USING MULTINATIONAL COOPERATIVE STUDENT PROJECTS TO ENHANCE SHORT-TERM STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

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ABSTRACT

Continued growth in international experiences for U.S. co++6llege students is a favorable trend. However, the most substantial increase has occurred with of short-term study abroad programs. Many of these programs include extensive travel instead of involving a single site. There is great danger that if not properly managed, these types of international educational experience will default into little more than an organized group tour.

In these types of programs it is challenging to induce student participants to engage meaningfully with local residents as the traveling group tends to form into its own portable society. In addition, the current state of wireless communications means that students participating in these types of programs can easily stay plugged into their home social networks which further reduces meaningful interactions in the cultures being visited.

Incorporating well designed research projects into short-term study abroad programs holds the potential to offset some of the inherent limitations of such programs. Research projects can serve both to prepare the students for the trip and promote meaningful cross-cultural interaction while the program is underway.

In this paper, the authors provide suggestions based on their experiences with short-term travel abroad programs which incorporated student research. Several potential problems are identified and suggestions are given for project design.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Business related study abroad programs have become a common offering at most U.S. business schools. In addition to rounding out an individual's education, an expanded world view is generally expected to lead to greater effectiveness in later professional pursuits.

At the same time, International academic linkages have become wide spread. Most U.S. business schools now have multiple international partnership school relationships either established directly or through various consortia.

While these developments have made long-term overseas study an increasingly widely available option for business students, an increasing number of students choose short-term study abroad experiences. These types of programs are convenient for students since they can usually be scheduled in a way which does not significantly impact the student's program of study.

However, the potential for gaining insight into other cultures is potentially lower for short-term programs – particularly for those in which students from a single institution travel as a group.

Unless the participants in such programs meaningfully interact with those of other cultures who they met along the way, there is likely to be only limited benefit with regards to understanding other cultural perspectives.

Increasingly, educators are coming to realize that just being in the foreign culture is not enough (Brubaker, 2007). Study abroad students may need significant guidance to reap the benefits of an international experience. For short-term study abroad programs this can be more important since there is less time for "trial and error" learning.

Although it can be argued that short-term study abroad programs do not hold as much potential benefit as do longer term experiences, it is clear that the growing availability of short-term study abroad programs has enabled a larger number of students to have at least some type of academically formatted international experience. It seems clear that the current conditions in higher education mean that theses short-term study abroad programs may be the only viable option for many types of students (Spencer and Tuma, 2002). For students who cannot participate in longer-term programs, a well-designed short-term program can provide a significant benefit while minimizing life disruptions.

The near global availability of wireless communications appears to be diminishing the benefits of even longer-term immersion programs (Coleman and Chafer, 2010). Internet access, text messaging, and inexpensive phone service cause many students to fail to adequately "de-link" from the home culture. Essentially, these communication technologies have fundamentally changed the nature of almost all foreign culture experiences.

However, while telecommunications technology advancements may have had a negative impact on traditional "immersion" experiences, they have also made possible various types of remote interactions between student groups located in different countries. Indeed, current availability of video conferencing technologies have made face-to-face video collaborations a possibility for nearly everyone (Green 2011). Clearly, decreasing price and increasing quality of video conferencing has opened the door to a wide array of potential educational applications (Collier 2012).

The opportunity then is to use available technologies to enhance short-term study abroad programs so as to offset the problem of inadequate de-linking by encouraging meaningful intercultural interaction. It can be argued that existing telecommunications technology provides a relatively good substitute to face-to-face foreign location experience (Savicki, 2010). Thus we can design hybrid experiences in which program participants interact over a longer period of time, first via telecommunications technology and later face-to-face. Thus the benefits of longer term interaction can be provided even when on-site program time is limited.

For most business student, there is a strong likelihood that some sort of international team work will be expected in the workplace. Thus, any program elements which parallel the conditions of such international and intercultural teamwork has a direct benefit. For short-term study abroad programs, properly designed research projects can met this objective. Specifically, joint research project which have students in multiple countries working together can provide an experience in which most of the important issues will be encountered.

The literature on managing international/intercultural teams is growing rapidly, with much comment in the practitioner literature (Bachmann, 2006). In addition to general guidance on the international management team dynamic, one can easily locate sources focused on specific bi-cultural management group interactions (see Hedderich, 2010). Thus, managers and international educational program participants can be trained for an expected intercultural interaction using readily available materials.

RESEARCH PROJECT OPTIONS

Various strategies are commonly employed to encourage meaningful cross cultural interaction during short-term study abroad programs. When partner school relationships exist, joint educational and recreational outings involving visiting and resident students can be very beneficial. Visitor-resident pairings and in-home host accommodations are also effective. But for business students, nothing more closely mimics potential future multinational work teams than a multinational cooperative student project.

To provide benefit to the student, the project must increase the likelihood that the student will interact with individuals from another culture and will come to view their own home culture from a different perspective. The authors have used multiple types of project in this effort. These types of projects differ in terms of both required student effort and the complexity of execution.

The true value of incorporating research projects into short-term study abroad programs is the benefit the projects have on the program participants. While these student projects will typically yield relatively modest impacts in terms of research results, the process of conducting a well-designed student research project in these settings can be substantial.

Pre-departure Country Research

The most basic of projects is one in which the student is asked to investigate some aspect of a foreign culture or system. Clearly this can be done both in advance of a short-term study abroad program and/or while the program is underway.

Assignments to research the cultures and systems of countries to be visited before departure can be helpful. But, the problem of student motivation can be significant. Unless the students have adequate structure and incentive, such projects will likely not receive the attention they deserve.

At the U.S. authors' institutions, many of the short-term study abroad programs are conducted in the break between the end of the Spring Semester and the start of the Summer Semester. Where the study abroad program involves course credit, required participation in the course which begins prior to departure generally provides adequate motivation.

In the case of the U.S. authors' institution, it is usually the case that a set of early pre-departure class meetings is held in the months prior to departure. These meetings typically involve cultural training, so it is natural to integrate basic country research projects and presentations into these class sessions. However, it is important that the supervising faculty members have, or have access, to country specific expertise to ensure that inaccurate information is not transmitted to the class via these student reports. For this type of project, substantial completion would ideally be reached early enough before departure to allow for feedback or grading prior to departure.

Internationally Themed Projects Spanning Program Period

An increased level of project complexity has the student engaged in the project before, during, and after the study abroad period. The nature of such a project can be quite varied, but the objective would be to have the student research some element of the culture of one or more of the countries to be visited prior to departure, have the investigation enter a hands-on, in-person stage during the travel portion of the trip, and then have the student prepare a retrospective report after returning to the home environment.

An example of such a project might be examining the differences in retailing in the home country and the country to be visited. The student would investigate cultural, economic, and regulatory issues which could cause differences in retail operations before departure. Then while underway, the student could visit multiple retail establishments and make observations. Upon returning the student would prepare a report summarizing his or her observations.

As with most elements of the short-term study abroad program, it is important to consider issues of student motivation. Clearly this type of project requires that grading would not be completed until after the final report were submitted after return. This is no small issue, since when most study abroad groups return to their home country, the group breaks up at the airport and the sense of being in a class quickly dissipates. Monitoring and mentoring is necessary to ensure completion of en route elements – particularly for first time travelers abroad.

Because many short-term study abroad programs tend to concentrate on visiting urban environments abroad, care should be taken to ensure that students are not confusing urban and suburban differences when making their comparisons.   This issue will vary in importance depending on the individual student background.

Multinational Team Projects Spanning Program Duration

The most valuable, and complicated, type of project for the short-term study abroad program is one in which participants are required to work with individuals from a different culture in executing some type of project. Fortunately, readily available communications technologies now allow the design of meaningful multinational cooperative student research experiences even when the two groups are not at the same location throughout the entire program. For business students whose careers will likely entail working in international teams, this type of project is particularly valuable since it replicates many of the elements which one might encounter in the actual workplace.

For this type of project, an international partner school relationship is essential. Fortunately, many short-term study abroad projects already involve partner school visits building on existing relationships.

As a practical matter, it is usually not possible to expect a workably high level of foreign language skills from American students – particularly among participants in short-term programs. While U.S. based student groups frequently have only modest foreign language skills, this is often not an issue because of the global lingua franca status of English. Particularly with European partner schools, English can be used as the joint language of interaction in practically any

International Business related programs. This too mimics the existing situation in multinational workplace teams.

Ideally, the multinational student group projects would be designed and overseen jointly by faculty at the participating partner schools. Here existing partner school faculty relationships can be helpful, but frequently partner school faculty members interested in international relationships are willing to participate even without extensive prior personal faculty interaction.

Ideally, the projects would be conducted by multinational teams comprised of students at the two participating partner schools with each team having representatives from both. Students from the two schools can be assigned to teams at the outset of the project before the travel portion of the program. And, even before meeting face to face.

In nearly every instance, video conferencing capabilities exist which enable a kick-off session in which faculty leaders at all locations are introduced, the student participants make initial contact, and the nature of the research projects is outlined. If the schools involved have dedicated video conferencing facilities, so much the better. But, even improvised classroom video conferencing will serve adequately.

Once established, the student teams would then be expected to interact remotely via video conferencing or social media in the period before the travel portion of the program. Then they would work together in person during the campus visit. And, then perhaps continue the project remotely again after the travel portion of the program has ended, depending on the precise design of the projects.

We have found it very beneficial to have the student teams make a joint presentation of their research efforts during the portion of the program when the members of the groups are present at the single campus location. With significant cultural and national differences in presentation formats, attire, and audience participation, this activity can be both entertaining and informative to the participants.

Because of regional differences in expectations concerning presentations, both faculty and student participants should discuss the details of any presentations in advance. Past experience has shown that norms of even the layout of presentation slides can vary significantly from country to country. We have in the past asked that the student teams have completed a working draft of their presentations in advance of the on-site collaboration. This assures both that the projects stay on schedule and that any significant differences of opinion among the group members arises early enough for some type of resolution.

An optimal situation would be one in which the research activities, presentations, and any written reports were required, graded course components for all team participants. However, due to different academic calendars and grading systems, this may not always be possible.

In any case, the participating faculty members should strive to specify clearly in advance if and how the research efforts will be integrated into their respective courses or program activities. Clearly many different options exist in this regard, but clarifying expectations in advance will reduce participant anxiety. It need not be the case that the project be of identical grading weight for participants at both (all) partner schools. But, all involved should have a clear idea of the expectations in advance.

In cases of reciprocal visits, where groups at host schools later visit the campus of the groups who earlier were visitors, members of the initial program leadership should be sure to schedule adequate program time for a secondary face to face work period at the second school. This will usually require cooperation with multiple faculty members at both schools since reciprocal visits will frequently be managed by different individuals.

The selection of research topics can be left to the students themselves. However, it may prove beneficial to specify at least a general topic or theme selected from a timely issue with a high level of media coverage in the multiple country settings involved. This approach will not only ensure adequate sources for reference, but will also allow cross cultural comparisons concerning perspectives on the issues selected.

Surveys

While literature-based research can provide many of the benefits of research in cross cultural issues, basic field research holds the additional benefit of forcing the student participants into a larger number and variety of cross cultural interactions.

Site visits and surveys are both ideally suited to use in a traveling short-term study abroad setting. Both will tend to force the program participant to interact with individuals outside the program cohort. While there is significant variation around the world, student researchers conducting surveys are generally fairly well received throughout Europe.

Nonetheless, faculty planning to have students use public encounter surveys should check regulatory and legal constraints well in advance. Typically, faculty colleagues at partner schools are able to provide basic information, but the program administrators may need to address any formal legal requirements.

In our experience, partner school faculty colleagues can help with cultural norms concerning public space interactions and how best for a student researchers to present themselves to potential survey subjects. Naturally, mixed teams of guest and local students working together can prove most effective in avoiding trouble and maximizing the experience.

If the research topic in question is suitable for public encounter surveys, then the creation and administration of the survey can itself provide the students with experiences which can significantly increase their understanding of cultural differences in communication.

If a survey were to be used, the survey instrument should be constructed well in advance of the planned data collection period. While English is a suitable language in many areas, it is an interesting exercise to have student participants have the survey instrument translated into the languages dominant in the areas to be visited.

If the student cohort has the required language skills, the process of translation of even a basic survey instrument can be enlightening. Differences in cultural norms concerning the propriety of certain types of questions, differences in income distributions, and even difference education systems will challenge the student's home culture bias.

Here again, a cooperative team structure is valuable with the cohorts from the different partner schools interacting remotely before the travel phase in the development of the survey. Then in person, during the overlapping in person period, and then perhaps finally remotely to analyze any data collected and prepare a report of findings.

Frequently faculty members of the participating schools will collectively have the required language skills to polish any student translation attempts. However the nuanced difference between assisting a student effort and providing translation services should not be ignored.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have provided observations and suggestions from our own experiences using student research projects to enhance the student's experience during short-term study abroad programs. While the experience upon which our observations are based are drawn from multiple-country traveling cohort type programs, the suggestions given should apply equally well to single-location short-term study abroad programs.

The main objective is to use the research activities, and the interactions they require, to maximize the potential benefits to the program participants. By beginning a research project prior to the short period abroad, and by including some type of post travel summary component, the program can offer a somewhat longer-term intercultural experience.

While the range of project design may be limited by faculty resources and existing inter-institutional relationships, most any short-term study abroad program can be enhanced through the inclusion of some type of student research. Faculty members involved in short-term study abroad programs should explore their options to introduce or expand the use of student research.

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