

Slow down. Listen. Observe. Know yourself.
Understand your own culture. Get advice from
others ... and start planning early: Instructor
learning and professional development in
international field-based education

Joellen E. Coryell
Texas State University

Geleana Alston
Texas State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc>

 Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Coryell, Joellen E. and Alston, Geleana (2012). "Slow down. Listen. Observe. Know yourself. Understand your own culture. Get advice from others... and start planning early: Instructor learning and professional development in international field-based education," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2012/papers/13>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Slow down. Listen. Observe. Know yourself. Understand your own culture. Get advice from others...and start planning early: Instructor learning and professional development in international field-based education

Joellen E. Coryell and Geleana Alston
Texas State University

Shelbee Nguyen
S P Jain School of Global Management, Dubai

Key words: *faculty professional development, study abroad, international education, international teaching*

Abstract: Educators who teach abroad participate within a variety of communities and contexts that may (or may not) help them to prepare to teach students in another culture and country. So how do instructors learn to develop the attitudes, behaviors, and values required to teach effectively in the global educational environment? The purpose of this study was to investigate the motivations, preparations, challenges, and personal learning instructors experience when preparing for and teaching in international settings.

In today's global society, adults need to develop cognitive and affective flexibilities to interact sensitively in a wide variety of work and living situations. One way to support this learning outcome in adult and higher education is to offer education abroad programs that provide students an authentic opportunity to learn about global diversity and intercultural understanding (Orndorff, 1998). But good intentions by faculty to develop such instructional experiences do not always produce the kind of learning, development, and transformation that is intended (Dirkx, Spohr, Tepper, & Tons, 2010; Green, 2002). Unfortunately, scant research has been dedicated to investigating *how* faculty development for teaching abroad happens and might be institutionally supported (Bates, 2000). The current study employed a broad definition of instructor development to how educators enhance their knowledge and skills through research, teaching, personal experience and growth, and the nurturing of one's career.

Educators who teach abroad participate within a variety of communities and contexts that may (or may not) help to prepare them to teach students in another culture and country. So how do instructors learn to develop the attitudes, behaviors, and values required to teach effectively in the global educational environment? The purpose of this study was to investigate the situated experience of international field-based instructors and the professional and personal development that resulted from their experiences. As such, the research questions were: (1) In what ways have instructors developed professionally through the experience of teaching in international locales? (2) In what ways have they developed personally? And, (3) how might these experiences inform future faculty development plans?

Theoretical framework and relevant literature

This research was framed by situated cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Situated cognition views learning as a function of the context, actions, behaviors, and culture in which it occurs. In the educational context, the situated community of practice consists of instructors,

other experts, learners, learning resources, and contextual influences that all bear on the learning and engagement of the participants. Learning within this framework is not located exclusively within the individual; instead, it is situated communally and involves the differences of perspective among co-participants. Learners, in this case, faculty, therefore, are considered members of a community of instructional practice which represents attitudes, behaviors, and values to be attained.

Vande Berg (2007) advises that the increase in study abroad (SA) enrollment (over 300% in the past 20 years) has led state legislatures, institutions, and faculty to focus on the effectiveness of teaching and learning in these programs. Of those participants, juniors, seniors, and graduate students comprised close to 70% of the SA population. It is clear adults of all ages are participating in SA programs across US institutions of higher education. Vande Berg stresses that if these programs are to be effective, faculty need to intervene before, during and after these experiences to form and support student learning. This approach to education requires faculty to facilitate learning in such a manner that draws knowledge from diverse situations, cultures, and languages, to use integrative skills in problem-solving and decision making, and to identify the cultural influences that shape our lives. Developing an internationalized mind-set can be challenging for both faculty and students as it entails exploring assumptions that underpin the academic discipline and developing a set of intellectual and affective skills necessary for successful international education outcomes.

With the changes in learner demographics, educator accountability, and a focus on socially-oriented and active learning methodologies in adult and higher education (Lieberman, 2005), the discipline of adult education becomes an essential resource for faculty professional development (Carusetta & Cranton, 2005; Lawler & King, 2000). Unfortunately, however, higher education faculty typically do not engage in formal courses in adult teaching and learning. Instead, much of what faculty learn about the instructional process and themselves as educators is informal, on-the-job training with varying levels of effectiveness (Grant & Dickson, 2008).

Nonformal learning as professional development (PD) can include planned activities with purposeful objectives, although it does not lead to certifications, diplomas, or degrees. Informal adult learning and PD, on the other hand, is not classroom-based nor highly structured training, but is learner-controlled, and includes self-directed learning, networking, and mentoring (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Supported by and extending recent research on informal and nonformal educator development (Lom & Sullenger, 2011), this study was undertaken to identify the kinds of PD opportunities higher education faculty engaged in international field-based education identified as meaningful in their instructional development processes in these unique settings.

Research Design

Data gathering was compiled through multiple sources from the purposive sample (n=19). An open-ended survey instrument was administered on a secure, password-protected survey website. An electronic call for participation went to the 38 instructors who had taught in faculty-led study abroad programs or Fulbright teaching experiences in the past 15 years at a large southwestern university. Thirteen instructors responded through their written responses to the survey, which was designed to collect data regarding formal, nonformal, and informal professional development activities, decisions in instructional design and assessment, lessons learned, and insights for future instructional experiences at home and abroad. Once the survey

data were collected and initially analyzed, six semi-structured interviews were subsequently conducted in which specific categories and themes were further explored. With a collective average of over six separate experiences teaching internationally, the participants worked in a wide array of subject areas including print-making, architecture, gender studies, early childhood studies, history, literature, language, educational technology, orchestral conducting, fine arts, and English language instruction.

The research team first read the survey data by participant, and then read through all of the responses to each survey question. Because the majority of the survey questions were open-ended, a cross-case analysis was then chosen to group answers to questions so as to examine the perspectives across specific topics (Patton, 1990). Data codes were noted in the margins and then compiled into categories and then into themes. Through devising guidelines to describe each category, we compared the codes across the data to continually refine the categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Doing so allowed us to cross-validate the data set interpret research inferences.

Findings

Participants indicated they learned through on-the-job experiential learning while teaching for the first time abroad. Only one of the 19 participants engaged in formal professional development in their preparation to teach abroad, although 63% (12 of 19) suggested they engaged in nonformal and informal professional development in their preparation. Mentorship and brief information sessions on culture, teaching norms, and language education were cited as preparatory training. Travel, having lived in the host country previously, and reading books about the culture were also cited as informal means of preparation.

Almost 70% of the informants believed their instruction abroad positively impacted their teaching at home. They revealed they had developed an increased understanding, renewed excitement and interest in their own disciplines, and they often used stories from their travel and instructional experiences as part of their teaching endeavors at home. These educators also felt that teaching abroad gave them a better understanding about a diverse range of students and their unique learning processes/cognitions. In addition, many of the participants offered insight into the unique challenges of teaching abroad. These included negative student behaviors during and outside of instructional activities, physical and emotional fatigue of what seemed to be a 24/7 teaching responsibility, and cultural and language misunderstandings. In this section we offer the findings, which are organized by research question.

In what ways have instructors who have taught in international education programs developed professionally through the experience of teaching in international locales?

Participants indicated that they developed new understandings of the teaching-learning process. Over-arching themes identified that the informants learned how to adapt the curriculum to the international context and how to be flexible in their instructional methods. Participants suggested they needed be prepared to change the curricular sequence and even the content on a daily basis. Across the data set, changes in business/museum hours, transportation issues, miscommunications with local partners, student illness, limited instructional resources, and logistical snafus were indicated as daily constraints on the curriculum and instructional design. A survey participant suggested she learned to “have contingency plans. An interviewee described his own PD in the following way:

Academics are perfectionists. We live in a world where we have a license to pursue perfection and we get used to that. And so when you're on site and logistical issues arise or something else happens it's like a profound shock like the world's not going to conform to my expectations. And so it's really valuable as a teacher to get into positions to where you have to be adaptable on the instant. It makes you more reflective about what you're intending to achieve or how you achieve it. There's where you get the options going.

Ultimately, participants learned to “relax the control: they were accustomed to having in the classroom at the home campus.

Finally, participants indicated they developed an understanding and appreciation for new teaching approaches that included instructor-student relationships that they had not had prior to teaching abroad. One interviewee offered, “I think the experience abroad gives you an opportunity to think differently about how you teach, and it gives you an opportunity to grow in a way that you otherwise wouldn't have access to.” A survey participant suggested developing a “better understanding of student/cultural influences on learning.” Another interviewee added, teaching in the study abroad context is “a lot more participative. I get to know the student. There is less opportunity for them not to be involved because if they are not involved I know it. It's much more participative-based evaluation than anything else.” Teaching in study abroad programs often requires much more contact with learners outside of class than is expected in courses at home. The interpersonal relationships among the members of the course/program become much more complex when living and learning together in a foreign locale. As one interviewee described,

You get a better sense of who they [the students] are as people. You get a better sense of their backgrounds and how they're looking at this, what their expectations are. And then you go and begin to see whether it [the instructional approach] works out.”

Finally, informants indicated they learned the value of developing closer relationships with students and the experiential components of instruction. This sentiment was articulated by one of the interviewees in his comment, “it's the way education should be.”

In what ways have these instructors developed personally?

The data analysis also indicated that participants developed in personal ways through their experiences teaching abroad. They cultivated deeper cross-cultural understandings and self-efficacy regarding adaptability to new cultural contexts and norms. One interviewee offered,

I think it gives me a more global perspective on things. We as Americans tend to see things from one view point. It allows me to challenge others to say, “hey, what about this?” or “what about that?” and, “what if you are looking at it from this perspective?” I think I have changed as a result of it.

Another offered, “What are you going for if you are not opening your mind and trying something new?” And, a survey participant suggested the experience of teaching abroad led to “reflect[ing] on diversity in our country” in different ways.

In considering their international cultural experiences, the participants realized they had developed an overall flexibility by developing “tolerance for ambiguity.” Living and traveling in a foreign country/culture requires adults to engage in a wide variety of cultural interactions. An interviewee reflected on his opportunities to “experience new culture, the food, the people, the interactions... things like that.” He was specifically impacted through interactions with peoples

who did not speak English well because “if you are going to interact with the people here this is going to be more meaningful than a bunch of people that can speak English, because...[they are not] used to serving Americans.” After living and teaching in a foreign setting, an instructor said, “I [now] like the chaos, turmoil, and energy,” and another suggested he “learned to adopt the Thai attitude of ‘no problem’ and learned to go with the flow.” Participants found that they developed tolerance and even appreciation for different cultural norms.

How might these experiences inform future faculty development plans?

The participants offered several recommendations to faculty interested in teaching abroad. They believed those new to the experience should engage in nonformal and informal study of the cultural history, religions, customs, and norms, educational culture, language, and the various systems functioning in the host locale. A survey participant offered that PD was needed for instructors to learn “how to go through the process of enculturation and the stages of this process,” and another recommended training to “better understand cultural learning styles.” Concerning instruction and assessment development, the informants submitted they would like to see training in how to “integrate course instruction with the resources available in the country,” how to design for “different sequencing,” and how to develop innovative and appropriate assessment approaches that would tap in to student learning in a more holistic manner. For example, one instructor offered,

To be fair to the student, we ... want to have more than one question [to include] affective and concrete [learning outcomes.] Grading is hard here. {How can we assess] elements that create the affect? We want them to draw on what they’ve learned from the lectures and resources to explain why they liked a particular space, but also to step back to how the space relates to the larger [cultural] context.

Participants were also faced with how to set learning and behavior expectations and how to handle student learning and behavior challenges abroad. Thirteen of the participants indicated facing undesirable student learning issues (“apathy and disinterest”) or inappropriate student behaviors including abuse of “alcohol and drugs,” bringing “prostitutes ... back to the hotel room,” and “shoplifting” while abroad. Some of these issues can be addressed in pre-course orientations, but learning how to design and develop these interventions were indicated as an important PD offering.

Finally, institutions are already offering varying levels of logistical support and structures about which instructors going abroad need to learn. Issues around “budgets,” receipts for expenses and “reimbursement procedures,” and the “reams of paperwork and bureaucracy and regulations” need to be discussed with faculty who are novices to the teaching abroad experience. In addition, the legal “risks” and “university expectations” for instructor responsibility need to be disseminated.

Although the participants were clear about the myriad of skills, attitudes, and nuances that teaching abroad engenders, seven of the participants stated they would not have attended training had it been offered. These same seven also indicated they did not engage in any kind of learning related to instruction or the international culture before they taught in another country, and their instruction at home was unchanged after their experiences abroad. For them, there appeared to be little to no difference between facilitating learning at their home campuses as compared to facilitating learning with students (both American and from other nations) internationally. Indeed, the focus across the data was on nonformal and informal learning that

was grounded in mentorship in-country, and observing other instructors in international programs prior to embarking on one's own instruction abroad was indicated as essential for PD, preparation, and readiness. The experiential, hands-on approach to instruction abroad was highly valued and encouraged. They believed these experiences are essential in developing the required cognitive and emotional flexibility necessary to be effective and responsible in these distinctive situations. Ultimately, each international teaching context is unique, and professional development is likely to require an individual and personal approach. Correspondingly, a survey participant offered this advice, "Slow down. Listen. Observe. Know yourself. Understand your own culture. Get advice from others...and start planning early."

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

This study explored the insights and lessons learned from instructors' lived experiences to inform the future of educator development in these programs. Analysis placed emphasis on learning experiences that were both nonformal (e.g., safety, logistics, cultural norms, financial issues, mentoring, experiences observing/co-teaching, and experiential learning instructional practices) and informal (self-study on one's own and the international culture, as well as instructional practices, foreign language, local political systems, and instructional planning). Implications suggest a blended approach of formal and informal training, while personalized informal learning processes must also be valued and validated. In addition, international field-based instruction experiences should be endorsed as a situated learning context for professional faculty development. An internationalized mindset must be developed by instructors to create learning that is comparative, integrative, interdisciplinary, contextual, and global (Green, 2002). With increases in education abroad enrollment, extension and expansion of knowledge and skills for international field-based instructors must be an integral element of both the faculty development and education abroad movements.

References

- Bates, A. (2000). *Managing technological change: Strategies for college and university leaders*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Carusetta, E., & Cranton, P. (2005). Nurturing authenticity through faculty development. *Journal of Faculty Development*, 20(2), 79-85.
- Dirkx, J., Spohr, R., Tepper, L., & Tons, S. (2010). Adult learners and short-term study abroad: Formation or transformation? *Proceedings of the Adult Education Research Conference* (pp. 122-127). Sacramento: California State University.
- Grant, M., & Dickson, V. (2008). Matrix on virtual teaching: A competency-based model of faculty development. *Proceedings of the Adult Education Research Conference*. St Louis: The University of Missouri – St. Louis.
- Green, M. (2002). Joining the world: The challenge of internationalizing undergraduate education. *Change*, 34(3), 13-21.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lawler, P., & King, K. (2000). Refocusing faculty development: The view from an adult learning perspective. *Proceedings of the Adult Education Research Conference*, Vancouver, Canada.

- Lieberman, D. (2005). Beyond faculty development: How centers for teaching and learning can be laboratories for learning. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 131, 87-98.
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lom, E., & Sullenger, K. (2011). Informal spaces in collaboration: Exploring the edges/boundaries of professional development. *Professional Development in Education*, 37(10), 55-74.
- Marsick, K., & Watkins, V. (2001). Informal and incidental learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 89. 25-34.
- Orndorff, E (1998). *The short-term study travel experience for adult professionals: A phenomenological study*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg.
- Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Vande Berg, M. (2007). Intervening in the learning of U.S. students abroad. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11, 392-399.