

Effective Short-Term International Learning Experiences: Promoting Global Understanding and International Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

Short-term international learning experiences can have a profound effect on student learning and professional identity. This paper draws on the author's experience with 17 such courses for 200 students to address all aspects of creating and managing an international learning experience from the academic and assessment considerations to handling logistics of travel and accommodation, constructing the itinerary, and creating opportunities for effective learning and international collaboration.

TOPICS

education of information professionals; pedagogy; curriculum; assessment of student learning; short-term study abroad; socio-cultural perspectives; information services; information practices

SHORT-TERM STUDY ABROAD

Although we live in a networked world with easy communication to any point on the globe, true understanding of our similarities and differences, and awareness of shared and unique problems, develops best when students are able to experience another culture directly. The powerful effect on student learning and understanding of even short-term learning experiences abroad has been demonstrated repeatedly, and accounts for the emphasis on study abroad programs within U.S. universities and the corresponding number of travel companies who are eager to arrange such programs (Twombly et al, 2012.)

Travel may broaden the mind, but the mind must be open to new experiences, to different points of view, to new awareness of shared problems, and to an alternative understanding of the learner's previous beliefs and experiences. How must students be prepared for a short-term learning experience? What form should the experience take? How do you make this experience truly an immersive class and not simply a sightseeing tour? How do you pay for the program? How do you set goals for the program and how do you assess the student learning? How do you protect your students during the experience and how do you help them reintegrate upon their return to the U.S.A.?

SLIM HISTORY OF STUDY ABROAD

The School of Library and Information Management (SLIM) at Emporia State University has a long history of involving students in international learning experiences. In the past fifteen years, almost 300 students have participated in 26 learning journeys to 11 different destinations. Since 2011, the current author has led 17 of these trips to three destinations with almost 200 students, and has helped with the creation and planning of trips to three more destinations. This paper presents some of the lessons learned from this extensive experience and indicates issues that must be addressed for successful short-term study abroad experiences for graduate students of library science.

CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

The first thing that must be decided is the form the student learning will take. SLIM has experimented with both service learning and experiential learning, and now employs a model of experiential learning for all international experiences. Although service learning projects have many benefits, there can also be major barriers to success. Apart from language difficulties, which may be substantial, for example in a cataloging project, the nature of the projects themselves may limit the potential student participation. It can also be difficult to avoid the problems of imposing the American understanding of the task and its accomplishment which may be in conflict with the values and culture of the host country. It is also easy to become focused on accomplishment of the task itself, at the cost of student engagement and learning. While the students may gain work experience in the official task, they lose out on the broader learning of engaging with others with a different cultural perspective. The emphasis on peer to peer experiential learning immediately changes the power structure of the interactions and encourages the students in the role of learners, rather than visiting experts. This is vital to reinforce the professional value of the host country librarians and to foster the idea of cooperative problem solving.

LOGISTICS

Once the form of the trip is established, the next task is to address the trip logistics. While there are many options for companies that will prepare tour packages, the SLIM model has relied on in-house organization and extensive collaboration with librarians in the host countries. One

major reason for this is to limit the costs of the experience for the participating students. Another is that it promotes the philosophy of collaboration and mutual learning, and it is easier to plan activities that give the students time to talk to library colleagues and to form relationships. Where possible, SLIM students are also encouraged to explore on their own and to become a part of the local culture, even for a brief period of time. This has meant that most SLIM trips are centered on one location, rather than changing to new locations every day or every other day. As most of the SLIM graduate students maintain full-time jobs during their study, of necessity our international learning experiences have become standardized in to a 10-day field trip as part of a regular 2-credit hour class. This has proved to be the most efficient model for our students that allows the largest number of student the possibility of participating.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

There are many other essential topics that require examination beyond the length restrictions of this paper. These include creating learning objectives for the course; the various methods of assessing student learning that have been tried and those which have been found most effective; the necessary preparation of the students to travel outside the United States (and in some cases outside of their home state for the first time); strategies for effective debriefing of the students upon their return; and encouraging continued reflection and learning after the end of the semester. There also needs to be consideration of setting up and managing library, archive and museum visits and creating opportunities for students to meet their peer in the host country. Costs are a major factor, and great care must be exercised to ensure the viability of the international experience, while at the same time ensuring it is accessible to the largest possible number of students. Accessibility issues also include planning for students who are differently abled or who require accommodations to participate.

International learning experiences do not have to be big and spectacular to be effective. Perhaps the most important outcome for any international learning experience is the formation of relationships and the development of shared understanding. While some of these relationships may be brief, they are important nonetheless, and even a brief encounter may have a profound effect on student understanding of the core values of librarianship that are shared across cultures and national boundaries. Other relationships persist and result in collaborations that benefit librarians and library patrons in both countries.

REFERENCES

Twombly, S. B., Salisbury, M. H., Tumanut, S. D., & Klute, P. (2012). Study Abroad in a new global century: Renewing the promise, refining the purpose. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 38(4), 1 – 152. DOI: 10.1002/aehe.20004