



Providing Life-Changing Experiences: Short-Term Study Abroad and Students' Social and Emotional Growth¹

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In the last decade, interest in study abroad programs has been steadily growing. According to Open Doors data, the number of U.S. students who travelled overseas for educational purposes has almost doubled in the period from 2001 to 2012 (from approximately 150,000 to 283,332). The vast majority of these students (58.9%) went abroad through short-term study programs, i.e., programs length of which did not exceed eight weeks (Open Doors, 2013).

Many educators and scholars note that such programs promote cultural sensitivity, develop international functional knowledge, deepen understanding of global interdependence, increase interest in learning a foreign language or working in a foreign country, cultivate interest in further study abroad, and inspire students to undertake interdisciplinary fields of study². Discussions on short-term study abroad are predominantly focused on global awareness, language learning, and cultural consciousness aspects. At the same time, general impact of such programs on students' social and emotional growth constitutes a relatively little examined topic.

The aims of this paper are both theoretical and practical. Based upon a recently conducted short-term study abroad trip to Eastern Europe (Poland and the Czech

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² For discussion on benefits of short-term study abroad programs, see Sachau, Daniel, Niel Brasher, and Scott Fee (2010), "Three Models for Short Term Study Abroad," *Journal of Management Education* 34 (5): 645-670.



Republic), the paper analyzes social and emotional growth of the participants, discusses the assessment tools, challenges that students and faculty typically face during such trips, and ways of overcoming those challenges. Practical dimensions of the project consist in drafting recommendations for faculty leaders who might be interested in launching and leading short-term study abroad trips.

Demographic Background

During the Winter semester 2013, twelve students from Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania participated in a three-weeks long study abroad program to Poland and the Czech Republic. They took two classes (“History of Jews in Europe” and “East European Cultures”), visited a number of historical sites in Poland and the Czech Republic, and had encounters with Polish and international peers. The program was “designed to provide an opportunity to Bloomsburg University students to learn and interact in a multicultural environment [...]. The goals of the program [were] to help students to expose themselves to multiculturalism and acquire global skills and training to build successful careers in global economy that would enable them to complete in the international workplace” (Polyuha, 2013). The learning outcomes encompassed five factors: disciplinary knowledge, global awareness, cultural conciseness and engagement, and social and emotional growth. Although the above-mentioned factors are interrelated, the paper focuses primarily on the last element.

Demographically, all of the participants were from the rural areas in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Majority were females (8 or 67.67%), under 21 years old (7 or 58.33%), in their sophomore or junior years (8 or 66.67%), and without prior travel abroad experiences (9 or 75%). History, English, and Biology were the most represented departments. Fifty percent of the group were of East European heritage (albeit only two had Polish or Czech roots), and seventy-five percent had exposure to East European languages (mostly Russian – 8 students or 66.67%). The following tables summarize the demographic data:

Gender	Count	Percentage
Females	8	67.67%
Males	4	33.33%
Total	12	100.00%

Residence	Count	Percentage
Urban	0	0.00%
Rural	12	100.00%
Total	12	100.00%

Travelled Abroad	Count	Percentage
Yes	3	25.00%
No	9	75.00%
Total	12	100.00%



Age	Count	Percentage
Under 21	7	58.33%
21-25	3	25.00%
26-30	2	16.67%
Total	12	100.00%

Status	Count	Percentage
Sophomore	5	41.67%
Junior	3	25.00%
Senior	4	33.33%
Total	12	100.00%

Field of Study	Count	Percentage
Anthropology	1	8.33%
Biology	2	16.67%
Business Administration	1	8.33%
Criminal Justice	1	8.33%
English	2	16.67%
History	3	25.00%
Psychology	1	8.33%
Russian and East European Studies	1	8.33%
Total	12	100.00%

Heritage	Count	Percentage
Polish	2	16.66%
Other East European	4	33.33%
Other	6	50.00%
Total	12	100.00%

Studied East European Languages	Count	Percentage
Polish	1	8.33%
Russian	8	66.67%
None	3	25.00%
Total	12	100.00%

Challenges

Logistically, there are considerable differences between one semester or one year-long study-abroad programs and the short-term ones. Short-term trips are often faculty-led; their participants travel as a group and have many organized activities and relatively little time to explore a foreign culture on their own. In essence, such trips are a hybrid between study-abroad and group (after all, students' contact with each other is often more substantial than their interactions with foreigners) experiences. On the one hand, students face "culture shock," i.e., a set of emotive responses to encountering differences in language, customs, laws, behaviors, cultural assumptions, etc. On the other hand, prolonged contact with one another creates very specific group dynamics. It is due to their intrinsically hybrid nature, short-term studies abroad are frequently classified as exposure programs, rather than the immersion ones.



Introduced by Kalvero Oberg, the term “culture shock” is commonly described as a sequence of four stages: 1) Euphoria; 2) Irritation and Hostility; 3) Gradual Adjustment; and 4) Adaption (Oberg, 1960). Although study-abroad programs are often discussed in terms of manifestations of culture shock, their short-term versions, in fact, do not allow participants to go through all the stages. Being exposed to a new culture for relatively limited time, participants usually experience the first two stages, only occasionally reaching the adjustment stage. Indeed, several studies indicate that during short-term study-abroad programs “most students [experience] only mild or no culture shock. The short duration [does] not allow for extreme levels of culture shock to manifest” (Zamastil-Vondrova, 2005).

However, the lengthy contact with one another considerably affects participants, producing different levels of stress. In terms of stress classification, participants go through alert and resistance stage and develop the first rudimentary tools to cope with stress. Thus, two reactions emerge simultaneously – culture shock and stress, and those reactions can be paralleled as follows:

	Culture Shock (stages)	Stress (stages)
Experiencing	Euphoria	Alert
	Depression	Resistance
Managing	Adjustment	Coping
	Adaption	

We need to determine what exactly causes stress or culture shock, i.e., what types of stressors are encountered during short-term study abroad. Following Karl Albrecht’s methodology, those stressors are deemed to be the following:

- a) Encounter, which can be further subdivided into:
 - role stressors (due to the necessity to perform certain duties, while sharing the apartment and spending much time together);
 - issue stressors (i.e., conflicts over different ideas or approaches to performing the same task);
 - action stressors (emerge when certain group members perform – consciously or unconsciously – actions which are viewed as undesirable).



- b) Situational stressors (i.e., stressors emerging from unfamiliar environment, living conditions, physical exposures, unfamiliar food, isolation from friends and parents, unfamiliar legal system, language barrier, etc.);
- c) Anticipatory stressors (uncertainty, fear of failure, fear of embarrassment in front of peers, etc);
- d) Time stressors (necessity to follow travel schedules, intensity of academic component consisting of four to five hours of lectures everyday followed by field trips, lack of control over one's activities, etc);

During the trip, encounter stressors were the most frequently observed, and they were the most challenging to deal with. Conflicts triggered by encounter stressors arose not so much from dealing with another culture, but rather from interactions between the members of the same group.

Expectedly, reactions that students produced coping with the stressors were similar to defense mechanisms activated during the stress, namely:

- a) Aggression – students became hostile to their peers and environment, many exhibited selfish behavior and ignored rights of their friends and colleagues;
- b) Withdrawal – refusing to deal with difficult situations, refusing to communicate or support peers.

Different degrees of aggression and withdrawal were observed with majority of the participants. Only a few students resorted to repression (i.e., forgetfulness to do things) and fixation (exhibiting repetitive, albeit useless under the circumstances, behaviors like asking repeatedly the same question, going to the same place several times, etc). Cultural factors (as it is known, encounter stressors are more typical for egalitarian societies) as well as reliance on typical U.S. diet (lots of sugar, sodium, and fats, consumption of coffee) undoubtedly intensified the reactions.

During the trip, students were encouraged to practice certain strategies that proved to be effective in coping with stress. These strategies included

- developing skills in time management (to eliminate time stressors);
- team building and collaboration technics (to eliminate encounter stressors);
- goal setting and small wins strategies (to deal with situational and anticipatory stressors).



These tactics can be recommended to faculty leaders who organize or conduct similar trips.

Given that social and emotional growth is experienced as a consequence of successful transition between experiencing and managing stress (i.e., between depression and adjustment stages of culture shock, or between resistance and coping stages of stress), we need to focus on that particular transition point in order to understand the nature of students' social and emotional growth.

Assessment Tools and Findings

To examine effectiveness of the program and students' social growth (i.e., how successful were the participants in coping with different stress factors), three primarily instruments were employed: self-reporting tools (consisting of Global Perspectives Inventory and pre- and post-trip surveys), peer evaluations survey, and emotional intelligence tests.

Global Perspectives Inventory (GPI), a third-party tool, administered by Office of Planning and Assessment at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, provided results according to three categories: cognitive (further subdivided into knowing and knowledge), intrapersonal (subdivided into individual and affective), and interpersonal (social responsibility and social interaction)³. Launched in 2007, GPI is currently one of

³ In his *Global Perspective Inventory (GPI): Its Purpose, Construction, Potential Uses, and Psychometric Characteristics*, Larry A. Braskamp et al (2009) describe Global Perspective Inventory in details. According to them, GPI categories are defined thusly: “(1) Knowing (degree of complexity of one’s view of the importance of cultural context in judging what is important to know and value); (2) Knowledge (degree of understanding and awareness of various cultures and their impact on our global society and level of proficiency in more than one language); (3) Identity (level of awareness of one’s unique identity and degree of acceptance of one’s ethnic, racial, and gender dimensions of one’s identity); (4) Affect (level of respect for and acceptance of cultural perspectives different from one’s own and degree of emotional confidence); (5) Social Responsibility (level of interdependence and social concern for others); (6) Social Interaction (degree



the most popular tools to assess universities’ internationalization efforts. The survey allows assessing student self-evaluation of their international knowledge, experiences, skills, and global attitudes.

As it can be seen from the table below, Global Perspectives Inventory discovered growth in all the categories, except Knowledge (-0.07) and Identity (-0.01), where there were slight decreases, although within statistical deviation⁴.

	CogEpis- PRE	CogEpis- POST	CogKnow- PRE	CogKnow- POST	Intrald PRE	Intrald- POST	IntraAf- PRE	IntraAf- POST	InterSR- PRE	InterSR- POST	InterSI- PRE	InterSI- POST
Average	3.82	3.61	4.25	4.18	4.36	4.35	4.53	4.30	4.10	3.78	3.94	3.65
Growth	0.21		-0.07		-0.01		0.23		0.32		0.29	

Table 1. Results of Global Perspectives Inventory (Winter 2013)

Most significant changes were observed in the categories of Social Responsibility (0.32), Social Interaction (0.29), and Affect (0.23).

While it appears that duration of short-term study-abroad is not enough to significantly change students’ degree of understanding of a foreign culture, such trips nonetheless greatly contribute to the development of social skills. Since social interaction presupposes dealing with encounter stressors, it is obvious that participants generally managed to cope with that type of stress.

Pre-and Post-Trip surveys were concerned with

- a) Knowing facts and abilities;
- b) Self-reported results of the trip;
- c) Activities performed;

These surveys demonstrated that along with learning practical skills (dollar conversion rates, making phone calls, etc), students develop confidence in communicating in

of engagement with others who are different from oneself and degree of cultural sensitivity in living in pluralistic settings)” (4).

⁴ Many questions in Knowing, Affect, Social Responsibility, and Social Interaction categories are “reversed,” i.e., disagreeing with the statement produces a lower average score, therefore, indicates a more global perspective.



another language. Even with limited vocabulary learned over three-weeks period, they managed to communicate certain ideas and be understood. They also became more patient with people who do not speak English well. The trip additionally made a lasting impression on participants, increased interest in academic study, and prompted students to search for friends outside their usual social circle. The following charts summarize the findings:

Knowledge and Abilities (differences between pre- and post-study abroad)	Change
I know dollar conversion rate	1.85
I know how to make phone call abroad	0.72
I can communicate in another language	0.22
I understand how foreign manufacturing affects U.S. prices	0.11
I can explain one aspect of U.S. foreign policy	0.11
I am patient with people who don't speak English well	0.11

In comparison to control group, the gains are even more impressive:

Knowledge and Abilities (difference between participants and non-participants)	Difference
I know dollar conversion rate	1.59
I know how to make phone call abroad	0.75
I am patient with people who don't speak English well	0.56
I understand how foreign manufacturing affects U.S. prices	0.42
I can communicate in another language	0.35
I can explain one aspect of U.S. foreign policy	0.34

While characterizing the trip, participants indicated the following:

This trip...	Score (out of 5)
...has had lasting impact on world view	4.67
...increased my interest in academic study	4.67
...influenced subsequent educational experiences	4.67
...influenced me to seek out a greater diversity of friends	4.67
... served as a catalyst for increased maturity	4.50
...reinforced commitment to foreign language study	4.50
...helped me better understand my own cultural values and biases	4.50
...continues to influence my interactions with people from different cultures	4.50
...helped me to acquire skill sets that influenced my career path	4.50



... increased my self-confidence	4.33
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Immediate results of the trip were also palpable:

I recently... (differences between pre- and post-study abroad)	Change
...consciously withheld judgment on international event	1.08
...listened to music sung in language other than English	0.72
...read article/watched TV about how Americans are viewed	0.39
...thought about issue important to developing country	0.39
...watched non-American news, TV	0.33

In comparison to control group, participants again demonstrated higher results:

I recently... (difference between participants and non-participants)	Change
...consciously withheld judgment on international event	1.18
...listened to music sung in language other than English	0.86
...thought about why other countries have different perspective than U.S.	0.50
...thought about differences btw. me & people in other countries	0.42
...thought about issue important to developing country	0.36

Finally, emotional intelligence assessment was administered by the Hay Group, and it was focused on the following competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and cognitive abilities. This test consisted of two parts: pre- and post-trip self-assessment and peer assessment. According to the results of Emotional Intelligence Assessment, the trip calibrated students' emotional intelligence and, subsequently, they became more realistic in their perception of themselves:

Category	<i>Student with high self-evaluation</i>			<i>Student with average self-evaluation</i>			<i>Student with low self-evaluation</i>		
	Pre	Others	Post	Pre	Others	Post	Pre	Others	Post
<i>Self-Awareness</i>	5.0	4.1	4.6	4.8	4.2	4.8	3.4	4.7	4.4
<i>Achievement Orientation</i>	5.0	4.4	4.0	3.8	4.4	4.8	4.0	4.7	4.2
<i>Adaptability</i>	5.0	4.2	4.0	4.2	4.4	5.0	3.4	4.7	3.8
<i>Emotional Self-Control</i>	5.0	4.3	4.0	4.0	4.4	4.0	4.2	4.7	4.0
<i>Positive Outlook</i>	5.0	4.1	4.0	4.6	4.4	4.4	3.0	4.6	4.4



<i>Empathy</i>	5.0	4.4	4.2	4.8	4.4	5.0	3.8	4.6	4.4
<i>Organizational Awareness</i>	5.0	4.3	4.0	5.0	4.4	5.0	4.3	4.7	4.0
<i>Conflict Management</i>	5.0	4.0	4.2	4.8	4.4	4.6	3.6	4.6	3.8
<i>Coach and Mentor</i>	5.0	4.2	4.2	5.0	4.4	5.0	4.0	4.6	3.2
<i>Influence</i>	5.0	4.1	4.2	4.4	4.4	4.4	3.8	4.7	3.6
<i>Inspirational Leadership</i>	5.0	4.0	3.8	4.4	4.3	5.0	3.5	4.6	3.6
<i>Teamwork</i>	5.0	4.1	4.0	5.0	4.4	5.0	4.0	4.6	3.8
<i>System Thinking</i>	5.0	4.0	4.2	3.8	4.5	4.8	2.8	4.4	3.2
<i>Pattern Recognition</i>	5.0	4.2	4.0	4.2	4.4	4.8	4.2	4.6	4.4

Conclusions

Certain conclusions can be drawn from the obtained results:

- 1) Short-term study abroad experiences develop mostly social responsibility and social interaction ;
- 2) Students learn to cope with encounter, situational, and anticipatory stressors;
- 3) Dealing with roles, issues, and actions helps in calibrating students' personalities;
- 4) Short-term study abroad trips reinforce desire to study languages and history and bring confidence that improvement in those areas is possible;
- 5) Short-term study abroad experiences have lasting impact on students' worldview and, potentially, on future career and life.

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