Attitudes and Perceptions of Students Participating in a Study Abroad Field Trip as Related to Human Dimensions in International Agricultural Development

David E. Lawver, Ed.D.
Professor
Department of Agricultural Education and Communications
Texas Tech University
Box 42131
Lubbock, TX 79409
806-742-2816
806-742-2880 (fax)
david.lawver@ttu.edu

Ricardo Abel Soto-Cruz, M.S.
Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua

Charles Klein, ASLA
Chad David, Ed.D.
Texas Tech University

Abstract
The benefits of study abroad programs in higher education are well documented. The purpose of the paper is to document and report experiences and gains in global awareness of graduate students in a College of Agriculture who participate in a graduate course focusing on human dimension in international agricultural development. A qualitative approach was used in the evaluation process. The research involves a course in call Human Dimension in International Agricultural Development for graduate students at Texas Tech University. It includes a week long field trip to historic, cultural and environmental venues in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico. Students keep journals before, during, and immediately following the field trip. Entries prior to the field trip dealt with preflective issues, entries during the field trip were of daily observations, and entries following the field trip where to illustrate the most poignant impressions as a result of this international experience.

The researchers identified five pervasive themes within the preflection portion of the student journals. These themes were termed; 1) anticipation, 2) cultural observations, 3) agricultural practices, 4) language barrier, and 5) safety. The pervasive themes identified in the daily journal portions were; 1) travel log, 2) curriculum-based issues, 3) language issues, and 4) cultural observations. In the reflection portion of the student journals, students wrote primarily about; 1) cultural observations, 2) appreciation of their home, and 3) the privileges associated with living in the U.S.

Keywords: International experience, international education, field trip
Introduction
As agriculture changes throughout the world and as policies continue to be created and carried out, it is important for all United States citizens to achieve global awareness (Zhai & Scheer, 2004). Past research has indicated that the United States had entered a global era and responsibility falls on education to prepare people for the world. Today’s agricultural educators must be able to adjust to the constant changes taking place in the agricultural industry. The ultimate goal in higher education is the achievement of sound educational programs. This should be no different in agricultural education programs.

According to Wingenbach, Boyd, and Lindner (2003), it is desirable, and perhaps advantageous, for higher education students to have experiences and first hand knowledge of other countries and cultures. A long term study by Dwyer and Peters (2004) of study abroad participants from the last 50 years provides some very strong indications of extremely positive, personal, educational and career growth among the participants. Many students are reluctant to participate in long-term (semester or summer session) study abroad experiences but are open to short experiences (less than one-week).

Graduate students from a college of agriculture in a southwestern United States university have been taking field trips as a part of a semester long graduate course for four years. The first 3-day, 2-night trip, in 2003, was to Nuevo Casas Grandes in the state of Chihuahua. In 2004 the 4-day, 3-night trip was to Cuauhtemoc also in the state of Chihuahua. The 2005 5-day, 4-night trip was to Ciudad Chihuahua with a side trip to Creel which is located in the western part of Chihuahua. In 2006, the 6-day, 5-night trip was again to Ciudad Chihuahua with a 3-day, 2-night side trip to a ranch belonging the Autonomous University of Chihuahua and to Creel. Each successive year, the trip has expanded to provide students with more diverse agricultural and cultural experiences.

Purpose
The purpose of the paper is to document and report experiences and gains in global awareness of graduate students in a College of Agriculture who participate in a graduate course focusing on human dimension in international agricultural development.

Methods
The first attempt at collecting data associated with these field trips occurred during the 2004 trip. This was done utilizing a post focus group of the participants to gather reflections of the experience and to gather information to see if prior knowledge and perceptions of international agricultural practices had changed.

For the 2005 trip, modified versions of preflective and post-reflective instruments from research regarding international agricultural issues by Elliot and Yanik (2002) and Radhakrishna and Dominguez (1999) were used. Students were also given brief oral qualitative questions following each day of the trip. These comments were recorded in both written and oral form and were coded to ensure study validity.

For the 2006 trip, students were asked to record their expectations of what they expect to experience. Students will be required to keep a journal as course requirement. They have been told in advance that this is a course requirement and that they will be collected read and copied for further study and analysis. The students will be encouraged to express their true feelings, not what they think the professor wants to read. Specific instructions will be provided for daily
reflective writing activities as well as three additional prompts for a pre-reflection essay, an intermediate essay and a post reflection essay.

**Analysis**

This study used a single class to derive thematic meaning from student journaling. Students enrolled in Human Dimensions of International Agricultural Development at a University located in the Southwestern United States were participants of the study.

In order to better evaluate phenomenon in its natural setting, qualitative and case study research have become common in the field of education. Intentions of case study research are not to explain phenomenon, but to evaluate the situation and generate meaning from its context (Gall, Borg, Gall, 1996, p. 549).

**Context for the study**

This study reflected the perceptions of students enrolled in Human Dimensions of International Agricultural Development, and their perceptions of the international experience. The setting for this class was Ciudad Chihuahua and various other locations through the state of Chihuahua. The students participated in a 6-day, 5-night field trip. The students recorded observation, thoughts and feelings through journaling.

**Methods of data collection**

Denzin and Lincoln (1995) explained that in order to be a bricoleur researcher, various methods must be used that develops an intertwined set of methodological practices allowing for a better perception of the subject matter at hand. Due to the need of various methods in interpretive research, triangulation was established in order to analyze the data more effectively. Each student wrote individually wrote in a journal (Denzin & Lincoln, 1995).

Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) state that archived text, or journals offer accurate perspectives of participants at a specific time, eliminating any change of perspective due to post phenomenon experiences. The daily journals of the students were accessed and analyzed for themes related to the sought objectives.

**Limitations**

In order to understand the nature of this study, several limitations were observed. First, sampling techniques used in qualitative studies do not allow application of findings outside of the participants. Furthermore, it can be argued that some students do not portray true feelings when journaling for a course.

**Data analysis**

In qualitative studies, data analysis refers to the categorizing and ordering of information in such a way as to make sense, and to communicate a true and accurate report of the findings (Brink, 1991).

According to Benner (1985), the coding of data by means of open, axial, and selective coding can be used to conduct thematic analysis. Open coding is the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data. After open coding, data can be put together by category. This is called axial coding. After the data is axially coded, it can be put into core categories, or selectively coded, to develop themes that relate to the research at hand (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This study used such coding, resulting in the development of themes.
Once the data was openly coded, axially coded, and selectively coded, emergent themes were documented and listed in order of pervasiveness.

**Control methods**

Control measures are necessary to assure the truthfulness of the results presented. The usual measures of validity and reliability generally accepted in quantitative research are not appropriate for use in phenomenological studies. Nevertheless, steps to minimize errors of interpretation and to control interpretive bias remain important. Qualitative research methods have controls of reliability and validity built into the study design.

Triangulation was used in the design of this study. Emergent themes from the individual student journals were compared. In addition, each author coded all journals to ensure data accuracy. This eliminated weak themes from being used as emergent themes in the findings.

**Findings**

**Preflection**

The most pervasive emergent theme associated with the preflection journaling assignment was *Anticipation*. Most students expressed excitement at the opportunity to travel internationally albeit a simple border crossing into Mexico. A majority of the 14 students enrolled in this class had never been outside the borders of the United States. And most of the students who had traveled internationally had been to tourist destinations such as a resort in Cancun. One student had traveled to China. One student stated; “I am going into this experience with an open expectation that it will be great. I will enjoy it. It will be an experience.”

*Cultural observations* emerged as a theme as well. Student expressed a desire to experience a culture other than their own. Although a hint of concern existed, students seem to recognize the value an importance of cultural experience. One student wrote, “I am concerned about seeing poverty. I know that there is poverty everywhere but seeing it brings to the forefront that we are not doing enough to help each other.” Another wrote, “I think we will be going to a place with people who are in complete poverty. I think there will be many people living on the streets, begging for food and money, and houses will be in complete ruin.”

The third emergent theme dealt with *Agricultural practices*. Students had heard enough in class and had done enough research to form ideas about what kind of agriculture to encounter. Students expected to see farming and ranching practices ranging from very small scale, poorly advanced techniques to very large scale, highly advanced techniques. One student wrote, “I do not believe that their (sic) will be the sophistication of equipment as high as in the U.S.” Another student wrote;

As for production agriculture, I predict that their technology will be significantly behind the United States. Their equipment will not be as advanced. Their production practices will be systems that were utilized in the U.S. 30-50 years ago (if not longer). The amount of acreage farmed by an individual will be extremely small in comparison to the U.S. Their projected yields will also be considerably smaller than yields generated by U.S. producers.

Most students anticipated a *Language barrier*. Of the 14 students on this trip, only one wrote about the language barrier as if it were an opportunity rather than an inconvenience or problem. This student wrote that, “I am looking forward to getting to practice my Spanish. I am
not very good with Spanish but this will give me a chance to practice what I know.” Another student wrote, “Will I be able to communicate?”

The final emergent theme dealt with Safety. Although the locations traveled during this field trip are considered to be some of the safest for tourist, there existed a concern for personal safety. Students had been warned to stay in groups and always be aware of their surroundings as to recognize potential hazards. One student wrote, “I have a lot of apprehension. With the new border policy, will the Mexican people resent us coming to their country?” Another student was very concerned about sanitation.

“I think Mexico is going to be a nasty, nasty place with horrible sanitation issues. I have a fear of getting sick whether it is from food borne illness or some type of bacterial infection. Staying clean is very important to stay healthy. I expect that the public restrooms will not have toilet paper, hand soap, or hand towels.”

Daily journal
The most pervasive emergent theme from the daily journaling portion of the assignment was termed Travel Log. This included normal, typical, everyday traveling issues. Journal entries were made concerning hotel arrangements, awakening, eating, riding, etc. One student wrote, “We ate at Ricky’s Tacos which was a pleasant experience. I especially liked the beans.” While another student wrote, “The food we ate to day was disappointing. We ate at Ricky’s Tacos. It was like a fast food restaurant.”

Many entries were made concerning transportation. A majority of these were unfavorable toward the amount of time spent in the vans. In regard to a side trip to view Cascada Basacheachic, one student wrote; “It sucked bad and seemed to take way longer than the actual two and one-half hours.” Another student writing about the same waterfall said, “I enjoyed seeing the view but it was too much driving around I felt. After the first view we got back into the car and ventured to a different view where it made the trip to the waterfall worth the drive.” The same student observed, “Anyone could see that the trip and the amount of time spent in the van took a toll on the participants of the class.”

Entries concerning hotel accommodations were favorable. A student observed, “I was a little nervous about our hotel, but it ended up being a great hotel with a great view of the city.” One night was spent at the ranch belonging to Universitat Autonomia de Chihuahua (UACH). Students commented about the less than desirable accommodations there but comments were more along the line of observation and less along the line of complaint. One student observed that staying at the ranch was like being at “deer camp.” The students seemed to enjoy the “adventure” of the night spent at the ranch.

The second most pervasive theme was Curriculum-based issues. Journal entries leading to this theme were usually descriptions of the site being visited or toured, a speaker, or observations relating to the purpose of the field trip. This did not include any valuing or cultural or language observations inherent in such observations. These were included under the themes that follow.

One of the purposes of the field trip was to show participants the effect of land reform which resulted in the formation of the Ejido system. The Ejido system has undergone significant change in recent years, but the effects are still very evident. Several students noted the general condition of land that was part of an Ejido. In general, students noted that, “animals on Ejido land looked like they were starving.” Also students noted that, Ejido land was barren, with very poorly maintained fences and buildings. Students also contrasted the condition of Ejido land with
land owned and farmed by the Mennonites in proximity to Chualtemoc, a city of about 200,000
which is located roughly 50 miles west of Ciudad Chihuahua. Students observed that the
Mennonite farmsteads looked like farms one might find in the Midwest. Students noticed and
observed that the Mennonite farms appeared to be better maintained, and more highly productive
than farms situated on Ejido land.

Students made the following observations concerning UACH. A professor presented
information concerning Extension in Mexico. Many students commented concerning the
disconnect between colleges of agriculture and the federal extension service. While visiting
UACH, students observed the school farm. One student wrote, “We enjoyed looking and holding
baby pigs” while another said, “This farm has many possibilities to aide in students understanin
genetics, animal husbandry, and with a few adjustments and rearrangements a teacher could
create test plots for different types of grain or other cash crops of Mexico.”

After visiting various agricultural sites in and around Ciudad Chihuahua, the group
traveled to Chualtemoc to visit other agricultural operations. Students were impressed with the
technology and sophistication that existed at the apple packing plant. One student wrote, “The
packing plant was very modern.” Another visit was to the experiment station, “Once at the
experiment station, we met with another group for the same purpose- to learn about the state’s
agricultural industry and meet with several of the leaders in the agricultural society, mainly those
that worked at the experiment station.”

The third most pervasive theme was Language issues. As evidenced by journal entries,
students seemed to be frustrated with the inability to communicate freely with the people of
Mexico. This included border crossing officials, waiters, waitresses, merchants, and tour
guides/speakers. One student wrote, “At the border, we checked into Mexico having our first
experience with language barriers.” A majority of students found it frustrating to listen to
speakers through interpreters.

Cultural observations was the next most pervasive theme. These included any discussion
involving a cultural setting or circumstance. For example, one student wrote about how the
native indigenous population lived in caves. Students also commented on the practice of
Tarahumara Indian children entering restaurants in Creel to beg for money and to sell small
crafts. Further, students wrote about the style and color of the Tarahumara clothing.

Much of the area around Cuauhtemoc is home to Mennonite people. The student seemed
surprised at encountering anglo appearing people living in the area. They commented on their
command of the Spanish language, the neat and tidy appearance of the Mennonite Campos, and
the apparent productivity of the Mennonite farm land. Much of the business enterprise,
particularly restaurants, grocery stores, and farm equipment store were Mennonite owned and
this caught the attention of students.

Also related to Mexican Culture were comments about the visit to Pancho Villa’s
Mansion in Chihuahua. Students were surprised to learn of the Mexican revolution and how this
was related to land reform and the Ejido system.

Reflection
Students were ask to write a reflection concerning the trip. These quotes are representative of
most of the reflective comments:

“My experiences in Mexico will totally change my impression of cultures and lifestyles.
I feel so privileged to live in the country I live in. I am happy to live in a place where my
education is valued. I am proud to have the opportunities and lifestyle I have in life. I
have also glad to have a valued Extension career where people count on me to help them. The Mexico trip was a great experience for me and I have learned so much I can take back to my career. I have also learned the importance of agricultural globalization.”

Another student wrote:
“I learned that much of the Mexican culture is as modern as ours. They dress pretty much the same, eat the same, and go to the movies the same. There were many theaters in Chihuahua City! There were many newer vehicles on the streets. The people were friendly. They would smile. They were gracious host and represented their country well. I ate good food and drank water and sodas and didn’t get sick. Do I want to go back? No, probably not. There are still places in the U.S. that are that beautiful, that exhilarating and that spectacular that I haven’t seen yet.”

This student commented on the Mexican culture in his reflection.
“T did notice a few mannerisms of the people in Mexico. They are very patient people, this I can only guess as a result of having to wait themselves on certain facets of life that we as Americans are terribly hasty about. Also, the Mexican culture tends to not be a hasty culture. There never seemed to be a rush to anything we did, which was nice for a change. I could definitely notice this aspect when it came to meal times. We would for the most part eat at later times.”

Conclusions
The researchers identified five pervasive themes within the preflection portion of the student journals. These themes were termed; 1) anticipation, 2) cultural observations, 3) agricultural practices, 4) language barrier, and 5) safety. The pervasive themes identified in the daily journal portions were; 1) travel log, 2) curriculum-based issues, 3) language issues, and 4) cultural observations. In the reflection portion of the student journals, students wrote primarily about; 1) cultural observations, 2) appreciation of their home, and 3) the privileges associated with living in the U.S.

When comparing themes from the preflection, daily journal, and reflection portions of the students’ writings, it is apparent that the largest single impact of the field trip was associated with cultural observations. A majority of entries were about culture.

Some students took the opportunity to offer suggestions for improvement of future field trips. Among the most common suggestions was to limit long periods of travel in the vans, spend less time in Chihuahua City and more time in rural areas, and increase the number of agriculturally related visits.

References


