Reflective Writing in Study Abroad Programs: Hunting a Story in South Africa

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Abstract
Universities are challenged to effectively prepare students to enter a global workforce equipped with the knowledge and communication skills to perform in an interdependent world. Short-term study abroad programs have shown the highest increase in participants, but strategic methods must be explored in order to make the most use of such little immersion time abroad. One such method is reflective writing. During a short-term study abroad course in South Africa, eight students kept reflective journals. This qualitative study used purposive sampling to gain greater insight into the thinking and meaning-making students conducted while studying abroad. Research objectives examined students’ self-awareness in the global community, changes in cultural paradigms, and desire to prescribe and become a part of solutions. Reflective writing proved to be a valuable educational tool to solidify learning and engage students in an international setting while permanently capturing student observations and emotions.

Key words: reflective writing, study abroad, perspectives, self-awareness, experiential learning
Introduction

According to the *Open Doors* report, in the past decade the number of American students earning academic credit through study abroad programs has increased 150% (Institute of International Education, 2007). The steady rise in the number of participants in global programs is a strong indicator that more students, parents and faculty are recognizing that “to succeed and prosper in a global economy and interconnected world, U.S. students need international knowledge, intercultural communications skills and global perspectives” (Meeting America’s Global Education Challenge, 2007).

The models for study abroad programs vary, including options such as short-term travel abroad, short-term study abroad, on-site classes, student teaching and long-term study abroad (Gray, Murdock, & Stebbins, 2002). Students who were previously prevented from study abroad programs due to financial, academic, personal or other barriers are increasingly using short-term study abroad programs as a practical option for going global. Additionally, educational efforts are moving toward customizing study abroad programs for students’ needs. For instance, schools are providing major-specific experiences that accommodate future career options like studying advertising with international firms in Italy or hotel management in Australia. (Meeting America’s Global Education Challenge, 2007). However, the challenge for short-term study abroad programs is to make the most of the limited time out-of-country.

Cultural immersion is a critical aspect of study abroad programs. However, to increase the impact of student engagement and learning, an educational model is needed that demonstrates how to effectively use this method. One of the methods proposed to increase engagement in this way, is through reflective journal writing. As students experience a new culture, the potential exists for perspectives to change in regards to themselves, their home country and the world. In Fiddler and Marienau’s model, “reflection is required to convert an event … to an experience from which learning and meaning can emerge” (2008, p.76).

Reflection is inquiry; it is asking “what’s getting my attention?” (Fiddler and Marienau, 2008, p. 76). This question leads the learner into a careful observation of the surrounding world and stimulates exploration. This “heightened awareness of what we see, hear, touch, feel, think, taste and smell—especially accompanied by an non-judging attitude of appreciation – generates greater possibilities to answer the ‘attention-getting’ question” (Fiddler and Marienau, 2008, p. 76).

Context of the Study

A recent short-term study abroad program at The Pennsylvania State University incorporated a customized curriculum for students’ specific major interests while including reflective writing to increase the value of the experience. The course: *Communicating Agricultural Development in South Africa* was designed to expand the eight participants’ worldview by exposing them to the challenges and success stories of South African farmers while enhancing their intercultural communication skills. Students were responsible for documenting South African agriculture in words and pictures through journalistic articles, photography, multimedia, and reflective journals.

Students were required to keep daily reflective journals while in-country. To further explain reflective writing and the expectations for the journals, students were given reflective writing packets for the 18-hour plane ride to South Africa. The reflective writing samples did not relate to study abroad or agriculture in order to avoid manipulating the students. The principal investigator was not responsible for assigning grades for the journals, which was
emphasized when obtaining the students’ research consent forms. All participants in this study were Penn State undergraduate students. The students’ majors varied; however, all expressed interest in journalism, agriculture and Africa.

During the 14 days in South Africa, as a class, students met for one-hour discussion sessions for a total of five meetings and turned in their reflective journals after these discussions. Journals were collected and reviewed by the course instructor and research investigator. Feedback on the journals was provided on post-it notes with comments encouraging deeper reflection than merely logging the activities of the day.

**Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of reflective journal writing as a model to reinforce learning for short term study abroad programs. The questions used to guide this study were:

1. Does reflective journal writing while participating in a study abroad program increase students’ self-awareness as members in the global community?
2. Do student observations made abroad lead to deeper questioning of personal cultural paradigms?
3. Will students internalize the problems they witness and indicate a desire to become a part of the solution?

**Methods**

This qualitative study used purposive sampling in order to provide rich detail and “maximize discovery of the heterogeneous patterns and problems that occur in the particular context under study” (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 82). The population size of the study was eight students who participated in the *Communicating Agricultural Development in South Africa* course and kept daily reflective journals while in South Africa.

Berg found personal documentation, such as journals, to be an unobtrusive qualitative strategy that subjectively captures thoughts and perceptions not found through other measures (2004). The collection of reflective journals, or solicited private archives, provides potential for the researcher to gain greater insight into individuals’ paradigms, which “allow researchers to draw out complete pictures of the subjects’ perceptions of their life experiences” (Berg, 2004, p. 221). Furthermore, the intimate nature of private diaries and journals is considered “an underutilized element in research” (Berg, 2004, p. 221). Subjects write their thoughts, feelings and understandings freely in such private journals. In this case, all journals were collected and photocopied upon returning to the U.S. for research purposes. Original journals were returned to students.

Glazer and Strauss (1967) described the constant comparative method of data analysis as the unitizing and categorizing of data. Employing this method allows researchers to compare responses from throughout the study and continually search for relationships (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000). Journal entries were unitized into stand-alone chunks. Following this unitizing, the researcher coded the data, and then sorted each unit into thematic categories (Erlandson, et al., 1993). The researcher continually re-sorted the data, making modifications and changes as needed, until all units were placed into a category. The outcomes of the categorization are in the results section.

In order to ensure credibility, the researchers implemented several techniques including thick description, peer debriefing, reflexive journaling and member checking. Allowing
researchers outside the context of the study to review material can refine and redirect the analysis process and more accurately communicate reality (Erlandson et al. 1993). Erlandson et al. (1993) suggest these techniques to secure trustworthiness of data collection and analysis in a qualitative study.

**Results and Conclusions**

Several themes emerged through the analysis process, and results are presented according to research objectives. Within objective one, participants indicated a self-awareness regarding the global community, and desire for higher learning and gratitude for their personal circumstances as supporting ideas. Students wrote about their desire for self-improvement and higher learning, such as:

I feel that by being on this plane I am not only bettering myself but investing in the improvement of people down the road. (SAS 01, p. 4)

Looking back on the conversations with the students and the information they threw out at me, I realize there is still much of the world I’ve yet to see and learn about. I was also really impressed by the level of education students received at Pretoria. They seemed to be well-informed of world issues, and I aspire to be the same. (SAS 07, p. 7)

I want to be able to help those less fortunate than I and in order to do so, I need to understand more from their lives. (SAS 07, p. 19)

Students recognized an interconnected world of which they are a part evident in the following:

I learned that [this farmer’s] grapes, which are sold to Dole, could one day find their way to me. It definitely shows the little aspects to how South Africa is tied to the rest of the world and even me. (SAS 07, p. 14)

Also, we saw a guy singing and playing a guitar at the bar in the market where we stopped to rest. He was really good, and only played American songs. I have noticed this a lot throughout the trip. This just reminds me of how much influence the U.S. has on the rest of the world, especially the entertainment industry. I am not sure if this is good or bad but something to keep in mind when you are going to the movies or listening to the radio at home. (SAS 04, p. 14)

Why do all Africans have a Christian name as well? Their real names are so much prettier and perhaps in several decades they won’t even have African names, and completely lose that part of their culture. (SAS 02, p. 14)

As shown, recorded observations led to realization of their fortunate citizenship:

It is funny how something as normal as a sunset can seem so different and so beautiful. I wonder with all they [African citizens] must deal with in their lives, if they ever take the time to notice the sunset? Do they realize how amazing their country really is? Or is it only amazing to me because it is different from what I
am used to...I thought of how lucky collectively as a group we are to have all been here and all experienced this place. (SAS 04, p. 30)

When we stopped at a rest area to get gas, we all noticed that the stations black employees washed down every single part of our vans. It showed me how different this culture really is (you’re not supposed to use credit cards to pay for gas) and that South Africans rely on smaller (what some may argue as meaningless) jobs as their life income. (SAS 07, p. 17)

Some of it amazes me in that adults up past the age of 60 may still not know basic arithmetic skills that I learned in grade school. The books themselves really showed how little educated much of the older population is. In the U.S. we’re teaching people who to use computers and newer technology, but here people are still being taught basic literacy. It’s hard to imagine this places lives on the same earth. (SAS 07, p. 39)

For objective two, students reflected on their observations in the field including differences and similarities in education, agriculture and human relations within South Africa, and between South Africa and the United States, noting the value of experiential learning. However, observations did not always lead to deeper questions.

As evident in these quotes, differences were recognized and followed with deeper questions:
Yes, its different, but is it really? And does that difference matter? I am beginning to think that every country has its differences and that’s a good thing. We don’t necessarily have the right way to do everything, and who is to say someone else’s way is wrong. Maybe it is ok for other countries to have their own ways of doing things. (SAS 04, p. 6)

Within the same country, we have gone from rich commercial farms to poor emerging farms to nice a national park and through impoverished villages. It is amazing how the extremely wealthy are living next to the extremely poor. This is a constant theme present in South Africa even after the apartheid era. Both see each other and their living conditions everyday, leading me to wonder “Do they ever think about one another?” (SAS 04, p. 33-34)

The general culture that blacks serve whites is very present and real. In one sense, this is outrageous. Racism has been drilled into us as bad since the time we were born. A society built on blacks serving whites is automatically deemed evil, wrong, bad and should and must be changed.
On the other hand, one could argue that although atrocities occurred in the past, the current players in this country are playing morally and fairly and living the lives they were handed as ethically as possible. (SAS 05, p. 17-18)

Surprising similarities are captured in the following quotes:
I couldn’t imagine walking somewhere so nice in the U.S. The environment of the school did not make me feel like such a foreigner. It was very natural to be amongst the students. (SAS 07, p. 5)
Even how students were socially interacting reminded me of my friends. I guess it shows how many social traits can transcend political boundaries. (SAS 04, p. 7-8)

They [college students at Pretoria] claimed America is the best place to party, something that makes me think they are very well off. They also seemed surprised that every one in the US doesn’t have a maid. Besides all that, my taste in music were very similar to theirs, and they knew a lot of U.S. music groups. They also said they only watched U.S. tv. I think this shows how the US’s culture is being expanded around the globe. I can see this too in all of the stores playing U.S. music on the radio in South Africa. (SAS 03, p. 14)

Students observed differences in human relations, such as:

Reflecting on the day, the one thing I was noticing while we were in the market was the prominent separation that still exists between races. ... Even with this observation I did see a young black girl and a young white girl in matching uniforms linked arm and arm. This is an image that makes me look to the future and think that maybe the next generation will not make the same mistakes as those before them. (SAS 04, p. 25-26)

White privilege in America is NOTHING compared to this. In every facet of life, whites (8-10% of population?) are on top and the laborers are black. Examples: Farms, restaurants, gas stations, transportation. (SAS 05, p. 17)

There seems to be such a separation in their cultures. It [is] almost like they are [Afrikaans] and natives then all being South Africans. In the U.S. if a group can to the U.S. 200 years ago we wouldn’t think of them of being different. We think of them as being American. Tell them to go back to their homeland would seem like a crazy idea. Here that does not seem to be the case. It only feels like they blur the lines, not melted together. (SAS 08, p. 38-39)

The value of experiential learning is evident in these quotes:

I have questioned the things I have seen, people I have met, social constructions, economic problems, future opportunities. I have questioned my classmates and my academic leaders. I have questioned myself. ... But as I question what is around me, and what is inside of me, I am able to enhance and change my perceptions and greaten my understanding of myself, the world, and my role in it. (SAS 06, p. 56-57)

I guess this proves that first-hand experiences are always better than second because it was hard to follow what everyone was saying, and I did not have they emotional attachment they did. (SAS 04, p. 23)

Finally, in the third objective, students identified challenges in South Africa. As an American student it seemed that students were seeking to find solutions to problems that have existed for generations. While this could be considered a cultural norm, it obviously is not appropriate for students on short-term study abroad to get prescriptive with solutions. However,
the students had a number of questions about motivation of the farmers. Most were frustrated that solutions were not readily apparent and some expressed a desire to be a part of the change.

Challenges are recognized, but frustration is evident when writing for a solution in these quotes:

_I feel that Africa’s challenges not only in the Agricultural sector but also overall are so numerous that one cannot be pinpointed as causing its issues. Instead, it is the combination of many smaller problems that are leading South African down a slippery slope._ (SAS 04, p. 16)

_I am having a difficult time deciding whether the reason that nothing is getting done is due to lack of motivation, education, money, extension agents, or inspiration._ (SAS 01, p. 19)

_I fully believe that the success and potential for South Africa lies in these developing rural communities and not only does the government need to embrace that, but the people need to as well._ (SAS 07, p. 34)

The desire to stimulate improvement is apparent in the following:

_Perhaps our presence at the farms, discussing agric. or interviewing women, will change their lives for the better, but I already know that this trip, no matter what happens, will change mine._ (SAS 02, p. 1)

_...some of the common problems that the U.S. and South Africa has and education seemed to be a main problem for both countries. I think it is universal that if you can get people educated and able to think about problems creatively that most of the world’s problems could be solved._ (SAS 03, p. 42)

_Biggest Impression of the Day: That the kindness and compassion of one man can inspire and motivate those who have lost hope in a country lossing it._ (SAS 04, p. 22)

**Recommendations, Implications and Application**

The reflections of students clearly indicate that they were engaged in learning while in South Africa. The questions and comments suggest both a naive and mature thinking about what the students were seeing and experiencing. As students participate in study abroad programs they often begin to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their own culture. This group of students was challenged to view racism in a raw form and it was shocking and revolting for many of the students.

The great benefit of study abroad programs is that often times students come face to face with real problems that seemed like vague concepts if explored in a university classroom. Defining “an emerging farmer” is an obscure concept in an university-based international agriculture course. Confronting black South African farmers, speaking directly to them, and asking them questions that confirm their poverty is an eye-opening experience that students will not soon forget. Moreover, it forces students to examine their own values, education and privilege. Discussing white and black owned agriculture in South Africa with peers, community experts, and those directly involved drew these students into the reality that there are no simple solutions. This realization also confirms learning and engagement.
Factors that could influence the quality of reflections include students who dislike writing or prefer typing instead of pen and paper. Fatigue and exhaustion from jet lag and the intense traveling schedule could have deterred students from taking the time to write their deeper thoughts. Also, some students might have been hesitant to write their true feelings knowing the professor and principal investigator would be reading their thoughts, though students were encouraged to be real and honest.

Instructors and program designers should incorporate reflective journal writing into study abroad curriculum as a method of solidifying comprehension. Reflective writing permanently captures student observations and emotions for the student to revisit upon return to their home country. However, just as a plant needs fertile soil and nutrients to grow, students need the proper environment and resources to succeed. Appropriate time should be allocated for students to observe, discuss, reflect and write. Examples of reflective writing should be provided to students to help them learn the process so that they internalize and apply knowledge rather than merely recording observations. For students who prefer to type, the appropriate technology should be provided to them if appropriate.

Further research should be conducted on the long-term impact of reflective writing in study abroad programs. The added learning value that reflective journals bring could make a powerful impact on building stronger citizens of the global community as well as establish loyalty and financial support for future study abroad programs.

Courses that engage and confront students to examine their values should be required of every student in colleges of agriculture. While the international travel and the seriousness of the problem is inherently a strong motivating factor, it was just a vehicle that was used to draw students into a level of learning that rarely happens in a classroom setting. More domestic and international courses need to find educational opportunities that provide students with the enriched experiences provided in this course. Reflective writing proved to be a valuable educational tool to solidify learning and engage students in an international setting.

References