Studying Abroad in Nepal: Understanding Impact on Student’s Lives

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Abstract

Since the inception of the Michigan State University Nepal study abroad program, 139 students have traveled across the world to take part in a 12-week learning experience, taking courses in social science, arts and humanities, and international studies. In addition, students tour historical educational and cultural sites, conduct independent studies, and participate in weekly reflective learning sessions and journal writing. The study was conducted in order to analyze the potential impact on the 139 students who had participated in the program between 1997-2001, focusing on the student’s academic program, personal development (e.g., emotional maturity, empathy, flexibility), and intellectual development (e.g., critical thinking, problem solving) from their studying in Nepal. The study draws upon adult learning theory to analyze both the survey instrument data and case studies to highlight the potential impact on the lives of college students studying in a developing country. The Nepal program is especially unique because it is a semester-long program in a developing country that includes independent study work. Lastly, this study contributes to the body of knowledge on U.S. study abroad programs, especially because the longitudinal research on such programs is weak.
Introduction

In April 2000, President Clinton signed an executive memorandum on study abroad and in a press conference following the signing, former U.S. Education Secretary Richard Riley stated, “student exchanges lay the groundwork for a broader U.S. mission to deepen international understanding and improve education in less-developed countries. More American college students need to see the world with a new set of eyes” (Hardi, 2000).

Michigan State University (MSU) President McPherson reiterated former MSU President Hannah’s and U.S. Education Secretary’s words through The MSU Promise unveiled in December 1999. Two of The MSU Promise principles emphasize study abroad. First, MSU must continue to strengthen the undergraduate experience by regularly reviewing and improving various student development programs, including study abroad. The second calls for building on MSU's successful study abroad programs by extending and integrating internationalization across the missions of teaching, research, and outreach (Hudzik et al, 1995).

The MSU Nepal Multidisciplinary Program began two years before McPherson put forth The MSU Promise. Since its inception, 139 students have traveled across the world to take part in a 12-week learning experience, taking courses in the social science, arts and humanities, and international studies. In addition, the students tour historical, educational and cultural sites, conduct independent field studies, participate in weekly reflective learning sessions and journal writing. Before departing the United States students take part in Nepalese language and cross-cultural learning sessions.

Once in Nepal, the students are immersed in the culture by living with Nepalese families in the city of Pokhara, one of the country’s largest cities. Students experience how a developing country faces urbanization and industrialization, while maintaining a strong cultural heritage and natural environment. Nepal remains predominantly an agricultural economy with 91 percent of the population living in rural areas; the health situation is one of the worst in the world; and the literacy rate is extremely low (Wagenaar & Subedi, 1996). Nepal offers a unique learning environment because while the government changed to a democracy in 1992, ethnic/religious beliefs and practices, kinship patterns and a caste hierarchy were maintained.

Numerous studies over the years have emphasized the potential benefits of studying abroad. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has established principles for global education which have been the framework for the majority of research on study abroad programs. Global education principles include: understanding and respect of all people, their cultures, civilizations, values, and ways of life; an awareness of the increasing global interdependence among peoples and nations; the ability to communicate with others; an awareness of the rights and duties of individuals, social groups and nations; understanding the necessity of international unity and cooperation; and a willingness of individuals to participate in solving the problems of their community, country, and the world at large (as cited in Good and Campbell, 1997).

Hess (1982) noted the “international dimension is relevant to education at all levels in order to identify and provide means for comprehension and confrontation of the various problems facing humanity” (p. 43). Morgan (1975) asserts that the valued outcome of study abroad is “simply to help the individual acquire a deep understanding of another culture, and to begin to appreciate and develop empathy for people who are different” (p. 210). In summary, international education has an impact on the intellectual, international
perspectives, cross-cultural interest and personal development of students (Kauffmann, Martin, & Weaver, 1992; Carlson and Widaman, 1988).

The most comprehensive study on the impact of study abroad was the 1990 Study Abroad Evaluation Project (SAEP) by the European Cultural Foundation. Carlson, Burn, Useem, & Yachimowicz (1990) focused on American study abroad, and their findings revealed three areas of significance: 1) language proficiency appeared to increase substantially, especially in the area of speaking skills, 2) a greater interest in international affairs, and 3) a large increase in their level of knowledge about the host country, especially in the areas of culture, customs and traditions, social structure and social issues. These findings would easily fit into the framework for international education by UNESCO and the other studies mentioned previously. With regards to personal attributes or behaviors, their findings did not statistically indicate that the study abroad experience increased levels of self-confidence and sociability.

However, other studies have shown increased levels of self-confidence and sociability. In 1991, Reghenzani found that study abroad experiences foster lifelong learning, cultural sensitivity, social and professional polish, wider personal horizons, and improved career opportunities for students. In addition, students adapted quickly to new people, places and situations, and were better able to communicate and think critically (Good and Campbell, 1997).

Good and Campbell (1997) also found that potential employers look approvingly at applicants with international study experience. Employers are becoming aware that students with international experience have many of the qualities that are essential to compete in the new global community (Hoffa and Hoffa, 1996). RAND Corporation and the National Association of Colleges and Employers revealed that businesses “expect recent grads to have cross-cultural competencies and international experiences” (cited in Matherly & Robinson, 2000).

Several of the studies have a common thread running through them—international experiences expand international perspectives, including cultural sensitivity, and an awareness of international affairs and global perspectives. However, in the areas of personal development (e.g., self-confidence, sociability and self-esteem), in addition to individual growth (e.g., solving problems of their own within community, country and the world at large), the studies show little comparability and reliability.

Methodology

Although formative evaluations of the Nepal program have been occurring annually, no in-depth study has been conducted on the Nepal study abroad program concentrating on its learning objectives. The purpose of this study is to analyze the potential impact from studying in Nepal on a student’s academic program, personal development (e.g., emotional maturity, empathy, flexibility), and intellectual development (e.g., critical thinking, problem solving) for those students who have participated from 1997 to 2001. Nepal’s program objectives are:

1. To develop inter-cultural understanding and interest of a developing country.
2. To develop an understanding of the interface between social, political, religious, economic and environmental issues of Nepal as well as understanding the significance each of these issues has in relation with international development efforts in Nepal.
3. To develop an understanding of the natural resource management issues facing Nepal.
4. To develop professional skills such as motivated self-direction in ones work, critical observation and thinking and communication.

5. To develop personal skills such as self-confidence, adaptability.

The study draws upon adult learning theory to analyze both the quantitative and qualitative data, and expose the possible impact studying abroad in a developing country has for students. Lastly, this study will contribute to the body of knowledge on U.S. study abroad programs, especially because the literature is weak in the area of longitudinal research.

This study of the Nepal program used survey and case study methods to analyze if the study abroad experience affected students’ lives in ways, which tie into the program’s learning objectives. The participants were asked to complete a survey instrument consisting of 26 close-ended and four open-ended questions.

The first part of the instrument was designed to document impacts of the study abroad program on students’ lives: academics, personal development (e.g., emotional maturity, empathy, flexibility), global perspective, career path, and intellectual development (e.g., critical thinking, problem solving). The second part of the survey instrument consisted of four open-ended questions. Students were asked to write about (1) their peak and low points or experiences, (2) what they learned about themselves, and (3) how the experience had impacted their life. After analyzing the open-ended questions, students were asked to participate in one-on-one interviews to further understand and offer unique interpretations of their Nepal study abroad experiences. Case study analysis was used for this portion of the research, searching for patterns predicted from the theories (transformational learning, self-efficacy and passion) (as explained per Creswell, p. 156).

Findings

Of the 139 students who have participated in the Nepal Multidisciplinary Study Abroad Program since 1997, 70 participated in this study or 50.7%, including 24 from 2001, who completed both a pre- and post-survey instruments. The analysis of the post-survey data included descriptive statistics, one-way analysis of variance and t-tests.

Of those 70 participants, 52 or 74.3% had never studied abroad before. Those who had studied abroad previously had participated in programs in: Canada (2 students), England (3 students), Belize (2 students), Mexico (3 students), and Israel among others. The length of the programs varied from two weeks in Belize (high school) to semester-long programs.

The majority of the students had traveled outside of the U.S. or Canada. 25.7% of the students had been out of the U.S. four or more times, whereas only 22.9% of the participants had never traveled outside of the U.S. or Canada. Their travels were primarily with family.

Perceptions of Impacts

The descriptive statistics of the individual question answers show high mean scores of 4.0 or greater (54%) for the different aspects of the students’ experiences in Nepal. The survey was based on a Likert Scale of 1=Not at all to 5=Very much.

The highest mean scores were for questions in the areas of understanding and acquiring knowledge about Nepal, international issues, and different cultures, including human difference. The highest scoring question was contributed to my overall understanding of Nepal, \( M = 4.84, \) \( SD = .40 \). In addition, increased my desire to travel/study/work abroad had a mean score of 4.80 (\( SD = .50 \)). In other words, 69% of the students who answered this question marked the box very much or quite a bit for desire to travel abroad in the future.

The two areas with the lowest mean scores were academics and career. There were
two questions on academic performance. One question asked if studying in Nepal led to an improvement of my academic performance with a $M = 3.29$, $SD = .93$. The other academic question, distracted me from my academic performance had a mean score of $2.40$, $SD = .84$. Statistics for the three career questions were: made me reconsider my career plans, $M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.49$, favorably impress potential employers, $M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.17$, and helped me find professional direction, $M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.38$. Problem-solving skills and leadership, which are higher learned typed competencies, were the other two low scoring questions.

The next part of the data analysis compared the means of the questions with consideration of gender, travel outside the country and year of study in Nepal. An independent t-test was computed to determine if perceived impacts of studying abroad differed by sex. Taking all questions into account, the mean scores were not found to be statistically different.

To understand the possible impact on a student who participated five years ago versus a student who studied in Nepal in 2001, an analysis of variance by years was conducted for the individual questions. Again, there was no statistical significance when taking into account the year a student studied in Nepal.

Lastly, to learn if previous travels affected the impact of studying abroad in Nepal, a t-test was calculated between the mean scores of those students who had never traveled abroad compared to those students who had traveled beyond the U.S. or Canada. The overall findings were not statistically significant. The reason for this could be that only 29% of the 139 students had never been outside of the U.S. or Canada previously to their time in Nepal.

As for the open-ended questions, students focused primarily on their high or peak experiences and what they learned about themselves. As for the low points or experiences, several stated that they became sick and how that affected their feelings of being in a third world country. None of those who said that they became sick stated that it affected their perceptions of their entire experience. One student noted that being sick was very lonely because his host family would not go near him, afraid they would catch his sickness. Overall, the statements were positive and indicated that the experience has impacted their lives in some way or another:

**Case Studies**

In order to reach a fuller understanding of the potential impact of the Nepal study abroad experience had upon a student, students were asked to take part in one-on-one interviews with the researcher. The student’s answers to the survey instrument questions used to guide the interview. The participant names have been changed to help protect their identity.

**Amanda: theme—spirituality and education.** Amanda participated in 1998, and before traveling to Nepal she had never traveled outside of North America. Amanda’s questionnaire revealed that Nepal impacted her professional direction, her views of critical social issues and problems within developing countries, her independence, and her comfort level around people.

Because of her Nepal experience, Amanda returned to MSU and added education to her degree program of environmental science. She decided that she wanted to teach environmental science. Upon receiving her degree, Amanda plans to work in a developing country as a missionary focusing on community development.

When Amanda was asked if there was impact upon her life from studying in Nepal, she stated that it “affirmed spirituality.” Before going abroad, she questioned how God could...
reach people in remote areas. While in Nepal, her question was answered on the last day of
the program while she was writing her independent study paper, “Children with Disabilities
in Pokhara, Nepal.” She was struggling to write a valuable paper and while sitting at the
computer she felt someone telling her to visit a leprosy center in Pokhara. Once there,
Amanda met a 13-year old girl who she described in her paper. “Due to the disease, she had
been shunned from her village after the death of her parents. She was beaten and starved by
her uncle, and finally attempted suicide in a mountain river along with her sisters. However,
God intervened and she ended up at a leprosy center where she was receiving treatment.”
The girl has learned to read and enjoys reading in a country where the literacy rate for
women is approximately 27 percent.

This experience profoundly impacted Amanda’s life. She appreciates how liberating
literacy can be for people, and as a missionary, how she can give people the tools to read.
Her understanding of education and its importance as a tool for social change was
transformed. If she follows her goals of missionary work, she could follow in Paulo Freire’s
footsteps. He maintained that education, specifically literacy, can be used to effect social
change and to liberate (1970).

Amanda has realized that studying abroad has made the “world more reachable” and
made her more “independent.” “The Nepal experience impacted my life both spiritually and
educationally, as well as helped me to more deeply understand another culture and how to
relate with other people. Even three years later, people I met and experiences I had in Nepal
still come up often in conversation. The experience helped change my way of viewing the
world, the needs of people, and my personal role.”

Dan: theme—cultural relativty & self-efficacy. Dan, who studied in Nepal in
2000, had traveled outside of the United States three times previously, including a two-week
stint in Belize studying tropical biology. Mezirow’s transformational learning shines light on
Dan’s personal experiences in Nepal.

Kauffman, Martin & Weaver (1992) state that international education impacts a
student’s perceptions about one’s own or the host culture, and their personal development.
Dan stated, “the most memorable and most beautiful part of my time in Nepal was my
internalization of it, the way it shaped me. I learned what is necessary for me and what isn’t
with regard to my home culture. I learned which assumptions held water for me, and I had
the opportunity to question them—for instance, one of many lessons in cultural relativity, I
was confronted with the reality of arranged marriages, something I hadn’t considered to be
valuable previously. When faced with their efficacy in the Nepali context, however, I had to
reevaluate my beliefs about the institution of marriage. The difference between the U.S. and
Nepal is two people versus two families.”

The ultimate result of learning is to become aware of the “cultural assumptions
governing the rules, roles, conventions, and social expectations which dictate the way we
think, feel, and act” (Mezirow, 1981, p. 13). For Dan, he saw significant personal growth—at
the time, 2000, he was looking to go as far away from Michigan as possible—as he stated, “I
couldn’t go much further than Nepal.” His Nepal experiences taught him to be adaptable,
flexible and patient—and what “time” and “late” meant to different cultures. “Among many
other things, my time in Nepal has shown me the importance of family; it has given me self-
confidence the likes of which I’ve never known before; it has shown me unparalleled beauty
in both the landscape and the people—Bahun and oppressed caste alike; it has given me
another home.”
Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide sufficient evidence for us to conclude that students' lives are impacted by their experiences in Nepal. Because the response rate was only 50%, the high means for each question could indicate that the researchers may not have heard from those who did not have a positive experience or passion for studying abroad.

In this discussion of the potential impact on the students’ lives from studying in a developing country, we narrow the focus to the high mean scores as they relate to the program’s learning objectives. The key learning objectives focused on: global perspective—international development, Nepal; personal development—emotional maturity, empathy; professional development; academics; and personal development—critical thinking, problem solving. The highest question mean scores were based on the students’ understanding, curiosity and appreciation of Nepal, other cultures, international issues, and human differences. These data show that students not only learned about Nepal, but also came away with a deep awareness of international and social issues, especially when it comes to developing countries. Students became aware of poverty, multi-national business, government, economics and health, which are key aspects of the program’s learning objectives. In addition, by living with host families the students came away with a deeper understanding and appreciation of life in Nepal. Lastly, Several former participants are now working with environmental companies, the Peace Corp or are in graduate school pursuing careers in public service or environmental issues.

The survey findings show that the students do not believe that they developed professional skills at the expense of international social issues. The mean scores were lower for the professional skills—leadership, career plans, academic performance, problem-solving skills and critical thinking skills had mean scores below 4.0. We argue that students probably enhanced their skills when it came to leadership or problem-solving, but they may not have reflected upon these types of learning, or they did not place them into the bigger picture of life. While answering the survey instrument, they may have thought about using these skills within the classroom in Nepal, but not while they were interacting with the external environment.

Analyzing the open-ended questions and case studies, we can argue that studying in Nepal helps students focus on what they want to do in life and opens their eyes to interacting with people from different cultures. This was highlighted in the case studies when the researcher asked the students about their independent study projects. The question was asked because more than one student mentioned that the class portion of the study abroad experience was weak. Within the case studies, the students talked about how they learned to work on projects without direction and being successful. In addition, they told how they interacted with the Nepalese, either in a cab ride, in the monastery or with their host family. Without asking the students about the learning objective, developing professional skills such as motivated self-direction in one’s work, critical observation and thinking and communication, those who were interviewed talked about these skills openly and vividly through their stories, especially the stories about their independent studies.

Additionally, the open-ended questions and case studies paint a clearer picture of how the students developed their personal skills, such as self-confidence and self-efficacy, during their time in Nepal. As for the personal development survey questions, no significant differences were found. Previous studies have shown that asking students to share journals
and participate in discussions groups throughout their stay in a foreign country are effective methods for researching and learning about the students’ personal development.

Institutions need to differentiate between outputs and outcomes, and as in educational programs on campus, educators need to determine how to fully grasp the impact on students’ lives and the learning they carry with them for a lifetime. The MSU Nepal Multidisciplinary Study Abroad Program is continuously being evaluated to determine if it is meeting the needs of the students and the learning objectives, but we need to take the next step. Utilizing journals, one-on-one interviews, focus groups and post-Nepal follow-up, the educators need to create more sophisticated methods to understand how the program impacts the students during the program, and more importantly after they return to the U.S. The analysis should not stop after six-months or a year, but should continue as a longitudinal analysis that includes not only the career and academic learning but the affective learning, too. Hard data can easily be tracked: jobs held, post-baccalaureate work, volunteer work, etc. John Dewey stated that education should be an instrument of social action and social change (cited in Pascarella & Terezini, 1991). Unless we closely follow students after their study abroad experience, we will never understand how they have played a role in society, and if their role was a result of this experience.

As for the affective learning, educators need to create methods to analyze students’ attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors during and after their study abroad program. For some students, becoming aware of and/or transforming their beliefs, values or behaviors may not occur while they are in Nepal, but after their return to the U.S. As Stephanie stated, returning home was more difficult for her. The ultimate result of learning is to become aware of the “cultural assumptions governing the rules, roles, conventions, and social expectations which dictate the way we think, feel, and act” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 13).

References


