). These concerns were voiced from students that had never visited Latin America or had never left the United States.

The third pre-session addressed cultural awareness focusing on specifics about their host country and intercultural communication. The students were very excited to learn about their host country and expressed appreciation for having a base understanding of the country they would visit. During this session, students also learned more about their host university. One student stated that she was even more excited now that she was learning more about the cultures of both the host country and at the host university (9). Three students also expressed their concerns for not being at all familiar with the language (3, 9, & 10). One said that she would have liked to learn more Spanish before leaving (9).

The last pre-session was dedicated to traveler's tips and setting big picture goals. During this session, students expressed concern with what to pack and bring. One student asked what specific clothing was required (12). Setting goals is an important part of preparation. Many students stated that their main goal was to learn as much as possible about their host country (7, 8, 9, & 11). Very few students stated goals pertaining to the course in general.

During the Experience

The following themes emerged from the data during the experience: language barriers, cultural differences, course structure, and reflection.

Language barriers. The first theme that was evident amongst most participants was their thoughts about language and culture within their host country. Some of the students expressed concerns about the challenges of communication. One of the students expressed:

The language barrier made things a little difficult, but I was able to piece most things together from the other students... It is easier to communicate when you are trying to get something accomplished than when you are just explaining . . . You really create a special bond with someone after working with them and experiencing their everyday life, even if you don't speak the same language. (1)

She found she was able to make better connections despite the language barrier through active interaction with the other person. Other students found the language barrier affected their learning experience (4 & 15). One student expressed dissatisfaction with a selective part of the course because some of the information was "lost in translation" (7). This same student also made an interesting connection between language and culture by saying that her host farm's owner did not speak their (the students') language both literally and culturally (7). The students had to work hard to be able to communicate their thoughts at times. This is well illustrated through Figure 1.



Figure 1. Participant speaking with a farm owner, listening intently, and taking notes.

Cultural differences. Some students can be sensitive to cultural differences, while others may not. A few of the differences expressed included the pace of life being much slower, relaxing/ “taking things in stride,” Latin America being a culture of food, sense of community, open and inviting individuals, gender roles, and the different views of socioeconomic status. Students felt the slower pace the moment they arrived in Latin America (3, 9, & 16). A few students struggled with this early in the experience but adjusted by the end of the trip. They learned to relax and accept what was happening even if it was different than originally planned. Students were also amazed that a visit to someone’s home typically included food prepared in their honor (4 & 13). The local people demonstrated their willingness to open their homes. Figure 2 illustrates an example of Latin American hospitality.



Figure 2. A local woman cooking in honor of students visiting her house.

A few other differences observed were those of gender roles. Through their interaction with rural farmers, students saw gender roles in Latin America clearly demonstrated. Some students felt pressure to assume the same roles (7 & 15). Lastly, the students felt a significant difference between their American cultures and the Latin culture when it came to the disparity of wealth displayed through different socioeconomic status (Researcher’s field notes, June 2). Students visited two very different groups of farmers, one group obviously more affluent than the other. Students made comments about the less affluent families living situations but realized that those families felt blessed with what they had and were relatively happy with their homes (4, 6, & 9).

Course structure. Participants also reflected about the activities of the experience. The first was the amount of time spent in the classroom (Researcher’s field notes, June 8). Every student expressed that too much time was spent in the classroom. One student stated: “I think that there should be a lot less emphasis on time spent in the classroom and more emphasis on

experiential learning” (2). The group as a whole expressed this during one of the reflection sessions: “There has been too much lecture. We sit in a classroom all day. It’s hot and miserable. This course was supposed to be experiential learning. When are you going to experience?” (Researcher’s field notes, May 28). Another student suggested: “... more time outside interacting with natives or students. I enjoyed the sciences in the classroom but I feel that a good amount of time was wasted in class” (16). Figure 3 illustrates students preferred learning activities.



Figure 3. Examples of students’ preferred learning activities.

Students found that they valued hands on experiences more than being in the classroom. One student stated:

The hands on experiences that we get from this course are much better ways to learn than sitting in the classroom. I understand that parts of the learning need to occur in the classroom, but I enjoy getting the chance to apply our knowledge in the field. (7)

Several students found that learning through experience was highly valuable. They also enjoyed the experience more when they were involved in the learning. “I think it was really good to get out into the field and actually see what we had been talking about in class. Most of this trip has done a good job getting us to learn through experience. It’s incredible how effective this is” (1). Figure 4 shows students in the classroom as part of several lecture sessions throughout their experience.



Figure 4. Students in a classroom during one of several lectures.

Throughout the course, the professor planned off campus activities to add to their learning experience. There were farm visits, tours, and fun activities. The students felt that their farm visits were able to give them a view of the culture that they were not able to see sitting in a

classroom. Students made comments such as: “I feel [the farm visit] gave us a good chance to not only study but actually be in the shoes of the people we are studying” (8), “This experience was completely eye opening. It has to be my favorite part by far” (10), and “Each person was excitedly discussing their farm visit from that day, and all that they had heard and learned about. They had all experienced different things, but all felt that they learned much” (14). Figure 5 exemplifies the students’ excitement over their farm visits.



Figure 5. Students with the children at their farm visits.

Students also had extracurricular tours of various farming activities. Some students felt that the farm tours were a valuable experience: “It was amazing to see how coffee is grown, and I wish that we had been given more of an opportunity earlier in this trip to actually see the landscape and farms in this country” (2), “I loved the coffee plantation. I thought it was so amazing that we were able to see a different aspect of the industry” (7), and “We then headed to the tilapia farm, which I really enjoyed” (13). Other students felt that the farm visits were not as useful. A few students commented that they liked the farm visits but did not see the value in going because they did not see how it tied into the overall course or because they were just observers (Researcher’s field notes, June 8). When it came to the fun activities, student’s main comments pertained to coordination and timing. Nearly all students criticized waiting long periods of time for events due to poor coordination (Researcher’s field notes, June 8).

Lastly, students valued free time and the time they had to themselves. One student commented saying: “The hour or so of free time at the end of the evening is nice because it allows us to unwind from the day and to also get to know our fellow students without being in a big group all the time” (3). Several students commented that they truly enjoyed time on their own to relax, explore, and catch up on work (9, 11, 13 & 14). Many students agreed with the following suggestions: “would have been nice to perhaps have class in the morning and then free time in the afternoons. More balance and structure on a day by day basis. It would be better than a whole day of lecture and then a whole day of work outside” (Researcher’s field notes, June 8). Figure 6 shows the students spending their time off together at a location they discovered on the host campus.



Figure 6. Students enjoying their time off together as they explored their host location.

Reflection. Students also made comments about the importance of reflection sessions. Most of the comments were positive comments pertaining to reflection.

Tonight was our first reflection session. I found this to be a very powerful tool in solidifying our ideas and opinions on the course. It was a chance for us to "tell it like it is" and I also found it to be an informal way to get know each other better. I am excited to have more of these as the days go by. (15)

Another student commented saying: "It was interesting to hear the other students' opinions of our time here. It helped me to think about things in a new way and even helped to strengthen my ideas when I heard others present conflicting arguments" (1). Students also made comments saying that without the guided reflections they may not have had the opportunity to speak to anyone about the topics at hand (Researcher's field notes, May 22). This particular student spoke about her experience saying: "I was forced to reevaluate my stance on a number of issues based on other students' comments, but that's good because it forces me to keep my mind open" (9). Figure 7 shows students during their reflective session. Students were courteous and open to what their classmates had to say.



Figure 7. Students during their reflection session.

The reflection sessions also served as catharsis for some students about their feelings. "A lot of negative energy was released as people spoke of the complaints, disappointments about the program so far, and solutions were discussed. It was a much needed release and I believe things will improve because of it" (9). Students felt that the reflection sessions were a way to synthesize the information they were learning, and also "a good way to communicate our concerns and solutions about the program" (9).

After the Experience

Data pertaining to after the experience was limited. Students did comment on their thoughts on how this experience has changed their ideas for future personal plans. One student wrote the following after he arrived home:

First of all I want to say that my life has changed. I'm still not sure everything has sunk in. My motivation has peaked. I feel like I should strive to be more aware of reality. I have been trying to tell everyone I know about what went on but I cannot use enough good adjectives. Hopefully I will be able to continue reflecting on the experience and elaborate to others. I think everyone that went on the trip bonded like family almost. The sweating was my favorite—there is nothing more fulfilling to me than being tired at the end of the day. On this trip I was tired at the end of every day, and I think that says enough . . . Overall I am excited about my next adventure, and I can only hope it is an equally good learning experience! (16)

Another student expressed his interest for further travel: “I retained and grew my interest for traveling. Going [abroad] showed me that I want to keep traveling and seeing more things. There is so much out there, and I want to see at least a few parts of it” (14). Another student expressed his desire through this study abroad to acquire information and ideas to bring them back to his university and start planning future projects (5). An additional student said: “I think it allowed us to engage in a way that most tourists never have the chance to. I met a lot of good people . . . and engaged in many activities that will be with me for a lifetime” (16).

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

Before the Experience

Based on the data collected, the best practices before are: addressing concerns about safety, cultural considerations, travel preparation, identifying preexisting knowledge, and reflection. To begin, a student must feel comfortable before further learning can be addressed. Beard and Wilson (2006) found that some primary emotions such as fear can have an important impact on learning. Concurringly, Wingenbach et al. (2006) found that students were unwilling to participate in international experiences because of barriers such as: safety concerns, lack of cultural knowledge, communication barriers, and fear of the unknown to name a few. To address these fears, pre-sessions geared towards particular topics can greatly reduce a student's worries about embarking on a study abroad.

Addressing concerns about safety and cultural considerations early can greatly enhance a student's ability to learn before departure and upon arrival in the foreign country. Tritz and Martin (1997) stated that “with experience, a new country or new situation is handled better because psychologically one is better prepared” (p. 52). Giving the students an overview of cultural practices and how they might be encountered will help identify potential cultural shock that could be a factor feeding their fear. According to McGowan (2007), “preparation aids students with cross-cultural adjustments and makes experiencing another culture more enjoyable resulting in a more rewarding study abroad program” (p. 65). Further preparation should also include traveler tips. Students tend to worry excessively about what to bring and have a tendency to over pack for their study abroad experience (McGowan, 2007). A packing list specific to their program can be tremendously helpful. Having this in hand will further allow students to concentrate on other aspects of their study abroad preparation.

The previous topics were geared towards the emotional and physical needs of the learners prior to the experience. Roberts and Jones (2009) stated that “educators should make sure students have sufficient details about the experience and its’ potential application to reduce anxiety and stress while at the same time increasing excitement and focus” (p. 406). Preflection is important to help enhance their focus.

During the Experience

While the students are in country, they will have an overwhelming amount of stimuli to sort through. It is the educator’s duty to help the students through the process of sorting through and making connections. The data collected presented the following best practices during a study abroad: course structure, community involvement, extracurricular activities, and reflection. The most important best practice is to prepare the course structure to give the students the most interactive experience possible.

During the study abroad, the student is looking to experience their course content in the environment in which they find themselves. The educator should ensure that their course allows for this. Students felt that they were spending too much time in the classroom and not enough ‘experiencing’. Similarly, the students stated that they valued hands on experiences more than knowledge gained in a classroom setting. Beard and Wilson (2006) emphasized the need to link the mind and the body. Students felt they learned better and more when working one on one with the topic at hand. Involving the student in their learning experience will produce better results.

Course structure also includes planned ‘down time’ for the students. In this study, students did not have much time for themselves although when they were given some time, they enjoyed building the relationships amongst their fellow classmates, having time to work on course assignments, exploring their environment. Students commented that they were glad for time off scheduled course activities. Accordingly, three weeks of an intense study abroad experience can create a severe fatigue in the students. Students need to have this ‘down time’ in order to recover from the day’s activities, synthesize what they have experiences thus far, and prepare themselves for further learning.

Involving oneself in the community in their host country is an excellent way to enhance cultural awareness and to allow students to make further connections with their location. Students not only enjoyed their interactions with local families but also felt that they were able to experience another part of their host country that they may not have otherwise. Additionally, students appreciate their interactions with students from the host university. McGowan (2007) encouraged students to make friends with host country students and spend time with them. Engaging on a personal basis allows students learn more about the culture and have the experience of sharing their own with others.

Lastly but most importantly, the best practice for a study abroad program is the inclusion of reflection during the experience. Roberts and Jones (2009) emphasized reflection as a necessary part of an international experience. This is not only beneficial for the student but also for the instructors and the program itself. Including the students in decision making for activities within the course will make them feel more a part of the process. Students valued their guided reflection time. It was used not only as an exchange of ideas but also a time to express their thoughts and emotions about a number of issues. Another excellent reflection tool is personal journaling. This allows students to reflect on their experiences and synthesize their inputs further.

After the Experience

As indicated earlier, the data collection protocol provided little data about after an experience. Despite the lack of data, there are two best practices that should be implemented

after a study abroad experience: reflection and motivating students for further learning. It was evident that reflection after the experience was needed. At the end of the experience, ideally, the students would have had another reflective session after a few weeks. It might take a student to remove him or herself from the experience to see how his or her life has changed. This post reflection would allow students to explore how the experience changed them and what they had learned after reflecting on the experience as a whole.

Students found that they had increased motivation to learn more about other cultures, to travel again, and even had peaked career interests. Dwyer and Peters (2004) found that the “long term impact of study abroad on a student’s personal, professional, and academic life . . . [is] that study abroad positively and unequivocally influences the career path, world-view, and self-confidence of students” (p. 56).

Summary

The study abroad experience starts before the students depart for their host country and continues well after the student returns for the program. Understanding this, educators facilitating study abroad programs should incorporate the experiential learning theory into the experience as the student is constantly experiencing and learning. In lieu of the above, the study at hand found best practices for study abroad programs through information given from participants on an international experience. Using student journals, researcher field notes, reflection sessions, and personal interviews, the researcher built the study on three different stages: before, during, and after. Similar themes were identified and used to create a model (Figure 8) to depict the best practices for each stage. Study abroad programs should be coordinated with the student in mind. Doing so would incorporate best practices to enhance student learning and engagement throughout the experience.

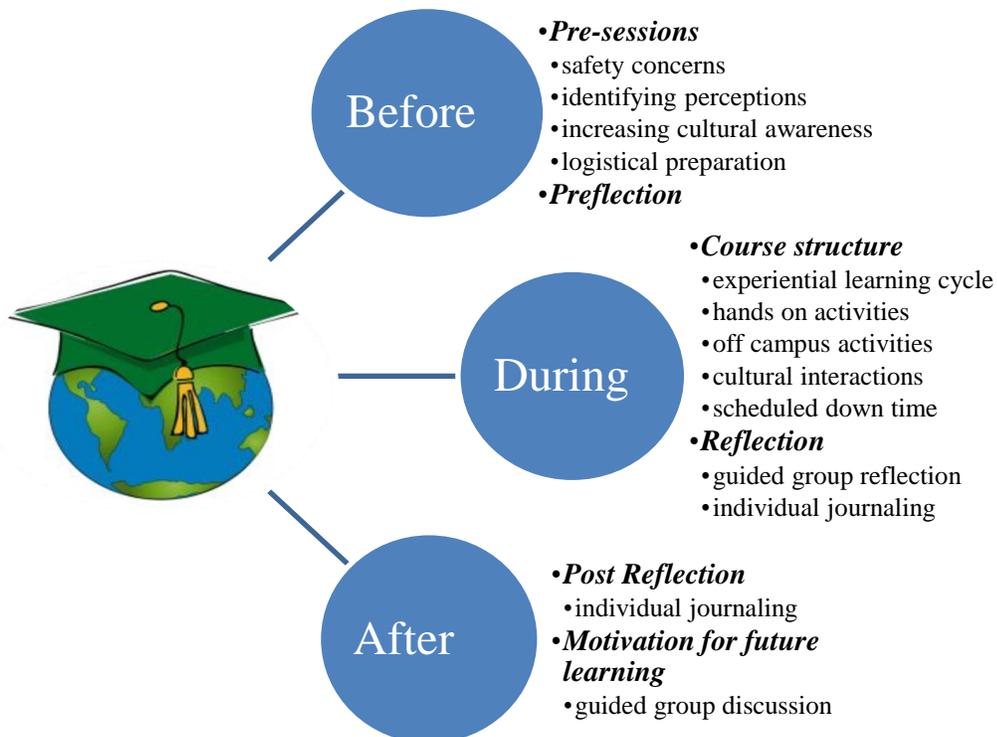


Figure 8. A model for best practices in study abroad programs.

This model can provide a guide for educators to use while planning study abroad programs. Although this model may not capture every possible factor that could be applicable in every situation, it does provide a good starting point. The conclusions drawn in this study do imply that educators should consider the study abroad experience holistically by thinking about learning before, during, and after the experience. The extent that educators consider learning activities before and after a study abroad experience is unknown. Ultimately, doing so should allow for the quality of the experience to be enhanced and greater student learning.

The findings in this study also yield recommendations for further research. The qualitative methodology used in this study allowed for an in-depth examination of this particular study abroad experience. Further research should examine study abroad experiences of different lengths, different locations, and with different foci. These examinations should incorporate both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Only through such a thorough examination can the complete picture be discovered.

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