Study Abroad Programs for Adult Learners: The Capacity for Transformative Learning and Challenging Western Perspectives

Juanita Johnson-Bailey, Talmadge C. Guy - University of Georgia

Norvella P. Carter - Texas A&M University

Introduction

As the need for a globally sophisticated citizenry and workforce grows, the demand for Study Abroad programs has emerged as one of the nine top trends in higher education (Dennis, 2003; Lane, 2003). Consequently, there has been a 250 percent increase in the number of United States (U.S.) students completing Study Abroad Programs in the last ten years (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2005; Krisantas, 2005). Study Abroad Programs are defined as all educational programs that take place outside of the geographical boundaries of the country of origin (Kitsantas, 2004). Most Study Abroad Programs typically involve a combination of course work, demonstrations, experiential activities, and tours. Students may choose to participate in programs sponsored by a U.S. college/university, a non-educational organization, or directly in a foreign university; these programs may vary in length from a full year to a semester, or even a mini-semester. However, some reports indicate that students are increasingly interested in short-term (i.e., less than 8 weeks) program models (Arenson, 2003; IIEN, 2005; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005). Students from both public and private institutions are participating in short-term and long-term Study Abroad Programs.

Background on Participant Universities

The University of Georgia was founded in 1785 is one of the nation’s oldest state-chartered land and sea-grant institutions in America. With an enrolment of over 32,000 students, the university is ranked among the nation’s top public research universities. As the state’s flagship university, UGA has a critical role in preparing the next generation of leaders for global competence. To meet these challenges, UGA is committed to offering international Study Abroad experiences. The University of Georgia offers its students over 100 faculty-led Study Abroad group
programs in addition to exchange programs. UGA is also a member of various consortia and is affiliated with organizations that offer many additional programs. However, students are not limited to these opportunities, and can select from many of thousands of programs offered by American universities or directly enrol in a foreign university for a semester, academic year, or summer. With more than 1,400 students participating in Study Abroad Programs in 2004, UGA ranks eighth in the nation among public university’s sending students abroad (IIE, 2004).

The West Africa Study Abroad Program is a short-term interdisciplinary, summer Study Abroad Program that is housed in one of the 15 Colleges at UGA. An interdisciplinary program includes learners from different disciplines that work closely together contributing their knowledge, skill set, and experience to support and enhance the contributions and attributes of each discipline. According to some writers (Creamer 2005; DeZure 1999), interdisciplinary learning is increasing in higher education. The program is open to all undergraduates and graduate students at UGA as well as any institution of higher education in the U.S. The program has been in existence for over a decade and has taken more than 200 students to Ghana from its inception in 2001.

The Southern Africa Study Abroad Program is a short-term, three credit hour Adult Education course that is open to graduate students enrolled at the University. In years past, the program has accepted cohort groups from other universities, including North Carolina State, University of Arkansas, and Texas A&M. Established in 2000, the Adult Education Program continues to work in partnership with the University of Botswana and its faculty to sponsor educational conferences during the two-week duration as part of the scholarly exchange. The two-week intensive Study Abroad Program averages between 10 to 20 students each year and has been offered eight of the past ten years. South Africa and Botswana are visited each time, with visits to the University of Botswana, University of Wittseranrand, University of the Western Cape, as regular stopovers. Each year, other countries in Southern Africa are added in rotation to the tour and these have included Zimbabwe, Zambia, Lesotho, and Namibia.

The second university, Texas A&M University, founded in 1876 was Texas’ first public institution of higher learning and has awarded more than 330,000 degrees since the university opened. It is a land-grant, sea-grant and space-grant institution with an enrollment of more than 48,000 students on its main campus. It ranks as the
nation’s fifth largest university with 9 branch campuses throughout the state. It operates branch campuses globally in the Middle East state of Qatar, Mexico City and Castiglion Fiorentino, Italy. It is one of two flagship universities in Texas and boasts a presidential library and an endowment of more than $5 billion. More than 80% of faculty members hold doctoral degrees and more than 300 hold endowed professorships or chairs. It conducts research valued at more than $500 million annually and stands among the top public universities in national and international rankings.

At Texas A&M University, there are three types of Study Abroad Programs. The first type is a Faculty-Led Program that involves studying at a host institution with a Texas A&M professor and a group of students. The second type is a Reciprocal Exchange program where you enroll at a foreign university and earn A&M credit. The third type is a Transfer Credit Program in which students Study Abroad with an affiliated or non-affiliated program provider. These programs allow students hundreds of Study Abroad opportunities each year.

The Southern Africa Study Abroad Program based at Texas A&M is a graduate only program where participants earned six credit hours in Urban Education. The two-week intensive program features two educational conferences in Soweto, South Africa and in Livingstone, Zambia. In 2010 the Soweto Conference featured two guest speakers from the University of the Witwatersrand, and a South African Civil Rights activist. The Zambian Conference featured a faculty member from the University of Botswana and student presentations.

**Relevant Literature**

As colleges and universities in the U.S. invest heavily in Study Abroad Programs as a major initiative to internationalize their campuses, their emphasis has been on undergraduate education only (Salisbury, Umback, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009). While the infrastructures are elaborate and fairly costly, the return is unknown.

The Institute for the International Education of Students (IES), an international consortium of student abroad schools, developed an IES Model assessment Practice, reports that there are 4 major areas that must be covered and routinely assessed by a Study Abroad Program: the student learning environment, student learning and development of intercultural competence, resources for academic and student support, and program administration and development (Black & Duhon,
Facilitating Transformative Learning in Study Abroad Programs

It is conjectured that Study Abroad Programs will increase social capital and civic engagement. In direct response to these facts, the practitioners designed their Study Abroad African Programs to encourage adults to contribute and connect to others and to use their experience to develop a plan to positively impact a project to
change lives of the disenfranchised learning they will be connecting to as part of their Study Abroad travels. It is of particular note that only one African country, South Africa, falls in the top twenty Study Abroad destinations. Of equal significance is that U.S. minorities, African Americans and Hispanics, are not represented proportionately in Study Abroad Programs. The importance of the programs being discussed at the roundtable is that not only do they feature African countries that are not part of conventional African Study Abroad Programs, but the participants are predominately minorities, especially African Americans.

Since 2000 the writers of this paper have conducted fifteen Study Abroad tours and have found that eight of the 10 phases of transformational learning that were set forth by Mezirow have been particularly pertinent to their students transformational experiences. The phases that have been identified as significant to Study Abroad Programs being discussed were: 1) disorienting dilemma, 2) critical assessment of assumptions, 3) recognition of shared transformative experience with other group members, 4) exploring options for new roles, 5) planning a course of action, 6) acquiring new knowledge and skills for new plans, 7) trying out new roles, and 8) integrating new assumptions based on new perspective.

Of the eight phases recognized by the Study Abroad facilitators as being present among the participant experiences, the most data were generated relative to the disorienting dilemma and using new knowledge to explore options for new roles. These two phases will be explored in this paper and the other six that were seen in the data will be discussed during the roundtable.

While the overall Study Abroad experience is generally seen as a disorienting experience for participants, the adult educators that developed these programs discovered in working with other Study Abroad Programs, as both students and faculty, that the transformative learning experiences were varied and often short lived. The writers of this paper attempted to create a Study Abroad experience that would lead to global engagement and have a long-term impact on students. The phases of Transformative Learning seen in the participants have been routinely manifested by the participants in several different ways. The students, who are required to keep video and paper journals, were open in reporting their biases and fears regarding visiting the Dark Continent. One student wrote: “I have several misconceptions about Africa. African is a continent, not a country, but somehow it is always imagined as one big country. When I picture Africa I see the hungry children..."
with flies around them.” Other disclosures that revealed the students uninformed attitudes concerning modern African society included discussions on their fear of wild animal attacks, questions regarding what kinds of exotic and/or substandard foods they would be forced to consume, and speculations on what kinds of huts would serve as their housing. Through the use of film and readings, the participants discussed their commonly shared negative beliefs and toxic attitudes about the African continent, particularly those on Sub-Saharan African countries.

The disorienting dilemma, the first phase of Mezirow’s stages, occurs most often across the group and is perhaps both generally anticipated, but accepted by both the students and faculty in the Study Abroad Program. The disorienting dilemma begins in Part One of the experience (before leaving the U.S.) and continues throughout the study. However, the gradations of the disorienting dilemma vary according to the participant’s previous experiences and positionality. However, it was noted that the disorientation was most severe with American White student participants who had never been a minority race person over a sustained period of time. In addition to being unsettled by their new minority status, the White American students also reported experiencing discomfort, anxiety, and fear. At the other end of the same continuum were Black African American students who reported feeling a new level of comfort by the occurrence of not being a minority in an environment over a sustained period for the first time and the joy and newness of seeing “that all the people in charge look like me.” Moreover, another interesting point was that process of transformation was not a linear and rational one as described by Mezirow. Even near the programs’ conclusion, participants were having disorienting dilemmas and using their prior experiences to skip the steps that involved shame and guilt, and were instead processing the new data quickly in order to resolve the conflicts and find their way to action. And this is in direct contrast to the Transformative Learning process as presented by Mezirow. One student wrote of her fourth disorienting dilemmas after visiting an orphanage. According to her, each dilemma was different and apart from the others in the experience and the resulting learning and evolution. She wrote of her emotional growth and of the overwhelming sadness:

Do you have joy?
Joy in spite of? What is it to be along?
To have your parents die?
To lose your childhood?
To wonder about your next meal…
Childhood is supposed to be a time of innocence
But happens when innocence is taken?

The participants quickly discovered the common ground of being unsettled by the recognition of the poverty and recent history of segregation that the participants encountered in South Africa. These viewpoints were most readily realized as they visited the Black townships, met with the children at the HIV/AIDS orphanages, met with political activists, and visited the Apartheid Museum. These sites and speakers were chosen with the intention of assuring that the students would not experience the Study Abroad Program as a tourist, but rather as an outsider exploring the inside (Hutchison, & Rea, 2011; Ripple, 2010).
During initial meetings before departing the U.S., the participants begin to engage in: self-examination of their feeling of guilt or shame regarding Africa, an assessment of their socio-cultural assumptions regarding Africa, Mezirow’s second, third, and fourth phases. But after the disorientation, the next most often documented steps were the exploration of the participants’ options for establishing a proactive stance towards Africa and their desire to use new knowledge to implement courses of action, Phases Five and Six. One graduate student wrote in her journal:

A moment of sadness has come as I realize I am ending a journey, a journey that has been emotionally charged, and a journey that has challenged me. It has called into question that I am, who I want to be, and what I want my impact to be. The answers will go unknown until I return to my life. Does my life look different, a day, a month, a year, a decade from this day? This time? Do I remember and implement the lessons learned? Hopefully I will carry this with me forever. Hopefully I grow and learn with each moment and time. The tears fall, but this is not the end. It is a beginning. I have changed. I have begun again, a metamorphosis.

One absolute condition of the participation in the Study Abroad is the Full Heart, Empty Suitcase Principle, which requires that a stipulation of involvement is that the student takes two suitcases on their trip, one whose contents are to be left behind. According to the group decision, the contents can be books, clothing, toiletries, toys, or medicines. In most years, the groups have elected to visit an orphanage in the township of Soweto that cares for children who have been orphaned by the high
death rate that has ravaged many South Africans. Some visits have included high schools in Soweto and literacy programs in Soweto.

The second part of the Study Abroad Program, the Ground Experience, includes working with a Non-Government Agency (NGO), TALK (Teaching African Language and Talk Knowledge) to learn and to become oriented to the African culture (Hartford, 2011; Ripple, 2010). This technique is employed to encourage critical reflection (Brookfield, 1995) which will support the process of transformation, and to avoid the students from being ugly Americans, a term used to refer to perceptions of arrogant behavior by Americans abroad. Using a theoretical frame grounded in Transformative Learning Theory, the adult educators work with the students to challenge assumptions, through critically reflecting in their journals (Hutchinson & Rea, 2011) and through daily debriefing group meetings. In the program, students are coached on the conversational styles of Southern African culture, informed how to avoid common cultural clashes, instructed on manners (issues such as proper dress, appropriate greetings, and African handshakes), and introduced to the Southern Africa cuisine.

An absolute directive of their Program is, Scholar Traveler/Not Tourist, so named as a constant reminder that the purpose is to learn and appreciate indigenous knowledge. The pursuit of African knowledge is operationalized by working with African scholars as subject matter experts, visits to women’s cooperatives, such as the Oodi Weavers, research exchanges through a day of presentations by Study Abroad students and students and faculty from African universities, with whom the sponsoring university has Memorandums of Understanding (MOU), visits to museums determined by the African scholars (Ripple, 2010), and interactions with African citizens who were leaders in anti-racists social justice organizations.

Patten and Peters (2001) suggested that in planning an international program one should blend lecture and structured presentations to enhance the students’ academic experience. This recommendation was of utmost importance in planning the WASAP. As a result, the program collaborates with four institutions of higher education, a junior-secondary school, and a senior-secondary school in various cities in Ghana to provide an academically sound experience. An exchange of lectures and presentations, and discussions are engaged jointly with American and Ghanaian scholars and students. Local community agencies provide an outlet for additional
educational activities. Learning activities include daily journaling, course lectures and presentations, tours (cultural, educational, and historical), and service learning. There were several important adult education principles that were common across the programs being presented that distinguished the programs as different from the typical undergraduate experience. Adults were allowed to handle their own funds and were allowed participation choices, particularly around events like church attendance or programs that might have been considered political in nature. More importantly, there were experiences built into the Study Abroad Programs that encouraged transformation. For example, there were regular debriefings and lengthy question and answer sessions with the speakers. In addition, the educators built in time for critical reflection and intermittently distributed questions that promoted critical thinking. And finally, the faculty modeled active sustained involvement with the staff and with the African programs visited, with the invitation extended to the participants to find a method that would foster their own independent association with the African communities included in the Program.

Overall Study Abroad Programs to Africa provide the conditions to enable a transformative learning experience for Study Abroad participants. These conditions include cultural, linguistic, and epistemological factors. However, what is necessary to optimize the chances for learners to experience transformational learning is to provide structured opportunities for reflection, engagement, and community – all of which – or any of which can trigger a shift in perspective about identity, racism, colonialism, privilege work.

References


Lane, K. (2003, December) Reports, educators call for more study-abroad programs. Community College Week, p.3, 14.