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# The Effects of Multicultural Immersion Programs on Students' Multicultural Competency Development

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THE EFFECTS OF MULTICULTURAL IMMERSION PROGRAMS ON STUDENTS'  
MULTICULTURAL COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT

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A Capstone Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the Master of Science Degree in

Counselor Education at

Winona State University

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Winona State University  
College of Education  
Counselor Education Department

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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CAPSTONE PROJECT

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The Effects of Multicultural Immersion Programs on Students' Multicultural Competency  
Development

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Robert Christiano

Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Science Degree in

Counselor Education

Abstract

This Capstone Project will examine the effects of multicultural immersion experiences and travel study programs on college students' multicultural competency development via an extensive literature review. The author will discuss multicultural competency as it relates to critical self-awareness, global citizenship, and experiential learning. Aspects of the travel study program, such as pre-travel orientation, program format, and a framework for developing multicultural competence, will also be discussed. The purpose of this project is to discuss the multiple facets of multicultural development related to travel study programs, and to discuss better practices of administering travel study programs as well as provide a framework of ethnographic inquiry.

Contents

Introduction .....	1
Review of Literature .....	3
Discussion.....	10
Conclusion.....	13
Author's Note.....	15
References .....	16

## Introduction

One of the main goals of any undergraduate education is to develop students into well-rounded human beings. Academic institutions often express a wide range of learning goals and objectives within the context of study, but the importance of intercultural development is recognized by virtually all institutions (Greenholtz, 2000). Higher education leaders and faculty are not only concerned with intellectual development and learning, but also moral, social, and physical development in students, including intercultural competency. According to Braskamp, (2009) in our pluralistic world, students now need to develop a global perspective while in college. They need to think and act in terms of living in a world in which they meet, work, and live with others with very different cultural backgrounds, perspectives, customs, and aspirations. Travel study programs have become an increasingly important educational experience in global learning, intercultural competence, and intercultural sensitivity in higher education. Bolen (2006) states that travel study has shifted from the marginal opportunity originally confined to an elite group of students to a cornerstone of US higher education. At the same time increased skepticism regarding academic validity has become a large part of the discussion.

Paus & Robinson (2008) note study abroad is a key element in students' education for careers and citizenship in a globalizing world. It provides unique opportunities for students to learn about and appreciate cultures and perspectives different from their own, to confront and explore their own assumptions, to achieve greater proficiency in another language and to grapple with the challenge of living in an unfamiliar context. In the United States, federal government initiatives have been significant factors in the growth of study abroad: the availability of federal financial aid for study abroad in 1992, President Bill Clinton's executive memorandum encouraging international experience and awareness in 2000 (Dolby, 2008) and more recently

the formation of the Commission of the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program (Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Program, 2004). There has been a heavy push from the federal government to incorporate study abroad programs into higher education, but little structure has been given. Ogden (2006) notes as we welcome growth and development in the field, our greatest challenge may be preserving the fundamental mission of education abroad, which is, in part, to engage our students in meaningful intellectual and intercultural experiences. Education abroad has not been immune to the pervasive consumerism seen in US higher education today. As a result, programs are increasingly structured to allow, even encourage, students to remain within their comfort zones. Travel study programs change the environment that the students encounter but do not assess the effects the programs have on the individuals who participate. Steinberg (2002) calls for greater accountability by travel study educators by stating, "One of the central ambiguities of assessment in study abroad programs is that success cannot always be measured with grades and credits and that the students who may derive the greatest benefit from study abroad programs are not necessarily those whose grades are the highest, since their learning has taken place in less academically structured settings. The study abroad field needs to develop instruments to measure students' overall growth holistically" (Steinberg, 2002, p. 215). Often programs send students to different, unfamiliar parts of the world, subjecting them to environments in which they are unaccustomed to. While they encourage and pave the way for personal growth, they do not truly measure what the students learned or how they grew as global citizens. Since many universities have different locations, ethnic minorities and socioeconomic status, it might be better to focus on institution-specific analysis of multicultural immersion on students' multicultural competency development. With an increase in demand for faculty-led short-term study abroad programs over the last decade

(Institute of International Education Open Doors Report 2010), there have been a number of studies demonstrating the impact of such programs on students learning outcomes, including intercultural awareness and understanding (Carlson and Widaman 1988; Chieffo and Griffiths 2004; Kehl and Morris 2007; Paus and Robinson 2008; Fawcett, Briggs, Maycock and Stine 2010). The purpose of this project is to discuss the multiple facets of multicultural competency development related to travel study programs and to discuss better practices to administer travel study programs to focus on intercultural development.

### **Travel Study and Intercultural Development**

Rexeisen, Anderson, Lawton and Hubbard (2008) did a longitudinal study and found that this study provides strong support for the proposition that travel study experiences have a positive immediate impact on the intercultural development of students. The instrument used was Hammer and Bennett's Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI, 2008). The sample group consisted of 54 junior-level students (from a private Midwestern university) majoring in business. The students participated in a semester-long travel study program to London, England. Eighty-nine students applied for the London program and only 54 were selected based on GPA, student essays, letters of recommendation and personal interviews. During this program, students traveled and did the majority of their studies as a large group. This could raise issues as to whether or not this was a true immersion program. This research is also based on a subject pool that studied in a country with the same language and a similar culture. These limitations, along with the fact that students were selected based on interviews and GPA, raise questions of how generalizable this study would be to the public. Their study also did not examine specific outliers, those that either benefited the most or the least from the study abroad experience. This study relates to the research project based on the structure of the travel study program and the

limitations of this study helped shape the proposed research project. Similarly, Doyle (2009) did a study with an integrated approach to assess holistic intercultural growth on travel study programs at Central College. Doyle states that an integrated approach that employs both qualitative and quantitative methods would be more beneficial to assessing intercultural growth. Doyle used the Global Perspectives Inventory (2009) to assess student's growth on a cognitive dimension, intrapersonal dimension and an interpersonal dimension. The GPI is a useful instrument that assesses cultural growth on three different levels. This method, along with the use of in-depth interview questions associated closely to the GPI, would be more beneficial to assessing holistic growth. The research usefulness is limited for this project because Doyle was assessing a language course in Vienna. Doyle stresses the importance of collaborative use of both qualitative and quantitative research to assess intercultural development.

A related study by Braskamp & Merrill (2009) used a pretest-posttest design to measure changes in students' global perspectives over a period of a semester-long travel study program. Students took the same written survey before or during the first day of their program and then during the last week of the program or shortly after they returned to the United States. Although this study used ten different travel study programs, there was no control group to compare the results. The design allowed the researcher to look at the differences from the pretest and posttest to assess intercultural growth. The results of this study found that students progress more on some dimensions of the GPI than others. It showed that cognitive changes in knowledge and international issues were more apparent than the growth of a more complex sense of self and more intense relationships with others unlike themselves. This leaves a challenge for leaders and faculty in education abroad to create an environment for students that fosters intercultural growth. This study concludes that experience integrated with rigorous and critical, constructive,

and creative thinking may help students learn to develop more holistically (Braskamp & Merrill, 2009).

When looking at the previous research that has been done on travel study programs, it is evident that researchers have a difficult time assessing or incorporating specific intercultural development strategies. Some of these factors are because the researchers did not immerse the students in a different culture, while other factors are because of the lack of research strategies or framework used. It is important for travel study leaders and universities to assess intercultural growth in their programs. In order to devise the most effective policies at the institutional level to expand education abroad participation, educational decision-makers need to know which of the factors that play an important role in study abroad generally are the more important ones in students' study abroad decisions at their particular institution. Good policies are based on institution-specific analysis (Paus & Robinson, 2008). The report will discuss pre-travel orientation, experiential learning, and integrating ethnographic research as three essential factors for improving multicultural competency in immersion programs.

### **Pre-Travel Orientation**

Orientation programs are typically designed to provide an overview of the academic program, housing options, financial cost, geography and safety measures. However, they can be used to create a deeper understanding of the environment students will be immersed into. Orientation is also a great time to help students begin to think and act as global citizens. Ogden (2006) explains that when preparing a multicultural immersion, students anticipate that by living in a new country (or environment) and culture they will encounter different ways of thinking and living and that the experience will require of them significant changes in their lifestyle. Students

participating in a multicultural immersion program are facing a whirlwind of emotions, including questions about the program, examining their own cultural biases and notions of other cultures, and possibly wondering how safe the program will be. Orientation presents the opportunity to introduce students to conceptual frameworks for understanding culture, the principles of ethnographic inquiry, and to initiate a discussion of cultural identity development. Pre-travel orientation allows a platform to voice the questions and emotions students are facing. It is an open forum between the participants to explore their expectations and to prepare students in a way that will create cohesion in the group and help maximize their overall experience. Fawcett et al. (2010) met weekly with their students to discuss readings about the culture and history of Guatemala for four weeks prior to travel. They also implemented group processing and team-building activities to build group cohesion. These types of meetings and assignments are critical to helping students define their own powers of observation and recognize their own natural tendencies to compare, contrast and judge things in terms of their own worldview. Similarly, McLaughlin and Johnson (2006) assessed student learning with innovative web-based pre-trip assignments that provided essential background knowledge of their travel study program to Costa Rica. During the pre-trip stage, each student had to complete these web-based activities and had to discuss their findings to the group. Orientation should also engage students early on in activities that enable them to become more understanding, objective and introspective cultural explorers (Ogden, 2006). Orientation also provides an opportunity to encourage students to begin reflecting on their own cultural biases and ideas of multicultural issues.

### **Experiential learning and multicultural immersion**

A number of studies suggest that experiential learning, particularly in the international context, has the potential to exert a transformation effect on global citizenship (McLaughlin and

Johnson 2006; Pagano and Roselle 2009). Experiential learning concerns activities that actively engage the student and which are subject to critical analysis and reflection. Study abroad programs that adopt principles of experiential learning are arguably powerful for improving multicultural competency among college students. According to Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning, in order to transform experience into knowledge, learners must begin with their own concrete experience, then engage in reflective observation, move to a stage of abstract conceptualization, in which they begin to comprehend the experience, and then engage in active experimentation of the concepts. In this model, reflection and analysis are essential components of experiential education. A major point in creating any multicultural immersion program is to gain knowledge and understanding through direct exposure to a particular population.

Mclaughlan and Johnson (2006), proposed a field course experiential learning model for short-term study abroad in which the field learning is comprised of hands-on experience, journal keeping, participation in discussion groups, and independent exploring. They believe this type of approach provides a framework for moving students beyond simply acquiring knowledge to being able to apply and integrate the information learned in their everyday lives. They used a field course experiential learning model to help inform students about the anticipated experiences and to elicit inquiry. Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich (2002) identified ten key principles for guiding experiential teaching in study abroad, including problem-based learning, critical analysis, active engagement, faculty facilitation, and peer-group discussion. Fawcett et al. (2010) designed a Guatemala travel study course that incorporated daily and weekly journals prior to, during and following the immersion experience. During the immersion course, students attended community events, learned the language and spent time individually with members of that particular culture. Their students were encouraged to reflect and honestly address cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of participating in an immersion experience. By writing about

day-to-day observations, students can deepen their understanding of the population that gives better clarity of the events they encounter. Because writing involves cognitive processes more rigorous than are common in conversation, students can use analytical writing to push past the limits of their current understanding to grasp new insights, and transcend the discomforts of cultural learning and culture shock (Wagner & Magistrale, 1997). Experiential learning relating to multicultural immersion of students offers opportunities participants could not experience in a classroom setting.

### **Integrating Ethnographic Research**

An essential framework for improving travel study programs is to incorporate ethnographic research in to the program. The key element of ethnography is extended, systematic, and detailed observation of a setting. Ogden (2006) mentions ethnography as a qualitative research method, which seeks to describe and to understand another way of life from the narrative point of view. The goal is to grasp the native's point of view, his/her relation to life, and to realize his/her vision of the world. There are multiple forms of ethnographic fieldwork, including observation, interviewing, note-taking, collecting life histories, analyzing history and religious beliefs, keeping a diary, audio and videotaping, creating a field journal, and taking pictures. All of these approaches help immerse students in the culture and help them explore their understanding of multicultural issues and what it means to live in a global society. Ogden (2006) notes ethnography at its most fundamental level can be reframed as the learning core or paradigm through which the field of education abroad will be better positioned to guide students toward becoming autonomous cultural learners and explorers who can describe, understand, analyze, appreciate, and enjoy intercultural differences. Travel study students living and studying in a new culture are constantly challenged to understand and reflect on the differences.

Each experience presents an opportunity for learning, but also runs the risk of defaulting to interpreting through stereotypes. Jurasek (1996) asserts when students are met with too much complexity without interpretive skills, they may attempt to negotiate complex meanings by falling back on superficial or stereotypical interpretations, dismissing or demeaning the “other” as irrelevant or insignificant, or deferring to authorities who tell them what to think. It is important to provide a framework for students to discuss and explore the differences in a positive way long before the travel study course is underway. Citron (2001) agrees that in an overly challenging situation, students may retreat to the foreign student bubble and close themselves off to future encounters with cultural difference. The student is then closed to the impact that the environment might have on him/her creating a “mis-educative experience.” Ogden (2006) continues describing how ethnographic inquiry can help inoculate students against monocultural defense mechanisms by raising issues of cultural difference and appreciation. Ethnography can help students learn and develop tools to understand a new culture, to make careful observations and generate less biased and more accurate interpretations of culture. Because ethnography is a culture learning approach, it can be integrated within all forms of travel study programming, regardless of type, location, or duration. Jurasek (1991) concludes that as one begins to think less in dualistic terms of right or wrong, he/she becomes more multiplistic in his/her thinking and seeks to imagine what things might look like from the viewpoint of an insider from another culture.

This research report is based on the research question: How do you create a multicultural competency program that will impact the cultural awareness of undergraduate students?

### Discussion

Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich (2002) identified ten key principles for guiding experiential teaching in study abroad, including problem-based learning, critical analysis, active engagement, faculty facilitation, and peer-group discussion. Fawcett et al. (2010) designed a Guatemala travel study course that increased participants multicultural counseling competencies through the experience of reading assignments, large and small group discussion, experiential activities, journaling and advocacy efforts. These efforts contributed to their ability to incorporate the cultural material into their thinking and practice. Doyle (2009) did a study with an integrated approach to assess holistic intercultural growth on travel study programs at Central College. Doyle states that an integrated approach that employs both qualitative and quantitative methods would be more beneficial to assessing intercultural growth. Allen (2010) created a 6-week summer study abroad program to France. Her program focused on language and culture through the use of experiential learning. Instead of the use of journals, her program had the participants create blogs comprised of 10 entries on foreign language and cultural learning. This method accounted for how goals evolved and how time was spent outside of the classroom. All of these studies focus on pre-travel orientation, experiential learning and some form of research to progress students' multicultural competency during their travel study programs.

Multicultural competency development should be assessed during travel study programs through the use of journals, interviews, classroom discussions, pre-travel cultural classes, experiential activities and service projects. The idea is to integrate all of these approaches that influence multicultural competency in the travel study participants. According to Ogden (2006) when students are shown how to be empathic to the perspectives of the insider, they become more sensitive to complex cultural issues. Gradually students move away from making quick

judgments or stereotypical inferences based on their own understanding of what is good and right in a culture, toward understanding that cultures are relative to one another, each with a different set of values, assumptions and beliefs. Through classroom discussions and experiential learning, the participants begin to understand what it means to be white. Through consistent interactions with minorities, students began to search for an understanding of racism and the ways they benefit from White privilege. It is thought that participants slowly begin to understand all the benefits they have and how truly difficult it can be for racial minorities. Interacting with local culture should be a huge component of any travel study program. The idea is to give the students a different perspective than their Eurocentric lens they've been looking through. Heavy emphasis should also be placed on discussing the history of the culture and their relationship with the United States government. As students become more competent, they will be more likely to respond to uncertain situations as an opportunity for cultural exploration rather than to retreat from the learning situation.

### **Implications**

The implications of this study could be important to all WSU travel study programs to help understand and assess intercultural development in their programs. Significant findings could demonstrate the value of multicultural travel study programs to higher education students. The findings of this study could influence future research on travel study programs that focus on intercultural development. Courses could be created for other travel study programs to help better understand the lives and needs of minority individuals, as well as document important stories that could be lost forever. Travel study programs could also be partnered with other departments such as counselor education, or nursing to help the fields get a closer view of what life is like for certain minorities.

### Conclusion

As the importance of travel study programs grow, so should the focus of these programs to assure they are being used to create global citizenship among the students. It is important to know more than the learning outcomes of these experiences; travel study leaders need to understand what it is we truly want students to learn through the experiences. Working with and constantly interacting with individuals from other cultures should be at the core of any travel study program. To be an effective travel study program leaders should incorporate pre-travel orientation, experiential learning, ethnographic research and intercultural development into their curriculum. It's also very useful to add journaling or qualitative interviews to help the students further their exploration of self-identity and their roles in a multicultural world. Journals and interviews offer the participants a starting point, and end point to assess progress.

Doyle (2009) notes the importance of employing holistic evaluation strategies at the end of a program. He states it provides more insight into the re-entry process that is often given short shrift in the overall examination of a student's study abroad experience. While travel study participants receive some guidance during the final stages of study abroad, they are often left to manage much of the re-entry process alone. If academic institutions are able to more accurately and completely understand how the cultural immersion has possibly reshaped student's attitudes about self and home, perhaps they can better assist students who encounter feelings of "temporary homelessness." Ogden (2006) notes that ethnographers seek to understand and describe culture, and so too can students. In the course of an education abroad experience, students can be taught basic skills of ethnographic inquiry as a learning paradigm through which they can take all aspects of their new culture as subject of serious study. Through the ethnographic paradigm, students learn advanced tools for cultural learning and exploration. With

time and experience, they become better observers who are aware of their own culture and respectful of other cultural systems. This kind of inquiry can lead students beyond simply becoming more knowledgeable about a particular culture, to becoming more insightful, patient and introspective cultural explorers. As study abroad and global awareness become even more integrated components of the undergraduate educational experience, it is critical that concepts such as “global citizenship” and “intercultural development” be assessed and discussed to ensure the travel study programs are helping to create global citizens and competent students.

### **Author's Note**

Writing this capstone project has been both an eye opening experience, and an important process for me as a professional. This project directly relates to the fieldwork I do with the Navajo Oral History project. For five years we've been transforming the program from that of a photography project, to an extensive documentary journalism course that directly impacts intercultural development. This capstone project holds tremendous values for our travel study program because I was able to assess what other researchers in the field value as part of multicultural immersion programs. Through the extensive literature review I was able to find commonalities among travel study programs and pinpoint which processes improve multicultural competency among the participants. My colleague and I will be able to create a stronger program based on the findings of this research paper.

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