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Categorizing Qualitative Insights from an Itemized Inventory of Interest in Study Abroad

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Abstract: Study abroad is a transformative life and learning opportunity that is thought to motivate student expectations of the university and cross-cultural travel experience. Few studies, however, ask students directly about what they desire to know prior to embarking on a study abroad sojourn. Here, we report on qualitative findings from an interest inventory of feedback given by university students who responded to a standardized worksheet designed to align student and teacher expectancies about the expectations and provisions of learning experiences. Categories were summarized according to fit and similarity with factors discussed in studies of intercultural awareness, pedagogical design, and study abroad assessment. The results showed that students generally “wanted to know” deeper domain knowledge about their host culture (New Zealand) and expressed being motivated to obtain a broader understanding about demography with authentic experiences. Implications for study abroad program design and assessment are discussed.

Key words: Study Abroad, Student Interest, Intercultural Awareness

1. Introduction

Study abroad is a transformative life and learning opportunity that is thought to motivate student expectations of the university and cross-cultural travel experience. However, current trends in study abroad programs in Japan, especially as they pertain to an abundance of short term “intensive” study abroad programs, have led to a more refined assessment of these programs and a shift in focus in the research from the program outcomes to what is actually occurring during the programs and the perceptions of those students participating in the programs. It has been posited that problems with many short-term study abroad programs may be a result of how these programs are designed, often not considering the goals of its participants but rather “as ‘sheltered’ programs wherein students integrate into a host institution yet remain in a peer group with others sharing their first language” (Allen, 2010, p. 28). This type of program has been found to lead to an artificial experience with the local culture, minimal exposure to natural language opportunities, and participants who begin to feel as if they are on vacation (Ingram, 2005), which may undermine their interests in joining the program in the first place and have an effect on future interest in developing cultural experiences and motivation for further study.

Although these studies do not provide promising data for short-term study abroad programs in particular, other researchers such as Davidson (2007) and Magnan & Back (2007) have found that one strong benefit of these types of programs is their potential to motivate lower-level students to continue studying at advanced levels or to participate in longer duration study abroad programs after returning from their initial program. With these conflicting views of short-term study abroad programs, where

then does this former motivation come from? Although this answer has not been unquestionably found, current research points not only to the importance of internalized motivation but even more so the ability for these programs to push participants to “see themselves as agents of the processes shaping their motivation” (Ushioda, 2008). Should these programs not then take into stronger consideration the interests in and the specific knowledge of the host country that the participants hope to gain of these programs during their initial development or execution?

Studies have shown that students are motivated to study abroad for a variety of factors. As an example, Anderson and Lawton (2015) performed careful analysis of these factors in an instrument validation and comparison of motivational indicators that identified *world enlightenment*, *personal growth*, *career development*, and *entertainment* as potentially informative inductive summaries. Other such instruments have been developed by Nyugen (2017) and Yoshida, Indurkha, Larson, Dujmovich, & Keith (2018). These instruments may also be useful when considering any themes that may be developed from an analysis of student interests in an upcoming study abroad program.

2. Research Questions

The current study was developed with two general goals in mind: first, to ask students directly about and to classify what they desire to know prior to embarking on a study abroad sojourn and, second, to see how those student responses and classifications align with other well-known instruments developed for recent studies of intercultural awareness, pedagogical design, and study abroad assessment. Here, we report on qualitative findings from an interest inventory of feedback given by university students who responded to a standardized worksheet designed to align student and teacher expectancies about the expectations and provisions of learning experiences abroad. As a result, the following research questions were developed:

When participants from a Japanese university are given an opportunity to voice their interests in and expectations for an upcoming study abroad program, what emerging themes are revealed?

How do these interests and expectations align with current instruments used to measure the effectiveness of study abroad programs regarding intercultural awareness and pedagogical design?

3. Methods

In order to gather data about participant interest in their study abroad experience, the researchers made use of KWL charts during the initial orientation meetings for the study abroad program. The KWL chart was initially designed by Carr and Ogle (1987) as a classroom tool for students to identify and activate their own prior knowledge, set personal learning goals and specify their interests in the topic, and as a post-analysis of the new knowledge they had gained. In its base form, the KWL chart has been described as “a worksheet on which students identify the progressive stages of knowledge acquisition about a given topic” (Alshatti, Watters, & Kidman, 2012). However, as this “worksheet” is able to provide such a comprehensive view of not only the stages of a student’s learning but also what they hope to attain from their coursework, it has been used for many purposes in research as a data collection tool. These include degrees of learner potential and achievement (Czajkowski, 2000), learner attitudes toward different subjects (Williams, & Burden, 1997), reading comprehension, self-expression, and vocabulary (Elliott, Formhals, & Wheat, 2002; Tonks, & Taboda, 2011), and of course student interest in the development of their education (Babalola & Walter, 2019). The current study follows the former study mentioned in utilizing the KWL chart to find student interest in their study abroad program by taking advantage of the W column, in which students “are encouraged to find personal reasons for wanting to learn more about the current topic” (Alshatti,

Watters, & Kidman, 2012, p. 2).

As briefly described above, the students were required by the study abroad program to attend an initial orientation. During this orientation, students were grouped into their respective countries and attended brief lectures about the countries they would be studying in. It was during this lecture that the KWL charts were given to the students and approval for the use of the data collected was given to the researchers. After the participants had the opportunity to finish their charts, they were collected by the researchers for later analysis.

The W: "What I Want to Know" section (W column - list of items) of the KWL chart was analyzed in order to answer the question, "What do participants of a short-term study abroad program desire to know prior to embarking?" After examining the items for duplication and coherence, a final list of 233 items was generated. An examination of the formulated items led to the grouping of the questions into three themes representing various facets of participant experiences abroad: Personal Experiences, Professional Experiences, and Educational Experiences. These themes were then grouped into nine categories of interest: Sightseeing (5%), Dining (8%), Field Specific (7%), History of Destination (8%), Social Systems (11%), Culture (39%), Language (4%), Foreign Perspectives of Japanese Culture (8%), and Nature (11%). As can be seen by the large percentage of interest in the category of Culture (39%), this category was further grouped into six sub-categories, which will be further described in the Results below.

As a deeper analysis of the data, and to answer the second research question above, the items generated from these charts and the categories generated from them, mentioned above, were summarized according to fit and similarity with factors discussed in studies of intercultural awareness, pedagogical design, and study abroad assessment. In particular, the coding instruments developed by Nyugen (2015), Yoshida et. al's (2018) Intercultural Awareness Factor Matching, and Anderson & Lawton's (2015) Motivations to Study Abroad were used. Doing so allowed the current data to be compared to and add to these other recent studies.

Participants

The participants for this study were undergraduate students enrolled in a university in Japan. The KWL chart was administered to the participants in Fall 2018 and 2019, and there were 61 participants in total who registered for the courses. Out of the 61 participants, 21 (34%) were male and 40 (66%) were female. The response rate for the study was 100% (n = 61). The participants were in the second semester of their first year of schooling in their respective undergraduate programs. The study abroad program is available to all students campus-wide, therefore students came from a variety of departments which varied across different fields (i.e. elementary education, music education, English education, engineering, integrated arts and sciences, law, medicine). Student enrollment in the study abroad program itself was completely voluntary.

4. Results

In order to determine the potential course that could be taken for the enhancement of the current study abroad program and theoretically for the development of future study abroad programs, two goals were assumed when analyzing the collected data. First, it was to discover what developing themes were revealed when exploring what interests the participants had in their destination and what they hoped to gain from their experience on the study abroad program. Second, the researchers hope to examine how these themes and data aligned with factors discussed in other studies of intercultural awareness, pedagogical design, and study abroad assessment. Through the use of KWL charts, as described above, the following categories were developed, based on the themes of Personal Experiences (categories that centered on participants enjoying their time in a more recreational

manner and to increase their natural life experiences), Professional Experiences (categories that centered on participants gaining some knowledge related to their field of study and potential future careers), and Educational Experiences (categories that centered on participants gaining academic knowledge, whether it be based in general history and culture or more specific to academic skills such as English ability).

Category Descriptions

Sightseeing

The first category of items developed from the data focused on student interest in personally experiencing famous tourism locations. Participants who responded with these types of items seemed to view their study abroad opportunity more as a chance to visit famous places recreationally. Examples of responses in this category include: "Sightseeing spots," "Famous places and buildings," and "Places to visit."

Dining

The second category of items focused on another aspect of recreational travel, experiencing local and famous cuisine of the country. Participant responses that fell under this category were more focused on the actual eating of the foods themselves, rather than learning about what is popular among the people of that culture. Examples of items that fell under this category include: "Famous food," "What to eat," "New Zealand's delicious food," and "I want to know delicious food there."

Field Specific

The third category from the list of participant interest in their study abroad program falls under the second theme of professional experiences and focused on information that participants were hoping to learn about that were related to their field of study or future career paths. The researchers had access to the background information of all participants, including their educational department and majors, and as such were able to cross reference the student responses in their "Want to know" columns with that data. Responses in this category focused on very specific aspects of New Zealand business and culture and included such items as: "Relationship between geography and industry," "Buildings," "Ecology," and "[New Zealand]'s tourism industry."

History of Destination

The fourth category of items and every remaining category fall under the third theme of educational experiences. These items focused on participants who were interested in learning more about the history of the country they were visiting. Examples of the items include: "The history of New Zealand," "The history of Maori," and "Why rugby is famous."

Social Systems

Responses from the fifth category focused on items in which participants were interested in the developed systems or infrastructures found in the society of New Zealand. These items ranged in specificity from general structures to specific policies developed to protect minority groups or roles expected of individuals in certain positions in the society. Examples of items from this category include: "Educational system of New Zealand," "How to realize multicultural society," "How to protect Maori traditional culture," and "Politics."

Culture

The sixth category focused on items which showed participant interest in learning more about the culture of their destination. The term culture, however, is very vague, and as a result this category represented the majority (39%) of items on the list. In order to further clarify this category, six sub-categories were defined. Below is a list of these sub-categories and some examples from each.

Food Culture

Unlike the items focused on sampling famous cuisine found in the *Dining* category above, these items were cases of participants showing interest in learning more about the types of food found and

eaten by locals in New Zealand. These items include: "What food do they eat mainly of everyday" and "The difference of food."

Ethnic Groups

These items focused on participant interest in learning more about the minority cultures of New Zealand. This of course includes the more well-known Maori culture, but also branches out to other minorities as well. Examples include: "Culture and tradition of Maori," "More information about ethnic groups," and "Traditional cultures of tribes."

Sport Culture

These items were few but focused on the types of sports and activities that are found in New Zealand. This interest in sports is likely a result of the rugby world cup happening near the time of collecting this data but goes beyond simple comments about rugby itself. These items include: "I love rugby, so I want to know the relationship between NZ's people and national sports" and "Other popular sports."

Multicultural Interaction

Items from this sub-category showed participant interest in the multicultural aspect of everyday life in New Zealand. These items focused less on interaction on a global scale and more on how one nation of people who come from different cultural backgrounds interact with each other. Examples of these items include: "The difference of lifestyle between city and country side in New Zealand" and "How to live with other cultures (without fighting)."

Modern Culture/Lifestyles

In this sub-category, items focused on more modern aspects of New Zealand culture (such as pop culture) and the daily life of its residents. Many of these items were also focused on university students, showing an interest particularly in individuals of about the same age as the students going abroad. Participants interested in this sub-category wrote: "The life of people in New Zealand," "The modern culture of New Zealand, especially food, music, and clothes," and "Something which university students in New Zealand are keen to."

Generic

The final sub-category of *Culture* included items that were not specific to any particular aspect of culture. Often these items were single words that did not provide much detail beyond the topic itself. Examples include: "National character," "Custom," and "Religion."

Language

The items classified in the seventh category focused on responses in which participants were interested in the languages used in New Zealand. These responses were not only restricted to those focusing on general language use in the country, but also specifically on opportunities for participants to improve their own English language knowledge. Example responses include: "How many languages are spoken in New Zealand," "How many people speak English or Maori," and "Pronunciation of English."

Foreign Perspectives of Japanese Culture

The eighth category was composed of items in which participants were interested in learning about how their own Japanese culture was viewed by those who live in another country. The existence of this category was not unexpected, as in their study on intercultural competence as defined through collection of "internationally known intercultural scholars" Deardorff (2006) found this topic, labelled in their article as "self-awareness of one's own culture" (p. 247), as one of the top three common elements found throughout multiple definitions of intercultural competence. Examples of items from this category include: "Why students in New Zealand study Japanese that is difficult to understand," "How people think about Japan," and "How students in New Zealand recognize Japan."

Nature

The final category included items that were related to participants learning something about the nature of New Zealand. As was the case with the *food* sub-category of *Culture* above, this is different from merely sightseeing as the responses were not focused on experiencing the nature firsthand but rather were focused on attaining more knowledge of the nature itself. Example items from this category include: “What wildlife live in this country” and “What do people in New Zealand do to conserve the nature?”

Category Comparison

In order to address the second research question, considering how participant interests and expectations align with current instruments developed in study abroad research, three well known instruments were chosen. These instruments, briefly addressed above, were the coding instruments developed by Nyugen (2015), Yoshida et. al's (2018) Intercultural Awareness Factor Matching, and Anderson & Lawton's (2015) Motivations to Study Abroad.

For initial analysis, the researchers looked at Nyugen's (2015) coding instrument which was heavily influenced by the concept of experiential learning. As a result, only items that were related to participant learning through firsthand experiences were considered for this analysis. The result being that very few items ($n = 9$) were actually included as factors of interest that should be considered for the study abroad program itself. These included: “How big the world and what the world is like through nature of NZ,” “How to interact with people from various countries and areas,” and “How is the life there?”

The second instrument taken into consideration for analysis of participant interest in relation to the study abroad program was Yoshida et. al's (2018) Intercultural Awareness Factor Matching. This instrument looked at more aspects or themes that are necessary for improving intercultural awareness: *Awareness*, *Knowledge*, *Emotions*, and *Skills*. In this case, the theme of *Knowledge* was most prevalent in the items showing what participants hoped to gain from their time abroad with 214 items, followed by *Awareness* ($n = 22$), *Emotions* ($n = 5$), and finally *Skills* ($n = 2$).

The final instrument considered for the analysis of the data was Anderson & Lawton's (2015) Motivations to Study Abroad. In this case four key themes for motivating students to study abroad were defined: *World Enlightenment*, *Personal Growth*, *Career Development*, and *Entertainment*. In aligning the current data of participant interest in and reasons for going abroad with these themes, it was found that these particular students were most interested in *World Enlightenment* ($n = 232$), followed by *Personal Growth* ($n = 3$), *Career Development* ($n = 2$), and *Entertainment* ($n = 2$).

5. Impact of Data and Suggestions for Future Research

Considering the current shifts in study abroad research from program outcomes to the perceptions of students participating in the programs, questions of the effectiveness of short-term study abroad programs (Allen, 2010; Ingram 2005), and a focus on student motivation as a key factor to the success of many of these programs (Davidson, 2007; Magnan & Back, 2007; Ushioda, 2008) suggest that development of a study abroad program should perhaps take into more account what the participants of the programs themselves hope to gain from their time abroad. This is further backed by research that has shown the importance of building expectancy (Koizumi & Matsuo, 1993), or goal setting, for generating achievement behavior to further promote motivation. This motivation as well as personal factors (such as connections to personal interests) have also been found to be a key factor for generating student engagement in their learning and thus success in formal education settings (Oga-Baldwin, 2019). One way to attain this expectancy and as a result engagement in the study abroad experience itself is to better align the goals of the program with the interests of the students.

Overall, the results of the current study's analysis showed that students generally "wanted to know" deeper domain knowledge about their host culture (New Zealand) and expressed being motivated to obtain a broader understanding about demography with authentic experiences. This data combined with the categories of student interest developed from the collected KWL charts may serve as a starting point for further development of study abroad programs here in Japan. In particular, short-term programs similar to the one used in this study could benefit from these categories.

However, some limitations of the current study should also be considered, mainly in that the data collected and analyzed were done entirely pre-departure, and as such cannot take into account the effect the actual process of being abroad may have on student interest and motivation. It is in fact evident in the way that participant's initial interests and goals were often lacking in specificity as to how they would be accomplished or discovered in real-life terms, something found in other similar research (e.g. Allen, 2010). Further, this data was collected from one university in Japan and as such generalizability of these findings to other populations and situations, especially when considering longer length programs, may not be appropriate.

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