THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF REFLECTION:
NAVIGATING THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN
STUDENT DEVELOPMENT AND INTERCULTURAL
LEARNING

Forum on Education Abroad Annual Conference
April 2016, Atlanta
Presenters

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- Steve Duke, Ph.D., Assistant Vice President for Global Strategy & International Initiatives, University of Nebraska
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- Larry Pickener, M.Ed., Assistant Director for Education Abroad, Boston College
This session is designed to accomplish the following:

- Provide a context for the intersection between student development & intercultural learning
- Offer practical solutions for getting students to be more reflective and engaged prior, during, and following an abroad experience
- Create a dialogue for sharing best practices among audience members
Theoretical Background
Importance of Reflection

- Reflection and reflective learning are essential in education, particularly in cross-cultural contexts.
- Critical reflection is a key element in transformational learning (see the work of Jack Mezirow and many others).
- Reflection encourages students to connect current experiences with things they have learned earlier, then form new theories about current events and future.
- Reflection encourages students to take control of their own learning and activate their awareness of what is happening.
- Many students need to be taught how to reflect when confronted with divergent experiences and stimuli.
David Kolb

- David Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (1984) argues that learning is a holistic process in which students resolve conflicts in the things they experience, adapt to new perspectives, and create new knowledge.

- Kolb argues for a cycle of experiential learning:
  - Concrete experience: something happens
  - Reflective observation: think deeply about what happened
  - Abstract conceptualization: create theory about what happened and why
  - Active experimentation: test theory thru new experiences
Reflection & Human Development

- James Zull (*From Brain to Mind*, 2011) argues that “reflection is central” (p. 136) in the process of making meaning from experiences and events.
- He believes that the human brain naturally moves from 1) sensing to 2) making meaning (facts/interpretation) to 3) manipulate/create (ideas/plans) before 4) moving to action (p. 85).
- Reflection is the process of making meaning of events and then creating ideas or plans for future action.


Pre-departure
Questions:

Does your institution incorporate reflection into any part of the pre-departure process?
If so, in what ways?
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BC: Rethinking Advising

- Know your institution
  - Boston College’s Jesuit identity
  - Reflection opportunities at Boston College
- How can we reach the largest number of BC students?
BC: Pre-departure Orientation

- Pre-departure @ BC: all interactions prior to departure
- Incorporate reflection during program selection
- Website
  - “Questions to ask yourself”
- Advising
  - Two-tier advising system
  - Essential question: what do you hope to gain from this experience?
- Pre-departure meetings
  - “Dear future me”
Outpost Retreat
Adapting a successful program at BC
Student talks
“Wisdom” figures
Student feedback

“How much had you reflected on your experience abroad before coming to Outpost?”

“I tend to be a reflective person, but I hadn’t yet thought about some of the tougher issues!”

“I would journal every so often, but it was way more helpful to be able to engage in conversation about it.”
Onsite

Reflection through online learning
Reflection during instructor-led study abroad
Questions:

What have you found to be successful in helping students be reflective?
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Georgetown Consortium Project: Interventions for Student Study abroad participants from 61 programs

- 1,296 intercultural learning
- Cultural mentors are most effective for advancing intercultural skills

Transformational Learning Theory

“As long as people believe that their way of being in the world is the only or the best way; it is very difficult for them to see alternative perspectives or to engage in reflective discourse” (Cranton, 1994, p. 196).
Smith (2013) found that students who took the course were much more able “...to articulate and market skills, new perspectives, and awareness, and had a greater understanding of intercultural frameworks...” than those who studied abroad and did not take the course (p. 137).

Student Quote:
He explained to me that in Spain ‘spanish’, men referred to their wives as their *mujeres*. I had always been taught that wife in Spanish to be *esposa*, yet in Spain ‘spanish’ *esposa* signifies handcuffs, an even more unfavorable term. I failed to recognize that they were not degrading their women, rather using a less derogatory term to show their commitment. From this and the readings, I more clearly understand how language is indeed a “social experience” and our interpretations of it can determine how we view the culture as a whole (Bennett, 1998, p.14).
Student quote:

“I also saw Spaniards dressed in blackface. I was astonished when I first saw this because of how inappropriate this behavior is to me. In the United States black face is condemned today for its obvious racial and stereotypical problems that it creates...he told me that he believes that it is because “Spain has only just recently began to become a diverse country”. Because of this they have not had many instances where minority populations have stood up to the majority to demonstrate certain civil rights issues. In comparison to the United States, we have already endured a civil rights movement and founded our nation on immigrants.”
How does the program instructor influence the student experience during instructor-led study abroad?
U of M: Findings

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Total Population Mean Pre/Post IDI Score

Total Population’s mean pre/post IDI Movement by Stages
U of M: Total Population IDI Movement in Percentages

- 28% **Gains** to another stage
- 73% Total **positive** movement
- 13% **Regression** to another stage
- 27% Total **negative** movement
U of M: No Guided Reflection during High Challenge Situation

The instructor would be like, you need to experience this on your own to form your own opinion. That’s how the instructor did it; pretty much push us into water to make us swim. Personally I wasn’t that, it wasn’t that hard on me because I was open to everything. I don’t know about others. Student

It was difficult seeing the third world country straight on. You always hear about people in the third world starving or begging but to actually see it and have them be there, it kind of hurt. There would always be beggars coming up to you asking for money and that made me a little distraught. We didn’t talk about this as a group because I think that is just normal. We didn’t talk about it because that’s what the instructor expected. I didn’t expect …I expected it but not quite what I felt. Same Student
U of M: Guided Reflection during High Challenge Situation

So this student at the beginning says, “it’s a violation of human rights, I don’t care, I understand that we want to understand cultural difference but no matter what it is a violation of human rights. But then by the end of it, after the talk about seek to understand, after the readings, she was like it was the reading that said you have to validate where a person’s viewpoints are coming from, even if you disagree with them. If you don’t validate those viewpoints up front and then move on to conversation... So, she had that incredible turn around.

Instructor
Conclusion: Holistic culture learning woven into the program structure and frequent and spontaneous facilitation is the best way to increase intercultural sensitivity for students on instructor-led programs.
Lessons Learned

- Find instructor allies
- Hold practical trainings
- Share research
- Describe benefit to content learning
- Share benefits to group dynamics
Reentry
Question:

What percentage of your advising process is devoted to reentry?
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Returning

- Reentry offers a point of disruption, creating an opportunity for growth ... if reflected upon properly

- We often give less attention to this stage:
  - Focused on recruiting, vetting, and orienting the next group of students
  - There is less of a hook for students to be required to participate in reentry events, i.e. they are already back and do not need us in the same way
BC: Online Course

- “Reflections on Being Abroad”, 2 credits, graded
- 8 weeks, individualized to students’ calendars
- Reflective exercises, reflective journals, & final project
- Last week prompt: “What will you have gained from the experience? In what ways might you integrate what you have learned into your academic coursework, on campus activities, and future career?”
“I think the most important lesson I will learn throughout my abroad experiences in both Paris and Hong Kong will be my flexibility to work in groups with people from all backgrounds and have a general knowledge about how to be respectful while working with them.” – Student, BC in Paris

“I also suspect that some people will look at how I’ve changed and not really understand my personal development in a real way. I don’t want my growth to be over-attributed to “abroad” because I feel like I’ve made a lot of effort to consciously reflect on my experiences, and it’s not just that “abroad” did so much for me and I effortlessly changed. I worry about not feeling at home here, then not feeling like I have a home to return to at BC since I won’t be as involved as I was in previous years nor living with my closest friends. But I also cherish this uncertainty, as it is the only way a person can learn to accept life’s unpredictable patterns.” – Student, Australia
BC: Revision of Program Evaluations

- Going beyond customer satisfaction instruments, to include a reflective component
- The new section is included at the beginning of the survey, so students are more apt to complete it
- Three new sub-sections, aligned with OIP assessment plan:
  - Personal growth, e.g. independence, adaptation
  - Cross-cultural learning, e.g. dealing with people from other cultures
  - Global mindedness, e.g. perceptions of the world, the U.S.
- Deletion of unnecessary questions
Use of quantitative and qualitative questions

Results:
- Much more thoughtful, in-depth responses, providing an opportunity to gauge student development
- Opportunity to use results for assessment purposes, especially when pre- and post-responses can be compared
Example:

Question: “Describe a time when you felt uncomfortable abroad. How did you deal with or overcome these feelings? What suggestions do you have for future students who may feel the same way?”

Response: “I discovered that discomfort, as long as it was not unbearable, was an indicator that part of me needed to be exposed. I needed to lean into the discomfort and accept the vulnerability. When I consciously made that connection, my experience became much more realistic, positive, and open to growth”
BC: Other Examples

- BC Career Center/OIP Event
  - Help students articulate their experiences in interviews & on cv’s, while also providing an opportunity to reflect

- New England Study Abroad Returnee Conference
  - Region-wide event for students who have studied abroad
  - Held on a different campus each year
Wake Forest: Reentry Course

- Cross-Cultural Engagement Program at Wake Forest University includes a one-credit, half-semester course

- Reflection is central to that course, as students are asked to identify events and experiences they had while abroad and then reflect on them (meaning & interpretation)

- Example assignments and discussions:
  - Read “Top Ten Challenges” (from What’s up with Culture), then write paragraphs about two of the challenges
Wake Forest: Reflection in a Reentry course

Example assignments and discussions:

- “Home and Away”
- “My identity after being abroad”
- “Cultural Analysis” paper using DAE methodology
- Identify intercultural skills learned or gained abroad, then write paragraphs about using the skill -- connects with job application, resume writing, and interviews
- Essay on how time abroad has changed you, future plans
Wake Forest: Take-aways from a Reentry course

- Many students “shoebox” their experiences abroad, especially when talking with others who didn’t go.
- Having a “safe place” to discuss the thrills as well as challenges of living abroad is exhilarating for many.
- Bruce La Brack opines that the reentry phase is where the most meaningful learning can take place, as it gives opportunity to shape and reshape perceptions.
- Intercultural competence development requires reflection and frame-shifting, which reflection can offer.
Conclusions
General Tips

- Recognize that the advising process does not stop at program selection: students need mentoring before, during, and after, as part of a holistic process.
- Consider where students are in their developmental process and meet them at that stage.
- Reach out to campus partners, to gain their support and to deliver the message more broadly.
- Not all mechanisms for student reflection require significant funding.
Thank you for listening! What questions do you have?