The Development of Cultural Competence Through Educational Experiences Abroad

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INTRODUCTION

Educational experiences abroad, such as through a college or university, have an advantage–the development of cultural competence. The experiential knowledge a person can gain, as a result of such a trip, can potentially impact their own cultural understanding and behavior. Cultural competence not only embodies gaining the knowledge of cultures and differences, but developing positive attitudes towards different cultural practices and worldviews, how to go about them, as well as being aware of and challenging one's own stance. A simpler explanation of cultural competence can be presented as the ability, but more importantly the commitment, to understand, communicate with and effectively work alongside people of diverse backgrounds.

Cultural competence, illustrated as a life skill, is vital in the workforce and desired by employers. Accordingly, it is an essential attribute when trying to meet the needs of others– customers, clients, and the like. In order to do so, a business and its members must be considerate, or learn ways to bring consideration into their performance. Accommodating, or at the minimum trying to accommodate, every individual one is working with and/or providing for demonstrates this skill of cultural competence successfully. Possessing cultural sensitivity, understanding how to communicate with different people, and being committed to improving such contact is the key to any strong partnership.

In order for an occurrence to be considered intercultural, two or more cultures are involved. Hence, traveling abroad provides opportunities to develop intercultural skills. Even with obstacles, such as a language barrier, individuals and groups have reported these experiences as worthwhile, due to how much was and can be acquired. Diverse participation moves people forward in a purposeful way through real-life relations. That being the case,

placement in any contrasting environment allows a chance for the growth of cultural competence.

THE IMPORTANCE AND NEED FOR CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Cultural competence adds immense value to our multicultural society together with our interconnected and interdependent world. As Make It Our Business's blog discusses, "In Canada, we have talked for a long time about the importance of respecting diversity and embracing a range of cultures as part of the social fabric of our society. However the term, cultural competence, is a relatively new concept to many" ("What Does It Mean to Be Culturally Competent?"). For instance, within the medical field, cultural competence is defined as a "process in which the healthcare professional continually strives to achieve the ability and availability to effectively work within the cultural context of a client" (Martin 76). Still, the overall purpose of this idea will be in reference to "the ability to appreciate differences through the learned and shared patterns of beliefs, behaviors, and values of people interacting from different cultural backgrounds" (Lyons 100).

Our Multicultural Society

To begin, "research findings report that students graduating from baccalaureate programs do not feel prepared to work in a multicultural society" (Long 102). For one thing, "diversity experiences may strongly influence tendencies or skills that are highly relevant to effective leadership (e.g., perspective taking, acceptance of diverse others), but these are not included within most college student leadership measures" (Bowman 31). "Over the past two or three decades we have endeavoured to challenge and address injustice, racism, exclusion and inequity

through legislation, awareness raising, rights education and an anti-bias curriculum. Cultural competence reinforces and builds on this work" ("What Does It Mean to Be Culturally Competent?").

To go more in-depth, "the Institute of Medicine (IOM) views cultural competency of healthcare providers (HCPs) as crucial to improving healthcare within a multicultural United States (US) population" (Martin 76). Thus, since "multiculturalism is rising in the US and there are disparities in access and quality of care among racial and ethnic minority groups … [overcoming] barriers that prevent patients within minority groups from fully benefiting from healthcare services" (Martin 76) is a must. "Education has been the answer to the question of how to address racial disparities in healthcare, but the cultural competence of the nurse educators is essential to accomplish the goal … [as] effective cultural competence needs to start with nursing educators" (Long 103).

Our Interconnected and Interdependent World

Similarly, "in recent years, American colleges and universities … have argued that meaningful engagement with diversity constitutes an important means of preparing college graduates to participate and flourish in a globalized and rapidly changing society" (Bowman 29). A necessity is equipping prospective student leaders with the "skills [needed] for entry into a global society … [encouraging] open dialogue and [promoting] critical thinking, collective learning, and meaning on issues of diversity and inclusion" (Lyons 100). "Since this generation and future generations of students are and will be increasingly interacting with a larger, more globalized community, they need to become ever more competent in understanding, talking with, relating to, and working with persons who differ from them politically, socioeconomically, and

religiously" (Sobania and Braskamp). In order to become "global citizens" (Murphy), in this interconnected and interdependent world, "when preparing undergraduate students for entry into a diverse society and contemporary workforce, developing intercultural competence is a skill set that institutions of higher learning can integrate into their academic curriculum and co-curricular activities" (Lyons 111).

THE VALUE IN REAL ENCOUNTERS AND ACTUAL INTERACTIONS

Reassuringly, "despite the challenges and inconclusive results of previous studies, cultural competence can be taught and learned" (Long 104). Although:

> Cultural knowledge is only the first step in the process of learning to become culturally competent. Awareness of one's own cultural beliefs and prejudices is essential, yet cultural awareness and sensitivity take training and guided reflection. Conclusions from early studies declare that achieving cultural competence requires more than a singular course or set of learning experiences. (Long 103)

For example, "placements overseas give students the opportunity to experience unfamiliar cultures" (Carter 186). "Undertaking an international elective has been identified as having a long-lasting effect far beyond the period of the actual stay overseas and has been widely acknowledged as having a positive impact on practice when individuals return" (Carter 186).

"Increasingly, colleges and universities have made study abroad—or, as some are calling it, education abroad—an important component of their students' educational experience. They argue (and we agree) that study abroad provides students with a global perspective, and thus better prepares them for living and leading in our globally interdependent society" (Sobania and Braskamp). It also allows faculty to build links (Carter 186), as well as continue developing their own cultural competence. Given that "educators instruct students to understand the political structure, religion, geographical, economic, and demographic nature of the culture, this concept [also] applies to faculty embarking on travel to foreign cultures" (McMillan 24).

The idea of "learning by doing and experience" (Lyons 99) holds much value. "Education abroad is a central experience that promotes understanding of different cultures" (Lyons 99), since "experiences outside the formal classroom setting influence cross-cultural awareness, especially those where students interact with peers who are unlike themselves and involve students' processing and reflecting upon these new encounters and experiences" (Lyons 99). Another important aspect that has been questioned is "the amount of exposure" (Reynolds-Case), more specifically the length of time spent abroad. According to Anne Reynolds-Case, "the actual experience in the country" and "the amount of time students spend interacting with native speakers" is claimed to be "more important than the length of time of a program (312). Another study states, "research has shown the value of homestays in education abroad experiences; students become immersed in the culture and have the opportunity to form strong relationships with their host family" (Lyons 111). Yet another study suggests that, "interpersonal interactions— as opposed to simply 'engaging' with diversity abstractly through course work or workshops" (Bowman 47) holds greater importance. Therefore, when choosing an educational experience abroad, staying with a host family versus a dormitory, for instance, results in a greater gain overall (Reynolds-Case; Lyons; Bowman; Long).

However, students from the United States tend to choose locations "where they can still function by only speaking English" (Grant 179). For this reason, "European destinations are the most popular for U.S. students, but developing destinations provide different perspectives from which to teach and learn and can influence intercultural development" (Grant 179). In continuation:

> traveling to a country with vastly different values, norms, and identities compared with those of program participants, can result in increased cognitive dissonance, a trait important for growth … Students from developed countries traveling to developing

countries gain more international perspective and cognitive and personal growth compared with peers selecting programs to developed countries. (Grant 179)

Demonstrated by research, it can be concluded that cultural competence and intercultural competency can be most effectively developed through intercultural encounters–education abroad experiences, even short-term ones (Martin 76; Lyons 99).

Reports from Such Trips

The findings within the reports studied support a constructive implication. Students benefit in areas such as "increased target language use, academic and personal growth, and guidance in selecting a career … [and] greater cultural awareness" (Reynolds-Case 312), as well as "interest in learning a new language, increased empathy for individuals who might come to the U.S. as immigrants/visitors who speak little or no English, and heightened awareness of participants' own privileges as relatively affluent U.S. citizens" (Lyons 113). However, "sometimes these experiences lead students to derogate their own country's culture … and experience feelings of guilt, often about the affluence of their own country relative to the host country" (Lyons 99). Relatively, "students reported intentions to modify their behaviors, awareness and perceptions, for example, travel more, learn more about other cultures, become more open-minded, learn to speak another language, and interact more with diverse others" (Lyons 113). Overall, "these studies sup-port cultural encounters as a foundational component in acquisition of cultural competence and demonstrate that experiential learning is a stronger predictor of increasing cultural competence than passive learning" (Martin 77).

Most, if not all, of the studies also included program components that took place before and/or after the departure, in order to prepare and/or reflect even further (Lyons; Carter; Grant; Hermond). The actual trips consisted of several aspects as well, which allowed students to

further connect, but most importantly, interact interculturally. Participants of a trip to Zambia

had the opportunity of "attending the local festivals, cultural villages and a trip to Victoria Falls.

This provided an opportunity for students to experience life outside the capital city and to gain a

deeper appreciation of life in Zambia" (Carter 187). Participants of a trip to Italy had the

opportunity of exploring through "multiple cultural tours to learn the history of cities in which

they visited" (Grant 175). Participants of a trip to Brazil had the opportunity of exploring and

socializing:

> These interventions and reflective debriefings included: a guided tour of the city; a visit
> to the Odebrecht Foundation, a global company with a number of community outreach
> programs; service-learning at a daycare in an indigent fishing village; a viewing of the
> Folkloric Ballet; a tour of a petrochemical complex; a visit to a public health
> improvement project; and a cultural lecture from a professor at the Brazilian institute.
> (Lyons 103)

Another crucial aspect of the trips was the living environment throughout their stay. During their

trip to Brazil, the students encountered some difficulties–ordering food on their own, getting to

places on time, relying on their host families–but they grew more comfortable by the end of the

trip (Lyons 112). In addition:

> Several students were relatively critical of U.S. culture, particularly in regards to
> Americans' reception of visitors and immigrants in comparison to the hospitality they
> experienced from the Brazilians … It was also noted that Brazilians are more tolerant of
> people not speaking their primary language (Portuguese) than Americans are when
> people do not speak their primary language (English). (Lyons 108)

They also "commented on differences they saw in valuing relationships and personal

connections. They noted that people in Brazil seemed more people-oriented whereas in the U.S.,

people are less engaging with others and more connected through social media and their

electronic devices" (Lyons 107). "During their time in Zambia, they were accommodated in

student nurse hostels within the hospital grounds. This provided an opportunity to interact with

their peers, experience student nurse life and the realities of working in a resource-limited environment. Students also volunteered at a local orphanage over a weekend" (Carter 187).

All in all, studying abroad has a beneficial impact on its participants. According to one study, citizens who, for example, "have friendships with people from other cultures, … enrich not only their lives, but the larger communities in which they live and work" (Murphy 14):

> Findings show that in comparison with peers who did not study abroad as undergraduates, alumni of study abroad programs showed higher levels of civic engagement in all areas on issues of international importance, and higher levels of civic engagement in some areas on issues of domestic importance; higher levels of voluntary simplicity; and higher levels of philanthropic activity for organizations devoted to the arts, education, environmental, human rights, international development, social justice. There were striking differences between the two groups in the activities in which they engage for personal enjoyment, with alumni of study abroad reporting much higher levels of engagement in internationally-oriented leisure activities. (Murphy 13)

"Nevertheless, the findings should encourage universities to continue to develop and promote study abroad programs for their students, not only as part of internationalization efforts, but to promote the development of a socially-connected citizenry that participates in the civic life of the community to promote the common good" (Murphy 14).

Medical

Within the medical field, students were provided with moral and ethical dilemmas when exploring resource-constrained environments (Carter). This provided them "with a different insight into the role of the nurse and the caring environment" (Carter 190). The Zabian healthcare system specifically, holds nurses "subservient to doctors" (Carter 190). On top of that, with a lack of nurses, patient care had to be prioritized, so fewer opportunities for bedside teaching and/or mentorship were available (Carter 190). Also, "students recognised the importance of resource management and felt that this would change their practice when they

returned to the UK … doctors and nurses only opened equipment as required, to conserve the supplies … often, in the UK, packets of gauze, syringes, needles etc are opened for procedures, not used and then disposed of" (Carter 190). According to a different study, "results show that regardless of length of stay, anxiety about a new culture decreased and second language skills increased. Study abroad experiences promote cultural self-awareness, sensitivity, flexibility and avoid stereotyping" (Long 105).

Agricultural

Within the agricultural field, students must be prepared to navigate globally, as food is interwoven into all cultures, especially in a highly globalized society (Grant 173). One-third of the world's population depends on agriculture for their means of living–producing, reaching consumers, and the like (Grant 173). The theoretical framework utilized was "a model that describes how individuals operate while encountering cultural differences" (Grant 174). Those who seemed uncomfortable with encountering differences, viewed the differences as obstacles and placed themselves in a "superior light" in comparison to others and used polarizing language–the "us versus them" mindset (Grant 177). On the other hand, participants who progressed according to the theoretical framework, "are believed to have developed the skills needed to appreciate and emphasize understanding of diversity and cultural complexity" (Grant 178). "The skills needed to understand different perspectives are important in creating solutions cross-culturally for issues in agriculture such as sustainable food production" (Grant 178).

Educational

Within the educational field, students were comparing and contrasting the norms of the study tour country's culture to their own (Hermond). For five years, a study regarding different cohorts of prospective leaders participating in study tour in Belize for one week, intended to acclimatize participants to "a Central American culture with the expectation that they would further enhance their cultural intelligence so as to serve their diverse staff and student body with greater culturally competence, which would, in turn, lead to greater student success" (Hermond 21). Furthermore:

> Belize's advantage is that the population mirrors the socio-economic and educational perspectives of many of the students from Central America that are migrating to Texas Schools. Most of the participants of the Belize Study Tour lead urban schools with diverse populations. These are typically communities that serve as incubators for new immigrants, who generally seek opportunities to be productive, thus, positively impacting the economic viability of the communities. (Hermond 21)

Data suggests that these prospective educational leaders "were somewhat cognizant of their own cultural views and behaviors but were less confident about the views, practices and expectations of other cultural groups … It is instructive to note that they were very motivated to learn about other cultures, which is not surprising since they self-selected to attend the Belize Study Tour" (Hermond 22). "Participants have begun to question their own views of the values and expectations of other cultures and are adjusting their own behaviors to account for those values and behaviors" (Hermond 25). According to a study regarding a four-week study abroad program in Madrid:

> The results showed that, even though the amount of time spent in Madrid was relatively short, it was sufficient for students to begin recognizing and using *vosotros* forms in appropriate situations. In addition, results from the post-program survey revealed students' increased cultural competence, demonstrated by their ability to appropriately distinguish in which situations they could be less formal, using the *vosotros* pronoun and forms, vs. those situations requiring more formality, and thus the *ustedes* forms. (Reynolds-Case 318)

Finally, according to a study focusing on current educators' development:

> This opportunity greatly assisted with professional growth and enhancement of cultural awareness to teaching venues. Some "lessons learned" included (a) an appreciation for vast similarities of challenges to nursing education, (b) the challenges of learning in a different environment than one's own culture, (c) importance and relationship of inclusiveness to effective teaching; consideration of language and presentation methodology, and (d) importance of having a clear, and open objective in mind in looking for means of collaborating with foreign universities. (McMillan 24)

"Collaboration brings the opportunity and responsibility to enhance research interests, and contribute to a growing body of knowledge in nursing education. It also brings great credibility to lectures, presentations, and exemplars when discussing cultural competency to nursing students" (McMillan 25). On behalf of faculty, it was "exciting and rewarding for the students to experience cultural aspects through anecdotal stories from faculty having current and relevant examples. As faculty members, exploring the world outside is important to changing our worldview within" (McMillan 25).

Limitations and Objections of Such Trips

By all means, certain components of these trips and experiences can get counterargued. At which point, "these factors need to be considered not only by students but also the universities that include electives as part of their programmes" (Carter 187). To carry on:

> limitations of short-term study abroad programs (defined here as anything less than a semester-long) in comparison to longer term programs include: restricted time to incorporate cultural-related activities, minimal opportunities or time to cultivate cultural learning, limited immersion and time in the local community to develop cross-cultural communication skills, and student experience is largely controlled by faculty. (Grant 178)

However, "while intercultural learning activities were implemented to support students in developmental progression during this period of change, each student is unique and experiences study abroad based on individual cognitive, emotional, and behavioral factors" (Grant 179). Still,

"it is critical to structure study abroad programs in a way that provides clear opportunities for student intercultural development throughout program participation in programs" (Grant 179).

Considered Unfair

These types of trips, and the people visiting, can be considered unjust towards, and by, the people being visited. In the medical field, for instance, "ethically, the concept of students undertaking international electives in resource-constrained environments could be seen as 'practising on the poor', and the argument of why students feel the need to travel to other countries when opportunities to work with deprived and poor communities exist within [their own nation] needs to be considered" (Carter 187). This is seen as a problem because "already working with limited resources and employees, local staff need to take time to translate, explain, and mentor international visitors, which results in them being distracted from providing care to patients or supporting their own students who will be required to continue to work in this environment long after the international student has gone" (Carter 187).

Needless to say, another restriction pertains to financial difficulties and/or obligations. Studies suggest that students may opt out of opportunities abroad "due to finances and/or employment responsibilities" (Lyons 102). This also concerns faculty:

> From a practical perspective, one tremendous challenge that hinders faculty in pursuing international experience is securing adequate resources. Resource outlay consists of more than securing departmental or administration monetary means, but includes other valuable resources. Examples of "intangible" resources incurred by faculty members include time away from office responsibilities, jet lag loss of productivity, time drains created by lack of understanding and navigation through a foreign culture, and "hidden costs" associated with international travel. Some hidden costs include passport application fees, vaccinations, airport parking, child care assistance, and provisions for pet and home maintenance while traveling. (McMillan 24)

Naturally, such trips result in "out of pocket personal expense," (McMillan 24) though there are awarded grants, scholarships, and the like.

Qualitative Data

As expected, the majority of research on this topic is qualitative. Even when quantitative, "most measures of cultural competence are usually based on self-ratings, which may skew results due to social-desirability effects of students wanting to rank themselves favorably so as not to be scored as racists or culturally ignorant" (Long 104). Additionally, there may be biases–as an example, one study's demographics revealed the university's population to be part of a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) with more female than male participants in the case (Lyons 102)–and those ranking "instruments are often developed without input from patients from diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds" (Long 104). However, certain studies' responses–for instance, the ones with open-ended prompts–confirm and allow for a deeper insight regarding the hypothesis (Hermond; Lyons). Another factor can be the study participants previously attending a similar experience (Martin 78). Therefore, researchers check for confounding variables that may be relevant to skewing the outcomes, such as "parental income, languages spoken at home, languages spoken by parents in professional contexts, parental participation in study abroad, or childhood residence outside of the United States" (Murphy 5).

"Study Away" Instead of Abroad

Finally, "while study abroad has some benefits, the experiences had no greater effect of developing human capital (i.e. skills, knowledge, and experience) than remaining at the local campus" (Grant 174). Similarly argued:

> While study abroad is an important educational experience that can foster the development of these desired learning outcomes and developmental skills, mindsets, and behaviors, so too are domestically based off-campus study programs … Diverse cultures within a local, regional, or national community should be recognized for providing learning opportunities and experiences that can also be transformative. (Sobania and Braskamp)

This was proposed since the U.S. has become "so richly diverse" and "inclusive of large immigrant populations" as well as "a global nation" (Sobania and Braskamp). With such a concept, the problem regarding finances could be eliminated as one would no longer have to travel overseas (Sobania and Braskamp). However, this argument resulted in finding the need to still integrate study abroad programs with domestic ones (Sobania and Braskamp). Regardless, "colleges and universities must work not only to maintain a racially diverse student body but also to facilitate meaningful interactions among students from different racial backgrounds" (Bowman 49).

CONCLUSION

As anticipated, personally experiencing cultural differences through travels abroad, such as with one's study or work, is most beneficial. Undertaking such a trip leads to an advance in one's cultural competence. With such experiential knowledge one's own cultural understanding and behavior can be impacted. Since cultural competence is explained as the ability and commitment to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people of diverse backgrounds, it expresses the expansion of a person's knowledge regarding cultural differences. Yet, cultural competence moreover regards spreading positive attitudes towards different practices and worldviews, as well as identifying one's own and challenging them. Thereby, such significant trips abroad push a sense of purpose for cultural competence.

In addition, putting this skill to use permits stronger international relations and partnerships to be created and operate more favorably. Intercultural skills are fundamental principles for any leader and are definitely desired by employers. Leadership behavior should include meeting the needs of others. Furthermore, individuals' skills can be developed and/or improved through opportunities that are provided abroad. As shown throughout the numerous studies, when one is experiencing a contrasting environment from their own point of view, the likelihood of engaging change into their own executions increases. Even with the challenges faced, these distinct experiences abroad have been reported as positive ones. Accordingly, participants have taken what they acquired and integrated it into their own practices. That being so, cultural competence can be considered a decisive skill and necessary part of our multicultural society as well as our interconnected and interdependent world.

Acknowledgments

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