Creating a Student Focused Study Abroad Experience: Looking Forward in Programming Design

Dr. Paula M. Teig
Instructional Systems Designer
2955 Food Science
Iowa State University
Ames, IA 50011
Fax: 515-294-6383
Phone: 515-294-3728
pteig@iastate.edu

Mr. Charles R. Steiner
Graduate Student
206 Curtiss Hall
Iowa State University
Ames, IA 50011
Fax: 515-294-0530
Phone: 515-294-0047
csteiner@iastate.edu

Abstract

Study abroad experiences provide students with the opportunity to gain necessary skills to compete and prosper in agriculture. Collegiate students have an increased knowledge base and personal experiences that can have an impact on the type of study abroad experience that best suits them. An Australian study abroad program was developed to allow students the opportunity to become involved in the planning of the program and gain some sense of ownership toward the overall study abroad experience. The study abroad trip along with the pre-trip course was designed with active learning strategies as a foundation. The students were interviewed and observed to provide information related to the benefits and/or limitations of this type of program design. An interpretive qualitative data analysis provides some benefits for allocating the necessary time and effort needed to plan this type of student-centered study abroad program for students. It explores the development of the curriculum, course, and trip while analyzing the overall impacts on the program leaders and students.
Introduction

During the previous two decades, American higher education has seen and experienced a dramatic change in its student body. An increase in the number of adult learners, women, distance education opportunities, as well as individuals who delay their educational careers or begin them at community colleges is becoming more of the norm. These changes have resulted in a mixture of traditional and non-traditional students which have forced higher education to address the learning differences, needs, ideas, and experiences which challenge traditional means of instruction.

New information and strategies related to student learning and program design is causing educators to question the previous tried and true traditional instruction pedagogy. As Malcolm Knowles observed; the changing American student challenges some of the most sanctified assumptions about teaching, including:

1) Instructors should lecture and students listen
2) Learning is a dispassionate, impersonal activity
3) Knowledge should be stored for future use
4) Students have little to contribute to the learning process

(Knowles, 1980, p. 45)

As a result an upheaval and discourse among educators has provided a rich and exciting environment from which our learners will benefit.

In addition to the changing student body there is a vastly growing demand by industry for higher education to prepare students and ultimately graduates with international perspectives (B. L. Jones, personal communication, 2001). As a result, study abroad experiences have risen up as a primary means of “experiencing” another culture. This, too, has changed how instruction is delivered as the traditional approach is not effective in the preparation of students for study abroad opportunities.

In all probability the union of the study abroad experience and active learning pedagogy appear to be an appropriate fit; however, a hesitancy to adopt active learning concepts prevails as a majority of study abroad leaders (instructors) have been trained in and utilized traditional pedagogy for a majority of their careers. There is a silenced skepticism about allowing students to participate in the most holy of all professional activities in education, the designing of the curriculum (D. Williams, personal communication, 2002).

This study focuses on the commitment made by the study abroad leaders (instructors) to integrate active learning in the design and implementation of an Australian study abroad course and trip.

Theoretical Framework

Beginning in biblical times, the concept of active learning has been a primary means of preparing students for vocational employment or apprenticeships. However, the role of
active learning in the higher education arena was relatively new and seldom utilized. Its place in the university and college environments is quickly becoming a significant teaching and learning tool (Bruening, et al, 2002).

In many ways the active learning predecessor, apprenticeships have followed the traditional teaching pedagogy of teacher-centered instruction. Bruening, et al (2002), stated that traditional apprenticeships were primarily a function of direct observation by the student of the master. They further stated that direct instruction and the supervision of the student’s work was under scrutiny of the master with minimal, if any, consideration for the input of student creativity in the design. The transformation to active learning, according to the article by Bruening, et al (2002), is so overwhelming that it should not be dismissed by college professors and instructors as a temporary approach.

The primary assumption in the pedagogical concept of active learning is that learning is by nature, a very active process and also recognizes that individuals possess many different ways to learn (Meyers & Jones, 2002). In addition, students and graduates are faced with the demands of industry to be equipped with various life skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, research, and communication skills. This in addition to the cognitive thinking abilities already experienced by the “buyers” of our product, the students (Jones, Personal Communication, 2001). To learn these skills Meyers and Jones (2002) implied that by following Piaget’s concept of mental structures students, regardless of age, need opportunities to engage in activities with a variety of individuals in a wide range of settings. Examples of possibilities are not limited to: teachers, fellow students, resource materials, field trips, study abroad, and guest speakers.

Given the following as the precept for an active learning structure, Meyers and Jones (2002) developed the following structure (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Structures of Active Learning](image)

The four elements: talking and listening, writing, reading, and reflection, have been separately used in classrooms throughout the decades; however, reflection, the opportunity
for students to develop their own ideas and knowledge has only been touched upon beginning in the 1990’s (Jones, personal communication, 2002).

The introduction of learning strategies as part of the continuum of educational processes allows for a greatly enhanced learning environment (Meyers & Jones, 1993). These student-driven strategies, if allowed, can provide an excellent means for students to assume ownership of their knowledge and responsibility for their own learning. These strategies can be further enhanced by teaching resources as well as experiences, which are based in cultural, diverse, and international experiences (Bruening, et al, 2002).

In program design, specifically in the classroom, the use of active learning concepts is becoming more of the norm rather than something experimental. Figure 1, depicts the breadth and depth involved in the pedagogy of active learning. It goes without saying that unless the teacher constructs the course to utilize active learning as the foundation of instruction the attempt to integrate certain components from the structure typically results in minimal knowledge gained by all parties (Meyers & Jones, 2002).

The key to fully utilizing active learning is to develop a high quality, student-directed experience of which students assume ownership of their learning as well as construction of knowledge built upon their existing knowledge base. Therefore, it is critical that the instructor (leader) interact with the students in all phases of the program design, implementation, and conclusion. In doing so, the effectiveness of the program and the learners experience determine the impact of the active learning pedagogy. In summary, if properly designed and administered, a course or program, grounded in active learning, could promote and nurture a high quality level of learning for students.

**Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this paper is to bring to focus an alternate trip preparation approach for study abroad experiences that enables the students to play an active role in the planning and preparation for international travel. The benefits and limitations related to this type of program development will be explored and the attitudes and perceptions of students will be analyzed. The impacts that this type of program can have on the overall study abroad experience will also be discussed. The three main objectives for this program development were:

1) The integration of an active learning environment into a study abroad course as opposed to the predominant traditional format

2) Student self development in academics as well as interpersonal skills associated with preparation for international travel

3) Use of the pre-trip course to strengthen participant communication, identify grouping patterns, and to conduct needs assessment for determining the trip itinerary.
Integrating an active learning environment for students allowed for a pre-trip course and study abroad program that was planned and implemented as a group rather than by the instructor(s) or department. It allowed students the opportunity to become involved in learning about, in this case Australian agriculture, and planning a study abroad trip that will satisfy their specific needs.

**Curriculum, Course and Trip Development**

The pre-trip course curriculum was developed to provide information and activities that would demand interaction and communication among the students. The study abroad experience included fifteen students who participated and two program leaders. The course was an eight week course meeting two nights a week for approximately one hour at a time. A site visit was completed at the beginning of the course to allow the program leaders to meet with people and visit sites related to the interests and demands of the students. The actual length of the trip was three weeks, the trip was divided into three sections which were: approximately one week at the University of Western Sydney, one week at Dookie College and one week at the University of Melbourne. These colleges and universities provided accommodations and resources for traveling to and from a variety of our educational sites and production tours.

The pre-trip course included the development of several individual and team building assignments. Each student identified a specific rationale for participating and in addition worked with groups to present materials researched in the areas of Australian agriculture, trade, culture, government and tourism. These activities enabled the students to interact as a group and also learn about Australia prior to the trip. The group presentations and discussions were used to develop a course packet for each student with information from the five areas mentioned earlier in the article.

The key component of the curriculum was each student’s development of an area of interest. Students were asked to identify an area of interest that they would concentrate on during the course and trip. They were asked to research their area of interest and to develop a paper that explains what they currently understand and what questions they would like answered during the trip. Some examples of those areas of interest were: export marketing of commodities, the United States farm bill and subsidies, dairy production, salinity, crop production, water availability/quality, governmental impacts and educational structure. As each student researched their area of interest they started to formulate ideas for possible activities and places to visit during the trip.

The program leaders were able to generate funding for an initial site visit. This site visit included the use of a schedule of possible activities provided by the students pertaining directly to their areas of interest. The University of Melbourne, Dookie College and the University of Western Sydney at Hawkesbury were our initial contacts. They provided the necessary accommodations for the site visit and study abroad trip and were able to access the necessary resources and personnel to develop the study abroad around the students needs.
The student driven program design was initially met with some reservations as many of the international program directors were accustomed to a more traditional study abroad program. One in which the leaders work with them to schedule all the events and the students follow their program or agenda. In this case the program leaders provided examples and information concerning what the students would like to see and learn during their visit to Australia. The program leaders asked their Australian colleagues to use the student’s information and develop a program that would satisfy their specific needs. This approach demanded a large amount of time and effort by both the leaders and students. In some cases not all criteria could be met, but overall each student was provided with one or more opportunities to become involved in a discussion or visit related to their specific area of interest. Some areas of interest were concentrated on more than others due to the availability of personnel and location; however flexibility was built into the program so individual students had opportunities to separate from the group and visit with personnel directly related to their area of interest.

Methods

A basic interpretive qualitative study approach was used to understand how participants made meaning of the course and trip. Data was accessed through the use of semi-structured interviews during and after the pre-course trip and after the study abroad programs completion. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the student’s attitudes and perceptions more openly and provided more flexibility within the individual interviews. Four of the participating students were selected at random and interviewed during the course and after the trip; time constraints and availability after the trip limited the interview process. Some basic questions were developed concerning the effectiveness of the course and trip related to achievement of objectives and outcomes assessment.

General discussions during the course and trip were conducted with the entire group and field notes of those discussions were recorded and included in the observation. Observation of the students by program leaders during the course and trip was also included in the descriptive field notes. Field notes and interviews were analyzed and common themes were identified related to both the pre-trip course and the study abroad experience.

Conclusions/Immerging Themes

The semi structured interviews, discussions and observations identified four common themes related to this type of study abroad experience. Those themes are:

1) Students have an interest in becoming involved in the planning of a study abroad that will address their areas of interest and specific needs.

2) Students felt increasingly prepared and informed to ask specific questions and become involved in discussions related to their researched areas of interest while on the trip.
3) Specific areas of interest were concentrated on while others were extremely limited causing some concern over preferential treatment.

4) An increased comfort level among students was achieved during the trip due to the group activities and presentations required during the pre-trip course.

The semi-structured interviews provided several comments regarding the interest in researching Australian agriculture and having some impact on the development of the study abroad trip. As was mentioned by a student:

It was nice to research Australia and actually be able to discuss what agricultural areas or components we would like to see. It was interesting to hear what others had researched and have the opportunity to visit and discuss possible ideas as a group. I had went on other study abroad trips where everything was laid out for us, it was still enjoyable, but there were some things I would have liked to discussed and seen that were not part of the program. This trip to Australia allowed me to become involved in selecting some possible visits and have some say about who we would have discussions with. (Junior, Agricultural Studies Student, Iowa State University)

The statement above represented a common theme among all of those interviewed. They seemed to gain interest in the planning and development stages while wanting to learn more about their specific areas of interest because they were aware that specific components of the trip were being developed directly for them. This seemed to also improve the student’s ability to become involved in the discussions and ask pertinent questions. As one student replied:

The discussion concerning our farm bill and the United States subsidy program was excellent. The economist at the University of Melbourne really proved his point about how our subsidy program made it increasingly difficult for Australian producers to compete in a global market. We were able to make some excellent points about our farm bill and why it is necessary for our farmers and from our discussion I think he learned a little from us. I sure know a learned a lot from him. (Senior, Agricultural Business, Iowa State University)

In observation and discussion during the trip the program leaders found out that many of the quest speakers and discussants were impressed with the amount of knowledge and the excellent questions being asked by the students. It was obvious to the speakers that the students had done some research and wanted to gain a better understanding about Australian agriculture and education. They were also impressed by the students abilities to communicate and socialize with faculty, industry personnel, and Australian students in a variety of different settings, in the classroom, on the farm and during dinner and social events.

Unfortunately, the trip was not without limitations and was unable to meet all students needs evenly. Due to location and availability some students were provided several opportunities to visit and discuss their particular areas of interest, namely dairy production,
salinity and marketing. Others in the areas of extension, turf grass management, and sheep production were more limited in their opportunities. The necessary time needed to enable all students to have equal opportunities was a definite limiting factor. In most cases, students were able to gain the information they wanted, but had to split away from the group program and spend some time on their own with specific people contacted during the actual trip.

The students interviewed expressed a real connection with those on the trip. There was an obvious comfort level and relationship formed during the pre-trip course and further developed during the trip. As one student stated:

The course really helped me get to know everyone that would be going on the trip. The group activities were fun because we all had a little bit different area of interest and we all found some interesting things to do. I really felt comfortable with the group and because I can be shy at times it was nice to make a connection early on with the students and program leaders. I thought it would be awkward traveling for three weeks with people I was unfamiliar with, but after the course I really felt like I knew just about everyone. It was a lot less awkward than I expected and I made a lot of new friends during our travel to Australia. (Senior, Agricultural Education, Iowa State University)

This was observed by the program leaders as well; as the course progressed you could see the students opening up more and an increased willingness to become involved in the discussions and trip preparation. The trip was designed with a few opportunities for students to have some free time to do what they wanted. This was included so that if certain people wanted to visit certain places there would be some time to explore on your own. This opportunity was seldom used as in most cases all the students decided to go as a group. There was an obvious comfort level among the students and it was both observed and recorded during the interviews.

**Recommendations**

This type of study abroad experience takes a large amount of effort and time to plan. With the current budget cuts at many universities faculty are being forced to spend more time on grant writing and research and less time on student learning opportunities which include study abroad programs. This unfortunate reality makes it increasingly difficult to spend the necessary time to allow students the opportunity to research, discuss and plan specific study abroad opportunities.

If we are concerned with student learning and international experiences shouldn’t we be providing students with the opportunity to become involved in the program, rather than telling them what they will be able to see? We have the necessary communication lines and resources available to contact people in a variety of countries who can assist with a student-centered study abroad program. It serves as an improved educational learning experience for students and increases their motivation to become involved in the learning processes.
The use of active learning strategies and more student-centered approaches to study abroad development should be provided because of the overall improvement in student learning and engagement highlighted. Continued development of active learning strategies related to study abroad experiences and scholarship of the benefits and shortcomings is needed.

**Educational Importance**

Colleges and Universities alike have a priority that includes the development and furthering of undergraduate students for career opportunities in agriculture. The advancements in technology and availability of resources are improving our ability to offer study abroad experiences throughout the world. The changing global economy and markets is increasing the demand for students with some international experience.

These expanding groups of students have the knowledge, ability and skills necessary to become involved in the development of their own study abroad programs. By providing these opportunities students are building leadership, communication, cultural along with a variety of other skills that are necessary. Providing them with a sense of ownership toward the planning of these experiences has shown an enhanced value toward their learning. It has also provided a closer knit group of students who are well prepared and willing to discuss current issues related to agriculture in the country of study.

If the time and effort necessary to develop a student-centered study abroad program experience is taken the resources and contacts developed can cut down on the time necessary in future years. It also can provide a possibility for student exchange and collaborative opportunities for students from either country.

Planning and implementation of this Australian study abroad were extremely time consuming and demanding for all those involved, but the impact and life long skills enhanced and achieved by those students participating were evident. It can be another creative means to provide students with the opportunity to practice necessary skills within the context of international travel and studies.

**References**

