Education Abroad Programs
The Worst Place for Intercultural Learning?

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Background in Education Abroad

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Definition: Intercultural Learning

- Change in understanding and behavior towards others’ and one’s own culture
- Experience and research indicate the intercultural learning is difficult in education abroad programs
Intercultural learning is difficult: Examples

MSU students teach a music lesson to refugee children in the Netherlands....
All U.S. students are eager to talk in class
Relying on program leaders to tell you what to do
Does intercultural learning occur in education abroad programs?

Research suggests, intercultural learning…

- occurs inconsistently
- in small amounts
- under certain conditions
Intercultural learning: Research evidence

How do we account for these “disappointing” findings?

- Due to problems with program or with assessment.
- But, this is a common research inclination…
- “Failure to accept what the data are telling us.”

- What is the MOST OBVIOUS conclusion from research data?
Intercultural learning does not occur in education abroad programs

Tenet: This should be the starting point of our work, rather than something idealized, hopeful, self-protective, self-promoting.

Very difficult to do in this field.
Intercultural learning does not occur in education abroad programs

Why doesn’t intercultural learning occur in education abroad programs?

Assertion: The conditions of education abroad programs do not support intercultural learning.
“Third” culture of education abroad programs

- In education abroad, we tend to focus on the host and home cultures
- But, education abroad groups also have their own culture
- Third Culture: the attitudes, values, norms, and behavior of education abroad groups
“Third” culture of education abroad programs

- The Third Culture is “closest” to students, therefore has the most powerful influence (Bronfenbrenner)

- The culture of education abroad programs conflicts with conditions necessary for intercultural learning
Discussion 1

How might certain characteristics of education abroad culture make intercultural learning difficult? Can you come up with real or hypothetical examples?
Invited student invites everyone else
Students are too tired.
“While I was trying to ask them basic questions, they didn't understand and made it hard for our group to start the project.”

“Honestly I know this isn't a culture thing, but the language barrier was just very intense and apparent and hurt us.”
The culture of education abroad programs

Good program  Enjoyable, comfortable, activity filled, safe, educational

Good group  Respectful, supports each other, inclusive

Good student  Open minded, willing to step out of “comfort zone” (trying new things)

Good leader  Organized, responsive, focused on students’ well-being, evaluates students’ work
How does intercultural learning occur?

Cognitive Perspective

- Reflecting on problems associated with intercultural experiences

- Not the only, but by far, the most commonly accepted approach. Other perspectives exist, and will be discussed later.
Conditions for critical reflection

- Having intercultural experiences
- Recounting experiences (events, behaviors, thoughts, feelings)
- Sharing with others
- Mediating by an instructor/expert
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Do Education Abroad Programs support these conditions?
Reflection & the culture of education abroad

Reflection

- A key component of the cognitive view of intercultural learning
- Talking or writing about challenges encountered during intercultural experiences
Reflection is difficult for groups

To be a part or to be apart? That is the question for group members

- Critical reflection requires questioning, disagreeing from others
- But, the culture of the EA group is to be cohesive and supportive
- Negative consequences for “breaking” from the group? (Perceived as selfish, insensitive)
Reflection is difficult for individuals

The Importance of Being Honest

- Honest reflection is critical to intercultural learning
- However, the culture of education abroad programs makes it almost impossible

- How?
A lesson from King Lear

- Shakespeare’s tragedy about the elusiveness of honesty and consequences of flattery

- Act 1. The King asks his three daughters to express their love for him

From, Wong, D. *Intercultural Learning may be Impossible in Education Abroad: A Lesson from King Lear*. Accepted for publication in *Frontiers*. 
A lesson from King Lear

Lear   Which of you ...doth love the most?

Goneril   Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter

Regan   I profess myself an enemy to all other joys
A lesson from King Lear

Lear (to Cordelia) Strive to be interested; what can you say....

Cordelia Nothing, my lord.

Lear Nothing will come of nothing: speak again.

Cordelia I cannot heave my heart into my mouth...
King Lear

The elusiveness of honesty; the tragic consequences of flattery

Why is honesty elusive?

“Cordelia’s Portion”, Ford Madox Brown, 1886-1872
Lessons from King Lear

Act 1, Scene 1

- A highly ritualized event
- Why might this be considered a ritual?
The function of rituals

All cultures have rituals. Rituals…

- express values of a community
- prescribe what to do in an important situation
- are prescribed, observed, rehearsed
- emphasize performance
The problem with rituals in education

- More emphasis on performance (doing what is expected)
- Less emphasis on learning (constructing meaning, exploring, etc.)
- Relates to performance vs mastery orientations (motivation theory)
Performing vs learning

- Rituals emphasize performance
- Less emphasis on learning (constructing meaning, exploring, etc.)
- Relates to performance vs mastery orientations (motivation theory)

Thus, the degree to which an activity is ritualized is the degree to which it does not support learning
Summary of our argument...

Intercultural learning is very difficult in education abroad programs

Intercultural learning requires certain conditions

The culture of education abroad programs are often in conflict with these conditions
Discussion 2

Suppose education abroad programs were, in fact, the worst (or not a good place) for intercultural learning.

What are the implications?
Implications: Change the culture of education abroad programs?

How?

The culture, norms, & rituals of education abroad programs serve a purpose.
Do we really want intercultural learning?

Most education abroad programs may be too short for significant change.

Deep intercultural learning can be very challenging, uncomfortable, even traumatic.

Can we handle the truth?
How’s this for marketing copy?

Join us for a Transformative Learning Experience!

- Experience disorientation, unsettling, disintegration, alienation triggered by life crises!
- Enjoy self-examination and relating discontent to others!
- Participate in extensive explaining, planning, implementing, experimenting, reintegrating ...etc., etc.

Terms adapted from Mezirow & Dirkx’s description of transformative learning
How’s this for marketing copy?
Forget about changing hearts and minds

Cognitive approaches focus on changing thinking and understanding.

Perhaps, what matters most is changing behavior.

Changing hearts and minds necessarily precedes changing behavior? Not always true.
Consider a wider variety of perspectives on intercultural learning

- **Cognitive.** Reflecting on problems associated with intercultural experiences (Dewey)
- **Social Learning.** Observing models who are interculturally competent (Bandura)
- **Pragmatic/Situative.** Participating in activities that require intercultural competence (Vygotsky)
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A variety of perspectives on intercultural learning

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Intercultural learning as intrinsic to a meaningful task

The pragmatic/situative perspective on intercultural learning

Learners behave in interculturally sensitive and competent ways in order to successfully participate in an activity.

Requires a carefully chosen task. Usually complex, and benefits from the multiple perspectives in the intercultural group.
Conclusion?

- So, we might be trying to do something impossible
- Being an idealist is essential for our work – believing in something that does not yet exist
- Equally important is being a learner - being open to change how we think and do things
Thank you!

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