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Personal and Cultural Adjustments Involved with an Oxford Study Abroad Experience

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Abstract

We report the results of a qualitative research study from in-depth interviews with 23 American students' responses to a study abroad experience at New College, Oxford University (U.K.). Two primary themes are reported here from the analysis of students' transcripts: maturity development and personal development. Maturity development said to have been stretched through new experiences and increased independence. Personal development was enhanced via expanded horizons and the indelible impression that was left with students following the SA experience.

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1. Introduction

Study abroad (SA) participation by students in the United States (U.S.) has been significantly increasing in the past two decades (Behrnd & Porzelt, 2012). Both university faculty members and corporate leaders who hire college graduates have encouraged involvement. Benefits are said to include enhanced multicultural awareness, more significant levels of cross-cultural sensitivity, and expanded capabilities in understanding constructs from multiple perspectives (Turos, 2011). These qualities are said to be valuable for maximum educational enhancement as well as future vocational success. Chapman (2012) notes that the marketplace has become increasingly global, and college students are said to benefit from the diverse experiences they undergo while in SA milieu.

The overall body of research literature suggests that SA participation results in students viewing problem solving from vantages outside of their normal purviews (Gammonley, Rotabi, & Gamble, 2007). Americans, in particular, tend to be relatively uni-focused with American culture being assumed as the dominant perspective. Hollywood and

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other social media tend to reinforce this stereotype, unfortunately, since the U.S. generally dominates visual portrayals of cultural norms. While this phenomenon often results in stereotyping of other cultures, Alred and Byram (2002) reported that stereotyping tended to diminish when American students participated in SA programs.

SA programs have received some attention in the recent literature, although the scope of the published articles is somewhat limited (France & Rogers, 2012). In order to enhance understanding of the SA experience, the aim of the study was to relate the perspectives of students who participated in the Oxford SA program through the thick descriptions they provided through personal interviews. We employed a qualitative design in the present study, since it often is most effective when engaging exploratory research (Johnson & Christensen, 2010). The approach was inductive, intentionally designed to be a theoretical and without pre-conceived expectations for potential findings.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Using purposeful sampling in the qualitative research tradition, we interviewed 23 students who studied at New College at Oxford University in the United Kingdom (U.K.). Ages ranged from 20-24, where 11 were males and 12 were female students. Sixteen students were juniors (third year of U.S. college), four were sophomores (second year), two were seniors, and one was a recent college graduate. Twenty of the students self-identified as being Caucasian, and the remaining related themselves to be Hispanic, French, and Korean. Saturation (Silverman, 2011) was reached after around 15 interviews; helping to ensure the sample size was ample for the study's intended purpose.

2.2. Procedure

Using a phenomenological, qualitative research paradigm (Creswell, 2012), we engaged the students using tape-recorded, in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Alvesson, 2011). NVivo software facilitated coding procedures, including analysis of word frequency, re-occurring phrases, and shared constructs. From the coding procedure (Maxwell, 2012), themes were derived that aptly reflected the consensus of all or most all the research participants. The study's internal validity was enhanced via the following qualitative research procedures: use of an outside, independent expert to review the procedure and process (Creswell, 2010), generating a data trail (Rodgers, 2008), member checking (Mero-Jaffe, 2011), and use of low-inference descriptors (Chenail, 2012).

3. Results

Two primary themes are reported here from the analysis of the students' transcripts: maturity development and personal development. Maturity development said to have been stretched through new experiences and increased independence. Personal development was enhanced via expanded horizons and the indelible impression that was left with students following the SA experience.

3.1. Maturity Development

3.1.1. Stretched through new experiences

Student described himself or herself as having been challenged through novel experiences and being placed in situations that were outside of their normal routines. Being in a new country, experiencing novel cultural dynamics, and learning to adjust to different living conditions were said to have impacted the students in significant ways. Following is an example from a participants' transcript:

Just getting to *live* in another culture, which, I mean, my preconceptions of Britain was that it's not that much different; but, once you live here, you realize everything is different. I mean, there are some similarities, but even the language...even though we speak English, they're different, almost different dialects just with different sayings they have and just different ways of communicating different things, different mannerisms, different cultural ways of interaction, which I think is important for people to learn that the way you've grown up and lived is not the way that, even people who speak your same language and almost have the same culture as you, don't do it that way at all....

3.1.2. *Increased independence*

Oxford University utilizes a tutorial system that is different from anything the American students previously had experienced. The rigor of academic expectations is renowned and the SA students found them having to impose self-discipline in ways that they previously had not previously experienced. There were no weekly quizzes or daily accountability, as students frequently experienced in the U.S. Consequently; they felt the SA experience at Oxford resulted in an increased independence. The quote illustrates this perspective:

But some of the ones, adjusting to having enough of a discipline schedule to do work. Because sleep until 4 in the afternoon and stay up until 6 in the morning, that's like my natural schedule. And, that wasn't good, because the library is only open until 10, so I had to wake up earlier and do all that kind of stuff earlier....

3.2. *Personal Development*

3.2.1. *Expanded horizons*

The participants described themselves as having broadened their thinking as a result of having spent an academic semester at Oxford. They spoke in terms of moving from primarily an American-centered to a more global-centered way of thinking about life, issues, and problem solving. They were exposed to different ideas, people, and cultural perspectives that were said to have provided a larger perspective through which personal constructs could be viewed. One participant related most students' sentiments in on this point:

I think it's broadening your experiences to being a new city, country and culture, especially. Just to see how different people live. Just having that life experience I guess. It just makes you a more well-rounded, knowledgeable person about the world. The appreciation for other cultures as well.... but I've had lots of multicultural friends from different countries and it gives people a really good chance to get out of your little bubble, and just see different people from all across the world and they're cool and normal and we can learn from them also. That widening perspective is really important. It's different everywhere you go.

3.2.2. *Left an indelible impression*

Students' resounded shared perspectives that the SA experience at Oxford impacted them in ways that they believe will be life changing. The insights gained and perspectives acquired were said to be cogent and participants believed they would have long-lasting effects on their respective future academic and vocational perspectives. One student who stated most forthrightly illustrates the finding: "I think those challenges and those experiences that you have studying abroad are something that stays with you for the rest of your life."

4. Discussion

Results from the present study are consistent with other SA research by Younes and Asay (2003) and France and Rogers (2012). The paradigm shifts that are required by SA experiences seem to propel learning in ways that seemingly would be impossible through traditional, didactic instruction alone. Students reported that, before leaving

the U.S., they assumed Britain would be relatively similar to American culture, due to the shared language. However, they indicated being surprised by the significant differences and, similar to findings by Drew, Meyer, and Peregrine (1996), students found themselves thinking more globally than through self-ethnicity alone. Previously held assumptions were more fully appraised and students seemed to challenge the notion of what previously was assumed to be “normal.” In short, a broadening of perspective occurred and students likely will not be completely the same in their future careers as a result of having undergone the SA at Oxford University.

5. Limitations and Future Research

Limitations in the present study include external validity based on New College of Oxford University (each OU college is relatively independent), a sample of one semester’s SA students, and the students were mostly Caucasian. Future research should expand the present design, using minority students, branching to additional OU colleges, studying other (similar) UK universities such as Cambridge, and interviewing students who participate in a yearlong SA experience.

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