

論文

## The Importance of Reflection in Study Abroad

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The goal of Study Abroad programmes, from an educational perspective, is for participants to learn from their sojourn in a new and different environment. This paper will examine the pre-requisites for such learning, in particular the crucial role of reflection in the learning process, and suggest some practical measures for enhancing the learning opportunities offered by Study Abroad programmes.

It is important to note that what is being discussed here is not the formal learning opportunities that arise from enrolment in classes at an overseas university. Mechanisms for the transfer of credit between universities are designed to ensure that formal learning is as similar as possible, in content if not in style, to courses students would have taken if they had remained at their home university. Potential differences in course style, together with differences in the physical, social and conceptual environment at and around the host institution, constitute possibilities for informal learning which are far richer and more extensive than those afforded by the formal curriculum.

Consequently, it is important that Study Abroad programme participants should be both primed for informal learning before their programme begins and supported in their informal learning during and after the programme. Failure to provide such priming and support would seriously undermine the educational potential of Study Abroad.

### Reflection and Learning

Informal learning, or learning from observation and experience, is an area of scholarly investigation which has generated a rich literature, dating back to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. 2000), but the most widely respected model has emerged, since the 1970s from the work of David A. Kolb under the title "Experiential Learning" (1984). Kolb draws on work by Dewey (2009), Lewin (1946) and Piaget (1977) to produce a four-stage, cyclical model of Experiential Learning (see Figure 1).

Kolb's cycle begins when the learner experiences something new and noteworthy. The learner then reflects on the experience, placing it in the context of previous experiences, resulting in an abstract conceptualisation of the experience, often in the form of a testable hypothesis. The learner then manipulates the environment, or conducts further observations to test out the hypothesis. The experimentation/observation generates further novel experiences and the cycle begins

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again, generating conceptualisations that correspond more and more closely to the environment. This, in Kolb's terms, is learning.

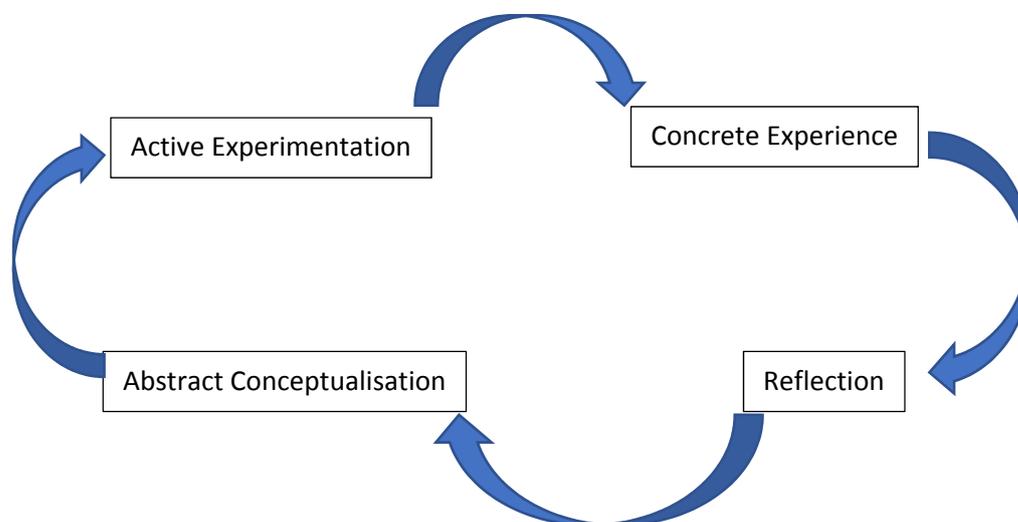


Figure 1. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. Based on Kolb (1984).

To take a practical example from a Study Abroad programme: a student from Japan studying in Australia notices her host mother appears rather concerned about the student's consumption of water for her daily shower (concrete experience). The student reflects on this experience, which is unlike her own mother's attitude to water consumption in Japan. She remembers from Social Studies lessons that Australia has a dry climate and much of the country is desert (reflection). She wonders if Australians tend to view water a scarce commodity (abstract conceptualisation) and looks for other evidence that this might be true (experimentation). Next day, she notices the very high price of bottled drinking water in a convenience store. This observation than leads to further reflections, conceptualisations and experiments on Australian attitudes to water and, possibly, other natural resources. At the same time, she continues to examine her own attitude to water.

What is clear from Kolb's model is that, for learning to occur, experience alone is not enough. In order to learn from experience, we must reflect on it. Experience without reflection is not learning.

### Reflection and Study Abroad

This assertion resonates with an emerging consensus among scholars who work with Study Abroad students in (and from) the United States. Both Vande Berg, Paige, and Lou (2012a) and Bennett (2012) refer to a paradigm shift in the field over the last hundred years, away from a positivistic or Newtonian paradigm to a relativistic one and from there to a constructivist one. The positivistic paradigm emphasises the importance of experience, of "being there," of having direct encounters with the new environment; it provides the theoretical basis for the "Grand Tour" approach to Study Abroad, where going to places and seeing what they are like provides the core experience. Both

relativistic and constructivist paradigms assert that just “being there” is not enough for learning to occur; learning, under these paradigms, occurs when experience leads to reflection. In the case of relativism, this reflection on how and why the new environment differs from a more familiar environment and, with a constructivist approach, it is reflection on how the new environment impacts the student’s view of the world and his/her own identity.

What is particularly interesting about this shift from “experience” to “experience + reflection” is that it has come about less from changes in theoretical viewpoints than it has from the empirical experience of people whose job is to advise Study Abroad students. As Vande Berg, Paige, and Lou (each of whom has long experience of “foreign student advising”) report: “Not all faculty and staff are convinced . . . that most students are more or less automatically gaining the sorts of knowledge, perspectives, and skills that are important for living and working in a global society merely through being exposed to the new and different in another country” (2012a, p. 5). They go on (Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012b) to advocate a constructivist approach to preparing students to study abroad, including long and frequent opportunities to reflect on the experience of “being there.”

### **Reflection and Learning**

Further support for the centrality of reflection in learning from new experiences comes from the emerging field of Mind, Brain, and Education, which seeks to apply the lesson of Psychology and Neuroscience to education. After an extensive review of the literature in each of these fields (Psychology, Neuroscience, and Education), a panel of distinguished scholars divided their findings into four groups (Tokuhamma-Espinosa, 2011): (A) what is well-established; (B) what is probably so; (C) what is intelligent speculation and (D) what is popular misconception. Among the “probably true” group is the finding that:

B1. Human brains seek out and quickly detect novelty  
(Tokuhamma-Espinosa, 2011, p. 78).

As well as explaining much of the motivation for studying abroad in the first place, this finding goes some way to explaining how the brain functions in Study Abroad contexts: it seeks out new things and new experiences. Scholars have suggested that this instinct developed, in evolutionary terms, as a way of dealing with hostile environments in which what is new or different could very well be lethal, too (Balderston, Schultz, & Helmstetter, 2011). Coupled with the brain’s dopamine-reward system, which releases pleasure chemicals to reinforce desirable, in this case, species-saving behaviours, this instinct now provides the basis for human learning (Wise, 2004).

Being drawn to novelty in itself, however, is only the beginning of the learning process. Once the brain has taken note of difference it then seeks to make sense of it. Here, a number of the findings of Tokuhamma-Espinosa’s (2011) panel are relevant:

B19. The search for meaning is innate in human nature.

A5. Connecting new information to prior learning facilitates learning.

B2. Human brains seek patterns upon which they predict outcomes.

(p. 78)

These three findings, combined, constitute a powerful statement for the centrality of reflection: having found an anomaly, the brain does not rest until it has found a way to make sense of it by integrating it into previous learning. The process of integration involves both viewing the novelty in the light of previous experience and modifying understandings of previous experiences in order to accommodate the novel experience. Among the results of this process are a new understanding of the anomalous experience, usually in the form of a hypothesis that can be tested against future experience (see Kolb's model, above) and a new understanding of a world that includes the (previously) anomalous experience. This second new understanding constitutes the "pattern" referred to in Tokuhama-Espinosa's panel's B2): a pattern which can be used to predict future experiences and prepare the brain to deal with them. This process of making sense is rewarded by a further shot of dopamine to thrill the student's body and encourage future sense-making reflection (Wise, 2004).

This learning process is not only natural and self-rewarding, there is also evidence that its lessons are stronger and clearer than those taught by teachers and textbooks in more formal learning contexts. To quote Tokuhama-Espinosa's (2011) panel:

B16. When knowledge is actively constructed by a learner, the learner will be motivated and engaged in learning.

(p. 78)

### **Reflection and Cognition**

Lewis and Durrant (2011) offer an understanding of the kind of processing involved when the brain turns individual events into a pattern on which to base predictions of future events. They give the example of a birthday party. A person may experience many different kinds of birthday party. In order to form a pattern from these experiences, the brain needs to strip away the non-standard elements from each experience in order to arrive at a common core of events that can be used to identify a gathering as a birthday party and to predict what is likely to happen at such a gathering. The standard core may consist of a cake, presents, smiles, congratulations and food that is rarely eaten on other occasions. Having this pattern in mind can help the person to avoid, for example, the embarrassment of turning up without a present or looking too sombre. Should the owner of the brain subsequently study abroad in, say, Mexico and attend a number of birthday parties there, their pattern for birthday parties may need to be modified to include the possibility of a piñata.

While Lewis and Durrant present this idea as a hypothesis still waiting for empirical verification, it is clear that some such process must be responsible for the ability to turn discreet experiences into models and patterns, the stage of Kolb's model (above) labelled as "Abstract Conceptualisation." It is equally clear that this kind of cognitive activity could not occur without reflection: it is necessary to reflect on an experience in order to extract any kind of essence from it.

Moving deeper into the cognitive processes, Clark's (2015) model of the role of prediction in both thought and action underlines the importance of the patterns or models resulting from the synthesis of multiple experiences. Clark claims that the ability to predict what will happen next is the basis not only for our understanding of the world but also of our ability to act in the world. The brain has been characterised as a "prediction machine" (Chennu et al, 2013), existing solely to provide predictions about what is likely to happen next: to make those predictions, it relies on patterns constructed from myriad discreet experiences, taking note only when a new experience fails to conform to what has been predicted from existing patterns. The "error message" (Clark, 2015) arising from a mis-match between prediction and reality is then used to modify the pattern in order to make more accurate predictions in the future.

Needless to say, this process of "prediction–error message–modified pattern–modified prediction" is both cyclical and ongoing, operating continually as the brain gathers more information by experiencing its environment. An understanding of this process is particularly relevant to Study Abroad as the whole point of Study Abroad is to place the brain in a novel environment, one that will challenge the brain's ability to make sense of it. The sheer number of novel experiences provided by the first few hours and the extra work the brain has to do to make sense of them is one of the explanations of why the first hours and days in new surroundings can be so tiring.

Clark's "error messages" and the process they entail are largely unconscious, though Kahneman (2013) does suggest that some disconfirmations of expectations are so large and disconcerting that they lead to the brain being engaged on a conscious level. Interestingly, Lewis and Durrant (2011) propose their theory of pattern building in the context of sleep research, suggesting that much of this processing occurs while the body is resting. Sleep scientists have long known that the brain is more active when its owner is asleep than awake (Lewis, 2014); Lewis and Durrant suggest that the consolidation of memory (reflection) is one of the things that keep the brain so active. However, the evidence of the Study Abroad advisers (Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012b) suggests that there is much to be gained by helping Study Abroad students make at least some of these thought processes conscious.

### **Impediments to Reflection**

Not reflecting on experience during Study Abroad can have many causes and take several forms. The natural tiredness incurred by travelling to a new place and settling into circumstances necessarily different from home (Gilme, 2013) can be compounded, as we have seen, by the pressures on the overworked brain as it struggles with unfamiliar input. This tiredness, in itself, can be a major reason for not reflecting on novel experiences and possibly even for ceasing to notice the new things in the environment.

Compounding the effects of tiredness are the symptoms of stress. Stress is a survival mechanism, initially functioning as a way of dealing with potential threats from the environment. It consists of a series of complex neurological changes, principally involving norepinephrine and cortisol (Ratey, 2008, pp. 62–63) and commonly known as "fight or flight." When triggered by a potential threat, this cascade of chemicals has the

effect of narrowing the brain's focus to those needed to perceive, identify and react to the source of possible danger. Physiological and cognitive processes not needed in the battle to survive the immediate (potential) threat are subdued and, at times, switched off altogether (Ratey, 2008). Clearly, a Study Abroad environment, full of novelty, can appear to the brain to pose many potential dangers. In reacting to these stimuli, the capacity to reflect on a new experience in terms other than "threat/no threat" may be severely limited by the brain's own defence mechanisms.

Attitudinal factors can also inhibit reflection. In Bennett's (1986) widely-cited Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, the first stage of reactions to a new environment is characterised as "Denial of Difference." Surrounded by a novel and potentially threatening environment, one of the most common initial reactions, the model claims, is to deny that there is anything novel or threatening about the environment at all: "It is just like home!" The model, initially based on empirical evidence from large numbers of Study Abroad students (Bennett, 1986) has since been used as a basis for many studies of acculturation to new environments (Hammer, 2012). In the majority of cases, these studies reveal that not only do most Study Abroad students tested begin their overseas sojourn with the state of mind labelled as "Denial of Difference," a significant number also end their overseas experience with most of their responses still falling into the "Denial of Difference" category (Hammer, 2012). If students are in denial about the existence of many of the differences they encounter, they cannot even begin to reflect on them, at least not consciously.

Another attitude that tends to shut down the possibility of reflection can be characterised as, "Yes. This is exactly what I expected." Although the old adage has it that travel broadens the mind, the author once had the experience of travelling to a distant and exotic land with a friend whose purpose seemed to be the opposite: rather than broadening his mind, he was travelling to confirm his expectations. At every turn he would confirm to himself that conditions in this new environment were just as he had expected them to be. This is not so much a denial of difference as an acknowledgement of it that, nevertheless, hinders further thought and investigation. Reflection does not occur because there is nothing to reflect on.

This is close to the "tourism" attitude, where visits to novel environments are undertaken in order to collect things. Souvenirs, anecdotes, photos, and experiences are all sought for as mementoes of a place visited. At a later date they are presented to others for their edification and, principally, entertainment. Facebook, Instagram and blogs have now superseded the photo album, scrapbook and travel diaries as repositories of unanalysed experience. The purpose of such travel appears to be not learning through reflection but the collection of trivia. So many students approach Study Abroad with this attitude (Gardner, Gross, & Steglitz, 2008) that it sometimes appears that the educational benefits claimed for Study Abroad are just a thin academic veneer of respectability covering a hedonistic pursuit of raw experience.

A further non-reflective attitude acknowledges differences in the host environment but labels them as "cultural" and effectively files them away without further analysis. This attitude is a close relative to the uneducated and now largely unacceptable response to difference that, "Foreigners are crazy; that's why they do weird things." While more acceptable in educated circles, labelling any difference encountered as "cultural" is just

as effective in shutting down further inquiry. Young people travelling abroad for the first time are not the only ones who are susceptible to this attitude: much academic research in the fields of Intercultural Communication and Cross-cultural Psychology consists of comparing data sets collected in different geographical locations, seeking obvious explanations for some of the variability in the data sets (eg. “One sample was slightly older, on average, than the other, so some of the variation may be age-related.”), controlling for that variable, and then labelling any variability that cannot be explained in these terms as a “cultural” difference (Ryan, 2000). As an explanatory variable “culture” fails in its most essential role: it does not explain anything. In terms more understandable to Study Abroad students, it is perhaps best to say that “culture” should not be the end of a conversation about differences in the host environment; it should be the beginning.

### **An Example of Reflection**

Having reviewed some of the impediments to reflection, perhaps it is time to offer a more worked out example of what reflection looks like in practice.

On the first evening of an accompanied Study Abroad visit to the Philippines, a group of Japanese students took a walk in central Manila and were very surprised to find pigs, chickens, and other livestock being kept in a compound just next to what appeared to be a luxury apartment complex. Once they had noticed this, they began to pay attention to other examples of what they termed “rich and poor people living side by side.”

Later that night, in a hotel-room discussion, the accompanying teacher pushed them to imagine why this might be. After a few half-hearted suggestions, one member of the group said: “I think it is because there is no democracy here. In Japan we do not see such things because we have democracy.” This quickly became the group consensus, but the teacher encouraged them to ask their Filipino hosts about democracy in the Philippines.

Later in the stay, the nightly discussion topic returned to democracy and several students reported that they had been told by Filipino friends that the Philippines was indeed a democratic country. In fact, most had heard stories of how, in living memory, the people had taken to the streets and overthrown a non-democratic president. Others had been given details of voting procedures and frequency of elections.

One student reported that a Filipino friend had mentioned doubts about the quality of Japanese democracy, since the friend had heard that the same political party had been in power in Japan since the 1950s. While the initial reaction to this was rather defensive, a lively discussion on the nature of democracy and its different qualities and manifestations ensued.

Later, when the Japanese students returned from overnight homestays, they became very interested in the fact that their host families all had live-in maids and some families had a very extensive domestic staff. The teacher referred them back to their comments on rich and poor living conditions and they began to understand that relations between the well off and the less well off were much more nuanced than they had initially appreciated. One student reflected further that there were also rich and poor people in Japan but they tended to keep away from each other.

Through this extended process of reflection the Study Abroad students not only learned about life in the Philippines but also had a chance to reflect on their own lives in Japan. Their sense of what is “normal” or “reasonable” was expanded. Their desire and ability to look below the surface of things were enhanced. Perhaps most importantly, several of them commented that the more they reflected on and investigated an issue the more interesting it became.

### **Encouraging Reflection**

From the outset, the Study Abroad programme should be framed for students as a learning experience. It is worth stating explicitly that the goal is not tourism, or shopping, or experience collecting, but learning. Students may, at first, have little idea of what kind of learning is expected, but the emphasis on learning needs to be present throughout, both for the academic credibility of the programme and for the chance it offers to shape students’ attitudes in approaching the Study Abroad experience. On accompanied programmes, each conversation with a student can begin with “So, what did you learn today?” A similar effect can be achieved while keeping in touch with unaccompanied Study Abroad students by email or some form of social media. Post-programme follow up should be framed in a similar fashion.

A first step towards encouraging reflection is to make sure students keep a record of things that strike them as strange or different. Especially in the first days in a novel environment, new experiences come quickly and frequently. Without some form of recording mechanism, many of them will be forgotten before they can be reflected on, and even those which are initially reflected on may be lost to memory before comparison with other similar experiences becomes possible. Fortunately, most students these days now carry a camera with them as part of their daily lives. They should be encouraged to photograph anything that strikes them as unusual. In accompanied programmes, asking each student to take a hundred photos a day of things that they would not see at home is not an unreasonable goal. A similar level of alertness can be encouraged in non-accompanied students by having them send one or two photos a day of things they find unusual together with a short explanation, by email or social medium. Non-visual or hard to photograph differences can be recorded in a notebook.

In moving students on through the experiential learning cycle from observation to reflection, the simple question “Why?” can be a most effective ally. A student notes a difference and is immediately asked why s/he think the difference occurs. An attempted explanation can be deepened by a “Why do you think so?” Other, nuanced prompts for thinking include: “Have you noticed anything similar?” “How do people deal with this in your own country” “How could we check out that theory?” and “Have you seen other things that could be explained in a similar way?” For best effect, these questions are asked in person during an accompanied programme, though a similar dialogue can be conducted through social media with unaccompanied students. Eventually, the goal is to have students ask themselves these questions without being prompted by a teacher.

While pre-departure Orientation sessions tend to be taken up with practicalities of passports, airline tickets and course registration, they also offer the opportunity to train students in the kind of reflective mindset with which we would like them to

approach their Study Abroad experience. A series of provocative pictures from around the world (see, for example, Menzel, 2007 and Mollison, 2010) can be used to stimulate students to reflect on differences in people's daily lives without specific reference to the area of the world they are about to visit. Orientation is also a good time to have students explore and share what they think they know about the place they are going to visit. Such an activity can lead to a questioning of how they know what they think they know, a question which should become a part of the reflection process.

Gilmour (2007) advocates training Study Abroad students as ethnographers and sending off to their overseas destination as fully fledged participant observers. While this may be too time-consuming and unnecessarily rigorous for most Study Abroad programmes, a brief D.I.E. exercise (Intercultural Communication Institute, 2008), which encourages participants to distinguish between their description, interpretation, and evaluation of an event or phenomenon, can be used to train students to bring some discipline to their reflective processes.

During accompanied programmes, time can often be included in the daily schedule for reflection. Ideally, a reflection session would be held each day in comfortable surroundings, secluded from the rich variety of experiences offered by the host environment, and with access to audio-visual equipment so that students can illustrate their reflections with photographs from the hundreds they have been encouraged to take. Including such sessions in the programme schedule is a good way of reminding students that reflection is just as important as experience for learning. If resources of time and equipment are not so readily available, group meal times often provide an opportunity for stimulating reflection with as simple a question as "What's the most interesting thing you saw today?" Failing that, time spent in transit can also be used in a similar fashion.

Obviously, such detailed discussions are more difficult to achieve with unaccompanied programmes. Slower, less detailed discussions can be conducted through social media, especially if students have a duty to report back regularly to the host institution, but the role of the teacher here is much more as provoker of thought than as discussant. This lack of opportunity for detailed discussions in unaccompanied programmes makes pre-departure training and post-return reporting much more important for unaccompanied than for accompanied students.

Most programmes have some kind of reporting requirement for students returning from Study Abroad. These can be used to encourage students both to continue their reflections on their experiences overseas and to begin integrating these reflections into their life in the home country. A written report, poster or PowerPoint presentation, instead of giving a factual account of places visited, foods eaten, or courses taken can be used for reflection either on the experience in general or on one particular aspect of it. Sharing such reports with members of the home university community can have a multiplier effect, not only in encouraging more students to study abroad, but also in exposing them to the kind of reflection that makes new experiences valuable.

## Conclusion

There is nothing unnatural about reflection. It is an essential element in all learning, whether we use the word "learning" in its formal sense of acquiring new skills

and knowledge or the more general sense of the ways in which an organism (the human brain) adapts to its environment.

Given the impediments, neurological, physiological and attitudinal, that may prevent our students from reflecting on their Study Abroad experiences, however, it is useful to remind them of the importance of reflection, to prime them to reflect on their host environment and to support them in their efforts to make sense of their experiences. Indeed, failure to do this is to fail in our responsibility as educators to make sure our students receive the best possible educational benefits of their time abroad.

The implications of a focus on reflection, though, extend far beyond Study Abroad programmes. Since reflection is such a natural part of learning, especially informal learning, the habits of mind encouraged by reflective Study Abroad are exactly the habits of mind that will support our students in their lifelong journey of learning.

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