

Think Piece Study Abroad ISL: Connecting Knowledge and Experience¹

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Introduction

Today there is a growing variety of study abroad experiences for students in higher education. A study abroad experience involves taking a course for credit at a university that includes time in a different country. While in the past these experiences were limited to university exchanges and the traditional language learning programs, these experiences are now quite diverse. The easier access to more remote areas in different countries due to advances in technology, transportation, and communications has transformed study abroad experiences. Consequently, we are faced with the challenge not only to prepare students for these experiences but also to prepare ourselves as educators and administrators for the complexity and dynamics of teaching and managing these courses. We should aspire to build a framework that provides us with a structure to work with different types and models of study abroad.

The diversity of contexts, types, and length of international experiences are making the logistical work and the teaching and learning of the subject matter and its environment more complex. The diversity of students' experiences include a language semester in Paris, an Environmental short term course in the mountains of Nepal, a summer Social Issues service learning course in Guatemala, and an internship at a newspaper in Buenos Aires, Argentina. These types of experiences require different levels of immersion in the host culture. In these environments the learning goals of a course need address the general knowledge of a host culture and the specific dynamics of those contexts where the experience takes place. This creates an enormous task for administrators, faculty, and staff in our different institutions. Many have jumped on the bandwagon quite fast but we need to figure out a way to provide a structure to these

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experiences that will make them not only more academic, but also more efficient and less intrusive to the host community overseas.

International Internship and International Service Learning

The most rapidly growing study abroad programs in the experiential learning category are international internships (II) and international service learning (ISL) courses. II and ISL fit the experiential learning theoretical framework where experience is central to the learning process. The study abroad experience is the tool used to enhance the academic content of the course through interaction with the host country's context. The main type of interactions in II and ISL take place by working with the host community, a practice designed to promote human understanding and cooperation between cultures.

II and ISL programs, if planned carefully, can provide students with a deep understanding of the host culture and skills important in collaborating and working with the host community because the experience does not occur in a vacuum, isolated from the social and physical context. Students learn as social participants in work/project by associating with members of the community and reflecting upon those interactions. The social and physical context that surrounds the experience, relating to communal living, is a critical component in the examination of learning outcomes. Boud and Miller (1996) state in this regard:

“Any examination of learning needs to take account of that context. Our world is defined by the people and objects that surround us, the meanings with which they are imbued and the language which is used to represent them. This world manifests the political, social, economic, and historical situation in which we exist...Learners create an internal representation and judge their actions accordingly. This internal world is a filter through which perceptions are modified” (p. 18).

Therefore, the holistic type of learning in an II or ISL program occurs within the new context. The learning context of an international internship or service learning program is one of the elements that allow students to construct knowledge of the world. This international context forces faculty, study abroad staff and administrators, and students to go beyond (US) domestic-based internship and service-learning models.

Moving from Reflection to Refraction in II and ISL

The construction of new perceptions and new knowledge about the host culture through II and ISL may lead to what Mezirow calls “transformative learning” (1991). Transformative learning is a type of learning that relies on new experiences rather than old ones, and these experiences are reinterpreted. The new experiences in II and ISL programs in the context of the host culture allow students to re-frame those experiences through reflection/refraction pedagogy. Refraction is the pedagogy that helps create new knowledge which provides a deeper understanding of the host culture and the academic course content.

When we discuss the concept of reflection we automatically refer to John Dewey (1933) and his philosophy of service learning. John Dewey referred to the concept of reflection as a vehicle to “think” about educational experiences. According to this concept we learn after thinking about the experience and in this way we construct knowledge that will result into action. While this concept is widely embraced in pedagogy, its level of analysis in complex study abroad educational experiences seems simplistic. Problem solving and critical thinking are not clearly inherent in reflection.

Reflection alone does not provide depth in the analysis of academic materials that need to be related to complex social interactions within a foreign context.

In II and ISL, reflection is just one of the steps in the learning cycle that help us take count of the issues we need to analyze in the course. The first step in the pedagogical thinking process that we use to facilitate learning is *reflection*. After going through reflection, we move onto a more active mental process called *critical thinking*. In critical thinking we aim to analyze the “inventory” taken in reflection that is the first step in providing evidence of issues. In the final step of the pedagogical cycle, we get to *refraction* which is the transformative learning stage where we clarify issues by providing new facts and evidence. In refraction we aim to uncover situations and assumptions. Refraction is a concept used by Downey (2005) in re-entry orientations that allow us to see a new medium instead of taking inventory of what we experienced. We decided to analyze this concept further to help portray the learning that takes place. Refraction is the highest stage of the thinking process that will illustrate the learning that takes place in the course.

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<u>REFLECTION</u>	<u>CRITICAL THINKING</u>	<u>REFRACTION</u>
Starts a dialogue	Weights viewpoints	Alternative solutions
Recollection	Revises	Clarifies
Passive	Passive/Active	Active
Accepts	Questions	Defines
Old materials	Past and present materials	New material
Individual perspective	Alternative perspectives	Integrates perspectives
Reviews	Scrutinizes	Selects
Monocultural	Multicultural	Intercultural
Individual	Makes connections with others	Engages with others and scholarship
Search	First step in providing evidence	Unmasks paradigms * Uncovers situations

Conclusion

While in the past the benefit of education abroad was an understanding of a host culture, now those benefits need to extend to learning how to work and to interact with the host culture. We are dealing with students who are working directly with people from other cultures within their daily routines. On the other hand, we are encountering challenging times in an era of political unrest that leads to wars, and fierce globalization of the economy which damages human understanding between people. It is crucial to go beyond the surface, providing descriptions and generalization that are vague and might build wrong assumptions. It is time we give more attention in education abroad for the individual to interact with other humans in order to learn about the host culture and the subject matter. Through refraction the thinking process takes many forms because this pedagogy allows us to analyze and to link issues through different lenses.