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Virtually There: Examining a Collaborative Online International Learning Pre-Departure Study Abroad Intervention

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VIRTUALLY THERE:

EXAMINING A COLLABORATIVE ONLINE INTERNATIONAL LEARNING

PRE-DEPARTURE STUDY ABROAD INTERVENTION

BY

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Abstract
As more guided study abroad interventions move online and into a collaborative format, it is important to not only examine the influence of students’ social interactions as related to their intercultural development and experiences in the interventions, but also understand which variables influenced the success of an intervention. The purpose of this study was to identify factors that influenced students’ intercultural development and experiences in a collaborative online international learning pre-departure study abroad intervention. To explore these questions I designed a collaborative online international learning intervention for pre-departure study abroad students.

Pre-departure U.S. study abroad students and international students coming to study abroad in the U.S. attended an online, collaborative seminar together over the course of six weeks in the fall and five weeks in the spring. Garrison et al.’s (2000) Community of Inquiry model influenced the seminar design and data analysis. A mixed-methods approach was used to gather data needed to study the intervention outcomes. Data was obtained from: (1) a needs assessment; (2) pre and post IDI® scores from intervention and comparison groups; (3) focus groups; and (4) online discussions. The three forms of data analysis used in this study, the IDI®, Community of Inquiry framework, and phenomenological review of participants’ text, provided a layered understanding of the research questions. Data analysis suggested that designing and
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sustaining a successful Community of Inquiry, as well as a successful online collaborative learning environment, is not without its challenges. This research demonstrated several technical and social challenges of building a Community of Inquiry and how a redesign of an intervention can influence outcomes. Several challenges of collaborative learning and creating online communities identified in Computer-supported collaborative learning research were also apparent in this study. Overall, this study underscored several variables that influence learning outcomes and experiences within a collaborative online international learning intervention.
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Sweet is the melody, so hard to come by.
It's so hard to make every note bend just right.
You lay down the hours and leave not one trace,
But a tune for the dancing is there in its place.
(Iris Dement, 1994)

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Chapter One: Introduction

A university study abroad experience, in the broadest sense, is an educational program that takes place outside the geographical boundaries of a student’s academic country of origin (Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001). The Institute of International Education (IIE) (2011) reported that there has been a steady increase in the number of American university students studying abroad over the last 20 years. Since the 1989/1990 academic year, the number of students participating in study abroad programs has tripled. Increasing nearly four percent from the previous academic year, 270,604 university students participated in a study abroad program for academic credit during the 2009/2010 academic year (IIE, 2011).

Statement of the Research Problem

Education abroad professionals, individuals that facilitate such experiences, historically believed that study abroad participants automatically gained global competencies, such as intercultural communication skill, and become more culturally aware simply by being abroad (La Brack, 1994). Based on recent studies (Paige, Cohen, & Shively, 2004; Cohen, Paige, Shively, Emert, & Hoff, 2005; Ingraham & Petersen, 2004; Shaheen, 2004; Vande Berg, 2009; Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009), we now know that this is not the case. Education abroad professionals face a fundamental challenge when sending students to learn outside the country. The duality of study abroad is that it can be a source of tension and conflict as well as an enriching experience and opportunity for personal growth (Fennes & Hapgood, 1997). Cultural differences, values, beliefs, and norms, can lead to cross-cultural misinterpretations. These differences are factors that can not only impede communication, but also affect a person’s ability to adapt cross-culturally, gain global competencies, and attain greater intercultural development. Study abroad participants need to receive guided education and training so that they may
successfully navigate new cultures, in addition to learning to recognize and understand their own cultural beliefs and values as related to their experiences abroad (Paige, 1993).

To mitigate the dualistic challenge of studying abroad some programs offer intercultural interventions pre, during, or after the study abroad experience. Access to a diverse set of technological tools has enabled more and more of these interventions to be offered online. Diverse in their curricula and use of technology, online interventions include GlobaLinks’ Learning Abroad program on global citizen development, the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities course on global identities, Willamette-Bellarmine Universities’ joint course on intercultural skills development, and the University of the Pacific School for International Studies’ What’s Up With Culture website, among others (GlobaLinks, 2012; University of Minnesota: Learning Abroad Center, 2012; Lou & Bosley, 2008; La Brack, 2003). Although several studies of online interventions explore changes in students’ intercultural development, no study examines the influence of students’ social interactions as related to their intercultural development and experiences in the online intervention (University of Minnesota: Learning Abroad Center, 2012; Lou & Bosley, 2008; Romero, 2005).

**Purpose of the Study**

This study was an exploration into a collaborative online international learning pre-departure study abroad intervention. The purpose of this study was to identify factors that influence pre-departure study abroad students’ intercultural development and experiences in an online intervention. Understanding these factors on a deeper level will help education abroad professionals design more effective online interventions for pre-departure study abroad students. The research questions posed were: (a) what is the influence of a collaborative online international learning intervention on pre-departure study abroad students’ intercultural
development; (b) how do social interactions influence pre-departure study abroad students’ experiences within the intervention; and (c) what are the affordances and constraints of collaborative learning in an online, international intervention?

To explore these questions I designed a collaborative online international learning intervention for pre-departure study abroad students. The intervention’s academic themes include study abroad preparedness and intercultural communication theories. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer’s (2000) Community of Inquiry model is used to guide the intervention analysis. The goals of this study were to explore the influence of social interactions in a collaborative online pre-departure intervention as related to students’ intercultural development and their experiences within the intervention, as well as to understand the affordances and constraints of this type of intervention.
Chapter Two: Review of Literature

To understand the need for this line of inquiry, an overview of intercultural development and outcome assessment is provided, as well as a summary of key studies on guided and online interventions. Print and online publications, primarily published after 2000, were reviewed. Articles were sourced from well-known peer-reviewed journals, such as the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, the *Journal of Studies in International Education*, and *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*. NAFSA: The Association of International Educators, the education abroad professional organization’s website, was also scanned for applicable webinars, training materials, and conference proceedings. Several older articles and doctoral dissertations were included to provide further context to the literature review.

There are few studies in the field of education abroad that examine technology and intercultural development or computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) within the field of education abroad. Literature from online learning and transnational classroom education provide necessary context to the technological challenges of collaborative online interventions, as well as how technology is being used to promote intercultural engagement. This research was obtained from *Computer Assisted Language Learning* and the *Journal of Research in International Education*, among others. Finally, research pertaining to CSCL draws on a growing body of research available in journals such as the *International Journal of Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning*, the *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, and *Educational Technology Research and Development*. The review ends with an examination of Garrison et al.’s (2000) Community of Inquiry model as a framework to analyze social experiences that influence intercultural development and the students’ experiences in the online
environment, as well as why it is an appropriate theoretical framework to use when exploring the research questions.

**Intercultural Development**

Intercultural awareness is a process of growth and development that is acquired as a person comes to understand and accept cultural differences encountered at home and abroad. As the field of education abroad shifts from a teaching-centered to a learning-centered paradigm, educators have come to learn that knowledge of a culture does not equate with cultural competence and being in the vicinity of a culture does not automatically lead to intercultural development (Bennett, 2008). The premise of intercultural learning assumes that fear of the “other” and cultural differences are surmountable and that encountering cultural differences leads to cultural development (Fennes & Hapgood, 1997). Studying abroad is a time to experience personal growth, stemming from interactions with host nationals, navigating a new culture, and confronting differing beliefs and values. Such encounters can often prove frustrating, confusing, and disheartening for a time. It is through repeated encounters with such experiences that students have the opportunity to navigate cultural differences, thus forming the foundation for further intercultural development (Savicki, 2008).

To gain intercultural awareness and to be an effective intercultural communicator, students must possess competencies that aid in understanding different cultures and facilitate transcending boundaries, as well as the desire to engage intercultural competencies to bridge cultural divides. Noted intercultural communications theorist Ting-Toomey (1999) identified several essential characteristics necessary for intercultural awareness, among them a high tolerance for ambiguity, the ability to manage stress, adaptability, and sensitivity. The development of intercultural knowledge and skills allows students to better interact with other
cultures (Brockington, Hoffa, & Martin, 2005). Increasingly, study abroad program interventions are purposely designed to help students achieve greater intercultural development (Vande Berg, 2009). When students receive intercultural training, it aids them in acquiring the skills that can help them navigate new cultures successfully, as well as helps them to recognize and understand their own cultural beliefs and values (Paige, 1993).

**Measuring Outcomes**

Measuring the success of study abroad is becoming an increasingly important matter for education abroad professionals; however, assessing the impact and value of a transformative experience presents many challenges (de Witt, 2009). Concepts key to transformational learning, including cultural awareness and adaptability, self-awareness, flexibility, and autonomous learning, are central to the growth of study abroad students, yet are difficult to ascertain and assess (Savicki, 2008). In an attempt to quantify learning outcomes stemming from intercultural experiences, a number of scales were created, such as the Beliefs, Events, and Values Inventory (BEVI), the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Index (CCAI), the Intercultural Development Inventory® (IDI®), and the Global Competencies Inventory (GCI) (Shealy, 2010; Kelley & Meyers, 1995; Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003; Mendenhall, Stevens, Bird, & Oddou, 2008). Such scales are often used in conjunction with an intervention to further students' intercultural development (Vande Berg, Quinn, & Menyhart, 2012).

A number of early studies were conducted on outcomes of study abroad indicating increased interpersonal skills in study abroad returnees, increased foreign language capabilities, and an increased interest in global affairs, as well as increased personal autonomy, independence, and self-confidence (Kauffmann, Martin & Weaver, 1992; Wilson, 1994). Later studies examined the effects of study abroad on intercultural development, intercultural sensitivity,
knowledge and skills, and academic outcomes (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006; Rexeisen, Anderson, Lawton, & Hubbard, 2008; Engle & Engle, 2004; Patterson, 2006; Sutton & Rubin, 2004). These studies represent what is evident in the larger body of research on the intercultural development outcomes of study abroad students, which suggest that exposure to another culture is a necessary, although not always sufficient condition, for intercultural learning. The studies also highlight the challenges of ensuring that students achieve gains in intercultural development due to study abroad participation.

**Guided Intervention**

Research demonstrates that contact with other cultures does not automatically lead to intercultural competence (Cohen et al., 2005; Paige et al., 2004; Engle & Engle, 2004; Vande Berg et al., 2009; Vande Berg, 2009). The Georgetown Consortium study was designed to test the assumption that students abroad automatically achieve gains in foreign language acquisition and intercultural development. One of the purposes of the Georgetown Consortium study was to examine outcomes of study abroad students as compared to non-study abroad students (Vande Berg et al., 2009; Vande Berg, 2009). The researchers studied nearly 1,300 students across three colleges attending 61 study abroad programs, which included 190 host institutions abroad and several study abroad provider programs. Two learning domains were researched: foreign language oral proficiency and gains in intercultural development. Pre and post IDI® scores were collected from all students. The research team concluded that significant relationships existed between several factors and impacted students’ intercultural development. Factors included second language acquisition, pre-departure orientation, and content courses taught in the host language. The study also found statistically significant positive intercultural development remained five months after students returned from abroad. Between pre- and post-tests, study
abroad students made further progress on the IDI® continuum than the control group; however, some study abroad students achieved lower IDI® scores than the control group because, when left to their own devices, they failed to experience successful immersion within the host culture (Vande Berg et al., 2009). Significant IDI® gains were also seen when (a) study abroad students took courses in the target language; (b) when their classes were not made up of an entirely host student population; (c) when students received cultural mentoring on-site; (d) when students felt that the host culture was different from their own; and (e) when students did not only spend time with other U.S. study abroad students (Vande Berg et al., 2009).

By examining pre and post IDI® results and comparing the scores with a list of program factors, researchers were able to tap into some of the factors that helped and hindered students’ intercultural development. Based on the data gathered, Vande Berg et al. (2009) emphasized the importance of an on-site “cultural mentor” as potentially “the single most important intervention to improve student intercultural learning abroad” (p. 25). This large-scale study demonstrated that exposure to another culture is a necessary, although not always sufficient condition, for intercultural learning (Vande Berg et al, 2009).

Comprehensive, facilitated programming in study abroad programs is essential if students are to gain intercultural awareness (Deardorff, 2008). To address this challenge, several study abroad programs have designed interventions for students abroad. Studies into interventions have demonstrated that study abroad students achieve greater gains in intercultural development as indicated by the IDI® when interventions are applied (Engle & Engle, 2004; Vande Berg et al., 2009; Vande Berg, 2009). Interventions manifest as pre-departure and on-site training sessions designed to facilitate students’ study abroad experiences and may include training in intercultural coping skills, theories about culture, and how to transfer theoretical knowledge into
real world situations (Paige et al., 2004; Cohen et al., 2005; Engle & Engle, 2004; Lou & Bosley, 2008; Romero, 2005; Shaheen, 2004).

Two of the early studies that examine the quantitative and qualitative benefits of guided intervention are the Maximizing Study Abroad study (Paige et al., 2004; Cohen et al., 2005) and the American University Center of Provence study (Engle & Engle, 2004). Around the same time as the Georgetown Consortium study, Paige et al. (2004) were developing and testing a comprehensive pre/during/post study abroad intervention. The study was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the Maximizing Study Abroad Students’ Guide as a curricular intervention to aid in second language acquisition, intercultural development, and culture learning strategies. Treatment and control samples included a randomized mix of 86 students from seven Minnesota area colleges and universities enrolled in study abroad programs in one of 13 Spanish or French speaking countries. Research instruments utilized included a background questionnaire, an exit language profile, interviews, and a pre and post IDI®. Overall, quantitative results did not indicate statistically significant changes between treatment and control groups; however, students who received the treatment did attain statistically significant positive changes in their pre and post IDI® scores. Qualitative data also suggested that the treatment had positive effects on students’ study abroad experiences (Paige et al., 2004; Cohen et al., 2005).

Other studies further demonstrated the connection between a well-designed guided intervention and positive intercultural development. Engle and Engle (2004) researched a study abroad intervention targeted towards advanced French speakers and located at the American University Center of Provence (AUCP). The student population included American university students from a number of public and private institutions, all with high admissions standards. A long-standing program abroad, the AUCP already had components of a guided intervention in
place, among them a 15-week core course, *French Cultural Patterns*, experiential activities, individual housing with local families, and facilitated contact with the local community. The researchers administered the IDI® to yearlong and semester students as a pre-test and post-test measure to evaluate whether the *French Cultural Patterns* intervention had an influence on students’ intercultural development. Results indicated that students’ arrived with an average developmental orientation (DO) score of 19. Both groups demonstrated significant gains on the IDI® post-test. Engle and Engle’s (2004) research provides a concrete example of the correlation between program design and quantifiable results, as well as how a thoughtfully designed on-site guided intervention can positively influence students’ intercultural development.

These early studies were some of the first to suggest to researchers and practitioners alike that intervening in the learning of study abroad students is necessary if students are to make significant gains in intercultural development. The Engle and Engle (2004) study highlighted how an intervention influences development on-site while the Maximizing Study Abroad study (Paige et al., 2004) depicted a multiphase, self-study approach. Their results underscored that although authentic contact with the host country paired with guided intervention is a critical component of intercultural development, implementation is extremely complex.

**Online interventions and study abroad.** In 2011, one third of the global population was online, and 45 percent of those Internet users were under the age of 25 (International Telecommunication Union, 2011). In the U.S. alone over 6.1 million students enrolled in at least one online class during the fall 2010 term, an increase of 10.1 percent over the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2011). The use of technology to create a virtual classroom serves as a medium for intercultural development because it affords the opportunity to make visible
(explicit) aspects of culture that are usually invisible (implicit). Websites and learning management systems (LMS) are some of the ways that researchers and practitioners are using technology to promote intercultural development.

Although affording participants flexible access, providing unguided intercultural training tools online does not necessarily produce positive intercultural development. Romero (2005) examined the influence of the *What’s Up With Culture* self-guided, computer-supported online intervention on study abroad students’ cross-cultural learning (La Brack, 2003). Designed for study abroad students at all program phases, the *What’s Up With Culture* website is an independent, self-paced tool that features some of the standard intercultural communication and adjustment models. The site is segmented into pre-departure, while abroad, and returned phases and includes a variety of small activities to promote understanding (La Brack, 2003). Romero’s (2005) study measured the value of the *What’s Up With Culture* website as an orientation and training tool for study abroad students. Through e-journal entries, self-reports, and the administration of a post-program survey to 15 fall semester students attending a variety of Lexia International study abroad programs, Romero (2005) gathered students’ interpretations of their general cross-cultural understanding, adjustment, and ability to communicate. By comparing e-journals of sample and comparison population, Romero determined that use of the tool positively influenced students’ feelings of preparedness. Students reported that the tool helped them ‘unpack’ their experiences abroad. Despite positive self-reports, there were no substantial changes in students’ cross-cultural adjustment or communications abilities (Romero, 2005). Romero’s (2005) research provides an initial look into one of the first self-guided interventions available freely on the Internet.
Combining an online intervention with guided support can facilitate positive intercultural development. Lou and Bosley’s research (2008) provides an alternative model to an online, computer-supported intervention. Rather than an informal, self-guided approach, Lou and Bosley (2008) designed a formal, online course administered while students studied abroad. With its foundations in a mid-1990’s email correspondence course, this intervention combined students from the home university studying abroad with international degree-seeking students studying at the home university in a three-part (pre/during/post), credit bearing course designed to promote the growth of intercultural skills (Bosley, 2012). Home-based instructors facilitate the course, designed to take advantage of the laboratory of the other culture through a series of experiential and reflective writing assignments (Lou & Bosley, 2008). This ethnographic participant-observer model was designed to support the following learning goals: (a) “to understand the advantages and disadvantages of cultural study, including the contrast of internal versus eternal perspectives and the concept of critical self-consciousness; (b) to encourage critical thinking about culture and to develop perspective-taking abilities; (c) to examine similarities and dissimilarities between and within cultures; and (d) to explore forces that contribute to the development and changes of cultures…” (Lou & Bosley, 2008, p. 278). Visible to both instructors and peers, students were required to write weekly reflections, post them on the home university’s Blackboard site, then review and provide feedback on their peers’ posts (Lou & Bosley, 2008). An added benefit of the asynchronous learning environment, participants had more time to read, digest, formulate responses, and provide feedback than in a synchronous classroom environment (Hmelo-Silver, 2006; Hartman, 2010). Also, instructors were able to engage individuals and multiple groups to provide guidance and purposefully targeted intervention (Lou & Bosley, 2008).
The IDI® was used as a pre- and post-test, as well as a development tool for instructors. Instructors were aware of each student’s individual IDI® scores, allowing them to provide feedback at the appropriate developmental level. Early assignments focused on the concept of self through activities such as culture shock reflections, cultural bump explorations, and experiential learning cycle activities. The remaining assignments moved students towards achieving the learning goals by conducting experiential and research based assignments involving the other. Quantitative and qualitative results indicate that students made positive progress in intercultural development. Students’ writing over time demonstrated increased intercultural sensitivity and openness towards cultural differences, and post-test IDI® scores indicated an increase between a few points to 14 points beyond pre-test scores (Lou & Bosley, 2008). Overall, gains in participants’ IDI® scores, coupled with the change over time in students’ writing, suggest a successful intervention.

Technology as a Tool for Intercultural Exchange

A study abroad experience is not a reality for many students due to cost, academic inflexibility, or other barriers (Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009). Perhaps the greatest affordance of a virtual classroom is the ability to transcend geographic boundaries in an efficient, cost-effective way. CSCL tools allow students to collaborate beyond the constraints of time and space, as well as access resources and interact with individuals from other cultures without leaving home (Lajoie, Garcia, Berdugo, Márquez, Espíndola, & Nakamura, 2006). Cunningham (2009) and West (2010) suggest that by connecting domestic and international students, the likelihood of critical thinking and reflection on the nature of the other is increased. Course discussion can be enriched by the diversity in opinions, experiences, and cultures of the
individuals, which brings deeper insight and awareness to intercultural issues (Cunningham, 2009; West, 2010).

Recent advances in technology provide a wide body of tools and resources that can promote learning and communication with a wider world (Bryant, 2006). Tools include blogs, wikis, social bookmarking and pinning, instant messaging, Skype, and social networking, among others (Bryant, 2006; Bell, Keegan, & Zaitseva, 2008). Online learning management systems (LMS), which often incorporate one or several of these tools, are one of the ways that researchers and practitioners are using technology to promote intercultural exchange. Quite often, virtual tools are used to supplement or replace an often difficult to come by real international experience, where real indicates a student leaving his or her home country in search of an experience abroad (Bell, Keegan, & Zaitseva, 2008).

**Connecting Online Guided Interventions and CSCL**

Despite the existence of online, guided interventions there is little research in the field of education abroad that examines the influence of collaborative learning in guided study abroad interventions. The Center for Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) (2012) at the State University of New York (SUNY) Global Center provides a rich set of resources for educators interested in creating virtual intercultural opportunities for their students; however, courses produced in collaboration with the COIL center focus mostly on academic courses outside the scope of study abroad. Sample courses include *Cross Cultural Video Production*, *Global Workplace: Intercultural Virtual Team Communication Project*, and *Social Control* (Rubin, n.d.; Dorazio, n.d.; Little, Titarenko, & Bergelson, n.d.). The literature on study abroad interventions examines learning outcomes, guided intervention, and methods of assessment. It does not explore peer interaction within interventions or collaborative intervention design, nor