

Reflecting on Intercultural Learning in Study Abroad

Written by Andrea Paras and Lynne Mitchell

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/06/06/reflecting-on-intercultural-learning-in-study-abroad/>

ANDREA PARAS AND LYNNE MITCHELL, JUN 6 2016

Does the age-old assumption that travel broadens the mind really hold true? In a widely read Huffington blog post, former voluntourist Pippa Biddle criticized the “white savior complex” that permeates many short-term volunteer programs. Such programs, as well as different variations of study abroad programs, are popular with university students seeking to bolster their CVs with international experience. Similar criticisms have appeared in social media; for instance, the Instagram account Barbie Savior satirizes the voluntourism industry with an accuracy that is both humorous and devastating. Given what Eric Hartman has described as “the dark side of voluntourism,” it is important to challenge the assumptions that surround an overseas experience.

Nevertheless, universities and colleges continue to bolster their overseas programs, and students regard an internship or volunteer experience abroad as a central part of their education. Among the variety of reasons to study or volunteer abroad, one of the main ones is to improve intercultural skills. The ability to understand and adapt to cultural difference is a desirable skill for future employers in a globalized workplace. But does simply being in another country increase students’ intercultural competence? Do faculty trip-leaders understand what is required to help students develop their intercultural skills? What do educators need to know to nurture intercultural competence in combination with other subject-based academic learning?

In order to tackle these questions, we developed a unique international field school at the University of Guelph designed to provide in-depth pre-departure intercultural training, as well as explicitly explore the ethics of international voluntourism both theoretically and experientially. The India Field School consisted of a twelve-week preparation course, and a four-week immersive field school in Dharamsala. During the pre-departure course, students examined the ethics of international voluntourism within the context of broader critiques of international development. A significant portion of the course was also devoted towards understanding the concept of intercultural competence, and providing students with a toolkit of reflection skills. During their time in India, students worked in full-time volunteer positions at a variety of Tibetan and Indian NGOs in Dharamsala, which included a range of human rights and development organisations.

The use of written reflections throughout the field school provided an effective method of assessing student intercultural learning. A total of 17 written reflections were collected from each student over the span of the six months of the program. Additionally, students contributed to a class blog during the month abroad, which provided another real-time window into students’ learning. The reflections provided a medium for students to make meaning of their own experiences, as well as made it possible for the course instructor to make timely interventions that would assist with student development. For example, once student reflected on how her whiteness became an uncomfortable marker of her identity in a way that she had previously never experienced:

On the airplane on the way to India, I was aware of the fact that I was one of the only white people on the plane. This was perhaps the first time that that experience was so obvious to me, and it created a huge learning experience for me while we were in India – I was constantly struggling with the implications of skin tone. By this I don’t just mean for me, I mean that if I could feel so uncomfortable at a place like the Golden Temple, where the environment surrounding the fascination with our whiteness was not hostile in the least, how did minorities in Canada feel all the time? How was it that I could come to India and be the minority, and still only experience my skin tone as giving me power and privilege?

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Here, the student was able to use her own uncomfortable awareness of her visible cultural identity markers to come to a deeper understanding of how privilege functions both in India and back home in Canada, thereby integrating a new perspective as a result of this transformative learning experience.

At other times, the reflections demonstrated students' difficulty in translating theoretical knowledge into practice. Even though students understood what was required for them to improve their intercultural competence and perceived that they had those skills, they frequently faced challenges in knowing how to behave in unfamiliar contexts or challenging situations. One student observed in one of her in-country reflections: "Before, I believed that simply being aware of these challenges would help me to walk around them. Instead, I walked straight into them and became quite stuck!" In such cases, it was not enough to assume that the pre-departure seminar, or their prior knowledge about intercultural competence, would provide the students with the appropriate supports and resources they will need to address challenging intercultural situations. Rather, in order to turn these challenges into valuable learning opportunities, in-country support was necessary in order to build on the information and training that students received prior to departure.

Being able to facilitate in-depth intercultural learning may present challenges for instructors, who may need to undergo intercultural training of their own before they are equipped to teach these skills to their students. However, if educational institutions are truly committed to producing global citizens, and if intercultural skills really are essential in an increasingly globalized world, we cannot afford to simply hope that students will learn intercultural competence through osmosis. Especially considering that study abroad programs require significant financial investment from students and institutions, it seems foolhardy to leave the development of a major learning objective to chance. Rather, investing adequate resources to the promotion of improved intercultural competence in study abroad students is not a luxury, but a necessity. Our next blog post ([here](#)) presents some specific ideas about how to assess and facilitate this intercultural learning.

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