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Abstract

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Abstract

Designing study abroad programs, particularly those involving international field experiences for preservice teacher education students, can be daunting with much of the research focusing on learning outcomes. This review of literature on considerations for program design will provide the road map for the development of a successful international partnership for teacher preparation.

Introduction

Designing study abroad (SA) programs, particularly those involving international field experiences for preservice teacher education students can be daunting. Much of the literature relating to SA focuses on the impacts or outcomes for students who study abroad and there is much less emphasis on the issue of program design for SA practitioners. Yet as Kenneth Cushner (2009) has noted:

"Achieving positive impact on intercultural development as a result of study abroad depends on the quality and design of the experience, the degree of immersion into the host culture, opportunities to develop relationships with people from the culture, and program support for guided critical cultural self-reflection" (p. 158). Without good program design, the quality of SA outcomes can readily be called into question.

Pittsburg State University (PSU) was looking for an opportunity to include a high quality international student teaching program within their teacher preparation program. Upon the hiring of a new teacher educator , whom had been part of the development of an international partnership between Queensland University of Technology, Faculty of Education and the Minnesota State, Mankato, College of Education, PSU accepted the offer to be a part of the expansion of the partnership. Study abroad opportunities for students in countries such as Australia and the USA are increasing dramatically, with funding provided by governments and higher education institutions to support the outbound mobility of their students. This support is usually explained using neoliberal discourses associated with globalisation; namely, that international experience brings economic benefits to the individual SA 'consumer' in the form of increased competitiveness in the global job market (Lewin 2009; Schellenberg 2004) and to the national economy in terms of developing interculturally competent workers of the future (Spellings 2007; Spring 2008). There can often be a humanistic element to SA discourses as well, for example, in the idea of developing world or global citizens who take action "to create a more just global society" (Fujikane 2003, p.145; Lewin 2009). Attached to these discourses are some common assumptions about SA, some of which are embodied in the words of former US Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings (2007): "When students study abroad, they learn about more than just their major. They learn about other cultures and countries. They learn how to bridge barriers and build friendships. And they learn what it takes to succeed in the highly competitive global economy" (p. 4). Thus, students who participate in SA experiences are encouraged to believe that their travel overseas will bring automatic benefits.

Globalisation, too, has had its impact on teacher education. Increasingly, teachers in many Western countries are teaching students from diverse cultural, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds and, to be effective, need "to understand deeply a wide array of things about learning, social and cultural contexts, and teaching and be able to enact these understandings in complex classrooms" (Darling-Hammond 2006, p. 302). In addition, teachers are expected to prepare all of their students to be interculturally competent global citizens (Cushner 2008), which presupposes that teachers already possess these attitudes and skills themselves. Yet it is pointed out, teachers in countries such as the USA are a largely homogenous group of white, middle class females who have little or no international experience, and teacher education students are not much different (Cushner 2008; Darling-Hammond 2006). Given the reality of the teaching profession, there are persistent calls for teacher

education programs to incorporate an international perspective, particularly through the cognitive and experiential learning provided by SA programs (Cushner 2008; Darling-Hammond 2006). However, there are considerable barriers to participation in SA for teacher education students. Cushner (2009) cites numerous reasons why teacher education students are so under-represented in SA programs, including no requirements for foreign language or international competence by professional registration agencies, lack of time due to "an already overcrowded teacher education curriculum", very little encouragement from academic staff to pursue international opportunities and the cost factor (p. 155). However, short-term programming may overcome many of these obstacles. As Chieffo and Griffiths (2009) observe, short-term programs have increased, most likely because they are more cost effective, they are more adaptable for disciplines with strict curriculum requirements, and "are better suited to students with little travel experience or who would struggle with being away from family and friends for an extended period"(p. 365).

Literature review

When developing any SA experience, there are several general questions for practitioners to ask themselves at the outset: What are the objectives? Where will it be located? How long will it last? What type of SA experience will it be? The answers to each of these questions will help to determine the design of the SA program.

Objectives

The first major thing to consider when designing a SA experience is what objectives the program is trying to achieve. Objectives may often be couched in different terms, but "academic and intercultural competencies are common to virtually all programs. Academic competency focuses on the specific discipline studied, while intercultural competency relates to the broad goal of enhancing student appreciation of differences among cultures" (Anderson *et al* 2006, p. 458). Increasingly, there is a call for students to undertake a SA experience to develop generic skills and attitudes for 'global citizenship' (Lewin 2009), and far less emphasis is placed on acquiring knowledge of a specific culture. Instead, specific knowledge acquisition in SA has transferred from the cultural arena to the discipline area, so that students can be exposed to a broader understanding of their discipline, which in turn is considered to increase their competitiveness in the global job market (Lewin 2009).

Location

For countries like the USA and Australia, one of the major considerations for SA

is whether it will be a meaningful overseas experience if students spend their time in another English-speaking country. There are differing views on this. On the one hand, it is believed that in English-speaking countries, program content is 'dumbed down' and students are less likely to be challenged to experience real cultural learning (Lewin 2009). Also where language is shared by host and SA student, there is a danger that students will assume that a closer relationship of trust exists with the host than is actually the case, potentially leading to conflicts in communication (Cushner 2009). On the other hand, some argue that where foreign language learning is not an objective of the SA program, useful discipline and culture learning can take place in English-speaking countries (Anderson *et al* 2006). Furthermore, there are concerns about SA experiences in so-called 'exotic' locations that suggest the experience is more akin to adventure tourism than a serious academic undertaking (Woolf 2007).

Type

A further consideration is whether students should be sent abroad individually to be fully immersed in the host country and culture, or whether it is more desirable to send students abroad as a cohort accompanied by faculty from their home institution. Programs which follow this second model are often referred to as 'island' programs and have been criticized for limiting the opportunities for students to make contact with people from the host country and to immerse themselves in their culture (Chieffo and Griffiths 2009; Woolf 2007). On the other hand, research has shown that island programs are regarded positively by the students who participate in them, because of the opportunities for discussion and reflection with one's peers about the program and one's own national identity (Fry *et al* 2009; Woolf 2007). The full-immersion model is regarded by some to be the ideal (Cushner 2009; Mahon and Cushner 2002), while others see full-immersion as not allowing students the intellectual space or separation for the "analysis and retrospection" needed for meaningful learning (Woolf 2007, p. 497; also Chieffo and Griffiths 2009). In the same vein, Jane Jackson (2008, p. 357) states that "[r]esidence in the host culture does not automatically produce interculturality", suggesting that immersion must always be tempered by opportunities for reflection and discussion.

Duration

A final general consideration for practitioners is the duration of the SA experience. The traditional model of SA was based on a year spent overseas, but then the semester model of study abroad became the norm (Lewin 2009; Woolf 2007). Increasingly, however, short-term programs of less than a semester's duration are being developed and *are* fast replacing the other two models as the one preferred by students (Chieffo and Griffiths 2009). Short-term programming in SA is regarded as a positive by many practitioners for enabling a greater number of students to

have an overseas experience and thereby democratizing SA (Chieffo and Griffiths 2009). However, short-term programming has been criticized for being "academically lightweight and culturally superficial" (Chieffo and Griffiths 2009, p. 378; also Woolf 2007) and it has been questioned whether any real learning can take place in a program of only a few weeks' duration. However, there is research to indicate that there are learning gains even from programs lasting three or four weeks (Anderson *et al* 2006; Jackson 2008) provided "that questions of program design [receive] at least as much attention as the consideration of length" (Chieffo and Griffiths 2009, p. 368).

While these general considerations have been dealt with in isolation from one another here, it is clear that in practice they are closely interconnected with each other. Factors that impact on one decision will also impact on other decisions, and will generate more specific considerations related to program design. For example, for an overseas field experience for preservice teachers, setting objectives, choosing the location and type of program, and deciding how long the program will run, will only be the starting point for further considerations about program design. In this case, additional key considerations emerge from the literature, focusing particularly on the issues of program structure, opportunities for immersion and interaction, experiences of dissonance or disequilibrium, and faculty support to facilitate critical reflection.

Program structure

For an overseas field experience for preservice teachers, structuring the program to include comprehensive pre-departure briefings, clear expectations for the running of the program in the host country and post-program debriefing after the return to the home country is considered to contribute to the quality of students' overseas experiences and their overall learning outcomes (Brindley *et al* 2009; Cushner 2009; Malewski and Phillion 2009; Pence and Macgillivray 2008; Sahin 2008). Ideally, the overseas experience should be an integrated part of the overall teacher education program, and not a stand-alone component (Tang and Choi 2004) and should share similarities with the structure of field experience at home (Brindley *et al* 2009; Pence and Macgillivray 2008). As part of structuring a program, Pence and Macgillivray (2008) cite "onsite academic assignments, follow-up, and evaluation [as] essential for a meaningful and educational experience" (p. 15), although Tang and Choi (2004) warn that "tasks/assignments unrelated to cross-cultural experiences need to be kept to a minimum" (p. 61).

Interaction

For the overseas field experience to be worthwhile, various authors argue that there needs to be a significant degree of immersion and interaction with the host community (Cushner 2009; Mahon and Cushner 2002; Moseley *et al* 2008; Pence

and Macgillivray 2008). This does not necessarily preclude cohort-based or 'island' programs, but where these models are used, program designers should ensure that students have opportunities to interact directly with local people, particularly in the teaching placement and by using homestay accommodation (Pence and Macgillivray 2008).

Dissonance

A more challenging consideration for program designers is the need for students to experience situations during their field experience which directly challenge their assumed knowledge and beliefs. This is variously referred to as 'dissonance' (Brindley *et al* 2009; Tang and Choi 2004), 'cultural disequilibrium' (Cushner 2009), or 'being outside one's comfort zone' (Pence and Macgillivray 2008; Mahon and Cushner 2002). This dissonance or disequilibrium is required for students to undergo a transformation of their worldview and therefore to gain greater benefit from the overseas experience (Mahon and Cushner 2002; Moseley *et al* 2008). Conversely, there is a danger that students who do not feel challenged by their new circumstances are not actually aware of cultural differences and so tend to minimize any differences that they do encounter; in such cases, their personal and professional growth is likely to be slight.

Support

Where dissonant situations occur, it is especially important that program designers also plan for students to receive direct support to facilitate critical reflection about the experience (Brindley *et al* 2009; Moseley *et al* 2008; Pence and Macgillivray 2008; Tang and Choi 2004). This may be provided by home institution faculty or by staff from the host institution, where relationships have been developed with the students to allow frank and open discussion (Brindley *et al* 2009). For transformational learning to occur, students need to be encouraged to go beyond their own perspectives (Pence and Macgillivray 2008) and potentially to question how they are perceived by members of the host community (Malewski and Phillion 2009).

Conclusions

SA program design is not a straightforward matter and certainly does not remain static. Good practice in study abroad requires SA practitioners to place greater emphasis on issues of design and be prepared to improve their design in response to the needs of students. The many considerations that go into designing an SA program suggest that good design should not be left to chance or even common sense, but should be done in an informed and intelligent way.

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