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Group Size and Adult International Field Study Programs: A Literature Review

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Abstract: Traveling in a group impacts the learning process abroad. This literature review examines established research about the effects of group sizes on learning when studying abroad as an adult.

Keywords: Adult peer-learning; adult group size; group size abroad; adult study abroad; group and individual learning abroad

In 1990, the National Task Force on Undergraduate Education Abroad argued that most typical study abroad models were not in-tune with the needs of adult students. However, more recently, higher education has begun to offer many more opportunities that include “short-term off-campus programs—credit-granting, volunteer, internship, international, domestic, summer, embedded in a semester—create opportunities for a far greater range of students to leave their homes to access another culture and educational opportunity” (Spencer & Tuma, 2002, p. 1). Current research indicates that small group configurations in adult education learning settings is a common practice and results in a myriad of benefits. This paper reviews current literature relevant to adult learning and instructional methodologies related to group work abroad.

Adult Learning in Small Groups

As adult educators shift from lecture-based to learner-centered teaching methods, group work becomes an indispensable technique utilized by instructors. Literature shows that “learning communities for students are now a staple of higher education across the disciplines” (Buch & Barron, 2012, p. 67) and constitute an emancipatory adult learning practice (Connolly, 2008). Jones (2014) confirms this notation stating that faculty members frequently utilize collaborative learning methods in graduate education to aid students in connecting course content to practice. Within the field of adult education in particular, group work has become more important as educators seek a more robust learning experience by utilizing challenges and processes encountered by students in their professional lives (Roemmich, 2013).

In a study conducted to understand the effects of group learning on student performance, Vrioni (2011) found that switching from the traditional teacher-centered teaching method to a learner-centered method promoted communication among students. As members communicate through explaining, elaborating, and auguring their thoughts on the topic, a deeper understanding of the content is likely to occur (Dart, 1997; Jones, 2014; Yalom 1995). Mowatt and Siann (1997) conducted extensive research about learning in small groups to find that group work encourages students to actively structure their own learning instead of waiting passively for learning to occur. Jones (2014) echoes this notion stating that in a collaborative learning setting students have the ability to create their own understandings “actively and uniquely” (p. 164). Likewise, students working in small groups learn new ways to synthesize information and new ways of knowing (Brookfield, 2015; Taylor, Marineau, & Fiddler, 2000). Another benefit of adult learning in small groups is the opportunity for members to explore different perspectives as

well as examine and refine their understandings (Dart, 1997). Brookfield (2015) states that small groups enable students to hear the different ways in which their classmates approach things.

It is clear that the size of the group is an important consideration in the learning process; in fact, some suggest that students “strongly prefer smaller groups” (Levine & Moreland, 1990, p. 19). However, what constitutes “small” is a subject of debate among scholars. Many have their own definition of “small” group, such as Webb and Palinscar (1996) who posit that most researchers propose three to four students per group to maximize learning potential, while Lyons et al. (2003) suggest four to seven group members to allow for a variety of viewpoints and to inspire discussion. Bray, Lee, Smith, and Yorks (2003) suggest five to twelve group members allows for diversity while still fostering collaboration efficiently and democratically. Imel and Tisdell (1996) suggest the consensus among most scholars is that groups of six or less are more unified and productive. These definitions nevertheless are for adult group work in the classroom, where the total class can be divided into smaller groups in order to work collaboratively. When we refer to the group size while abroad, we are referring to the size of the program as a whole, the total amount of students who will be travelling abroad and will be led by faculty. For this particular dynamic where a vast amount of the learning happens outside of the classroom, the grouping for adult outdoor education seems pertinent. In this regard, Walsh and Golin (1976) sustain that an ideal group can constitute around 10 participants, and for practical purposes an optimal range could be between six to 16 (Neill, 2004).

Adult Learning in Small Groups While Abroad

Even though learning in small groups can significantly benefit a learning process, literature referencing adult learning in small groups while abroad is rather exiguous. The scholarly discussion about group size is relevant as different group sizes can deeply shape the multicultural experience. In fact, students travelling abroad in large groups tend to miss out on the deeper cultural interactions. Ogden (2006) discusses the “flock,” the “American bubble” or the “one hundred-legged American” metaphors which are often used to describe American students travelling abroad and how studying abroad in such large groups does not allow students to effectively explore the host culture (p. 104) because their ‘togetherness’ can impede cultural interaction. In fact, to facilitate the understanding of different cultural frames of reference, Ogden proposes teaming students in small groups, which help them “compare, contrast and judge things in terms of their own world views” (p. 106). In this regard, Mills, Vrba, and Deviney (2012) point out that the unique individual characteristics of each student and the composition of the group of their study abroad program “enriched the study abroad program beyond what might have happened otherwise” (p. 127). Indeed, the smaller size of this group (fourteen students) was probably instrumental to the deeper interaction within the group and enabled each personality to influence significantly the group. Willis (2010) also suggests “flexible grouping” where U.S. students are combine with host students in and outside of the classroom (p. 469).

Travelling abroad generates a “liminois state of communitas” among the group where traditional barriers dissipate and cultural and national identity deepens connections, which can create “insular behavior”, but can also serve as a powerful learning tool (Fairley & Tyler, 2009, p.287). Therefore, the shared individual experiences foster meaningful group learning processes: they help assimilate new knowledge (Mills, et al, 2012; Willis, 2010), but they also help individuals cope with stressors in socio-cultural adaptation (Savicki, 2015). In this regard, Davis and Coryell (2016) conducted a study with adult students enrolled in a study abroad course to

find that travelling in a group of ten students allowed for trust and comradery to develop among the group. The size of the group, among other characteristics of the program, enabled students to focus more on the learning experience and the cultural exchange as opposed to the stressors of adjusting to the foreign locale.

In addition, the risk of insular behavior mentioned above must be considered to avoid creating “island programs,” disconnected from the host culture (Gnatt, 2014). Therefore, an appropriate balance between the group learning dynamic and the authentic exposure to the culture becomes one of the goals when structuring successful study abroad programs.

Instructional Methodologies in Adult Study Abroad

We know from studies on pedagogical strategies across study abroad programs, which can cater to non-traditional adult undergraduate, graduate, community college, and professional students, offer some insight into the kinds of instructional methods in use, many which are designed with small groups in mind.

Experiential learning activities are cited as foundational for international learning experiences. Many programs include cultural field trips, lectures/presentations, and academic excursions to meet with groups of host country individuals and observe local practices and norms (Bai, et al, 2016; Barton, Bruck, & Nelson, 2009; Coryell, 2013; Dirkx, et al., 2014). In addition, research recommends utilizing group discussions (Coryell, 2013; Coryell, Spencer, & Sehin, 2014; Dirkx, et al., 2014), offering alone time, scheduling guided observations, organizing research activities, and requiring students to journal or blog (Davis & Coryell, 2016; Dirkx, et al., 2014). Others recommend utilizing formative and long-term evaluation practices (Bai, Larimer & Riner, 2016), group role plays or projects to present typical professional interactions in interprofessional exchanges (Bai, et al., 2016; Coryell, 2013), and service oriented activities/volunteering (Coryell, et al, 2016; Dirkx, et al., 2014). Additionally, in graduate study abroad programs, opportunities often include internships, teaching abroad, and/or work abroad (Dirkx, et al., 2014). Many researchers also promote individual and group reflexive activities on both assumptions and new learning throughout the course/program (Coryell, 2013; Coryell, et al., 2016; Coryell, Spencer, & Sehin, 2014; Bai, Larimer & Riner, 2016; Spencer & Tuma, 2002), while Sanders and Morgan (2001) assert critical reflection and rational discourse with adult study abroad participants while abroad. Similarly, Roholt and Fisher (2013) emphasize the importance of including decolonizing pedagogy, which requires

“raising student awareness of the lived experiences of those who have been ‘othered’ through colonizing practices and creates space for these marginalized and disenfranchised voices to enter the discussion. The goal is not simply to empathize with others but to realize how our understandings of the world and social work practice are often grounded in our own lived experiences (p. 62).”

Researchers suggest collaborative learning in small group instruction and interaction can provide opportunities for students to work and learn with students from the host country and to share cultural professional practices (Bai, et al., 2002; Coryell, et al., 2014) and to interact outside the classroom to exchange cultural traits and mores (Bai, et al., 2016; Coryell, 2013; Davis & Coryell, 2016). Working collaboratively with integrated host country students in the

classroom (Mills, et al., 2012), with assigned cultural informants (Willis, 2010), or with intercultural mentors at the site (Van den Berg, et al., 2009), can also maximize students' intercultural learning. Participants often reflect on these experiences as being meaningful and some of the best learning opportunities offered in the international experience (Bai, et al., 2016; Coryell, et al., 2014; Davis & Coryell, 2016). Likewise, the literature proposes the need to offer students opportunities to provide feedback about the design of the learning program (Bai, et al., 2016; Barton, et al., 2008; Coryell, 2013). Indeed, the learning design must consider that "each traveler may have very different experiences based on complex and intersecting identities of gender, national origin, and socio-economic status" as Binięcki and Conceięo (2014, p. 50) stress. Gathering learner perspectives on their experiences, what worked, and what may not have in their learning while abroad, can help instructors establish more reflective and meaningful instructional practices.

Groups in Adult Study Abroad Programs

Faculty led study abroad programs found in the literature describe and analyze the characteristics which have made each program a success, and most of these programs travelled in small groups. Savicki (2015) analyzed four programs which had between 9 and 23 students while Mills, et al. (2012) led a 14-student program abroad. In his model, Sachau (2010) required a minimum of fifteen students for financial viability of the program, and a maximum of twenty for manageability, which are concerns shared by Herbst (2011). Even though these many successful programs have *de facto* been working with small groups, the number of students present in each program or the ideal size of the group to enhance learning has not been a significant question in their research. Besides Ogden (2006) who mentions the value of the small groups in a faculty-led study abroad program, research is scarce in regards to this specific characteristic of the program. Overall, the literature indicates that the intercultural competencies do not improve by the mere exposure to a foreign culture (Tezuolo, 2016) but by the quality and depth of the cultural interaction (Bardovi-Hartlig, 2013; Gantt, 2014) which then becomes one of the most valuable conditions to be fostered by study abroad programs. Nevertheless, for future research, we posit the following questions: is it possible to incorporate effectively the characteristics of successful programs when travelling in larger groups? In what ways might group size maximize students' intercultural learning abroad? And, how can we learn more about the effect group size has on learning in adult study abroad experiences?

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