

## Original Paper

# An Impactful Winter Session Experience for University Students on a Short-Term Study aboard Trip

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### **Abstract**

*To better understand the world and oneself, exposure and immersion in the world outside of one's typical daily setting is helpful. For university-level students taking prescribed coursework and also having to work a part-time job, having the opportunity to travel and learn afar over the course of a traditional semester can be challenging and prohibitive. As a result, short-term study abroad experiences led by university faculty can help students who desire a study abroad experience as a complement to their campus-based learning. The purpose of this investigation was to explore the impact a short-term study abroad to Costa Rica conducted during the 2020 winter session at a university in the USA had on nine students. Data sources included pre/post surveys, formal interviews, and reflective journal entries. A qualitative analysis of the data suggests these short term study abroad participants were cognizant of their privilege as they compared and contrasted the norms of their own lives with those of the people they worked for on their short-term study abroad. The students' perceptions of their experience were ones of accomplishment and pride. They left with a sense of empowerment and a call to serve others. Reflective learning is a crucial component to students' learning, especially when they are immersed in a different culture and country. During short-term study abroad experiences, students have the potential for transformative learning.*

### **Keywords**

*Costa Rica, service learning, transformative learning, university students, winter session*

## 1. Introduction

Students crave a hands-on learning experience, and this is where study abroad comes in as that hands-on learning experience. Study abroad involves one's intention to travel to a different country to take a class or have experiences to further their knowledge. Sometimes these classes involve internships or co-ops to help fulfill a student's major requirement. With study abroad, students are able to immerse themselves in a unique environment and learn with academic means. Studying abroad is much more than learning in a classroom, which is why students look for opportunities like this. This gives students the opportunity to learn in a new context.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *Preparing Students for the Global World*

Preparing students for the real-world is essential during their university education. Having students apply their knowledge outside the classroom is also a huge component to preparing them for life after university. With that, it is also crucial to prepare them for the global world. The United States and other countries outside of it have their differences, but also coincide with one another in terms of education and politics. The global engagement students experience is an experience no one can take away. The students learn about new cultures, and also about themselves. Roberts, T. G. et al., noted that "The overarching theme among all articles is that there is a push to be globally aware, and short-term or long-term study abroad experiences are one way to do that" (Roberts, T. G. et al., 2018). This note is a very important response to why preparing students for the global world is crucial; no matter the duration of the trip, students will learn copious amounts from being exposed to a different country.

In the article, *I Have a Better Sense of How Interconnected the World is: Student Perceptions of Learning and Global Engagement During Study Abroad*, the authors state "Students reported that their experiences in the program encouraged them to reflect on and challenge their beliefs, particularly about educational policies and practices in local and global contexts" (Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2018, p. 130). This note is especially important when students are learning in a different country, with different values and beliefs. Reflection is also a large part of this learning process, especially when being educated globally.

When preparing students for off campus experiences in the global world, it also important to prepare for them for the different cultures they are about immerse themselves in. Having some prior knowledge before heading to a different culture will set students up for the "culture shock" individuals usually experience when going to a new country. In the study performed by Vandermaas-Peeler et al., they asked their participants open-ended questions about how many of them had to adjust their behaviors in order to behave in a culturally appropriate manner; 92% of the participants did have to adjust their behaviors. The participants were also asked if the study abroad program allowed them to make a difference, and global engagement was a common code used. Being culturally immersed exposed the

students to new perspectives, and new political interests, too.

## *2.2 How Students Come to Understand the World Better*

To understand the world better, students need to be exposed and immersed in the world. If not, how will they come to understand the world, and what it holds? Students will understand the world when they are immersed in different cultures, as well as educated on countries' values and beliefs. Students will come to understand the world better when they start reflecting on their experiences, and how those exposed experiences affect their lives, and the real-world. In the Impact of Short-Term Study Abroad Experiences on Transformative AN

Learning, Walters C. et al. (2016) speaks on transformative learning, and how it teaches students reflective learning. They explore the theoretical framework which is "a result of critical reflection which involves 'a critical review of presuppositions from conscious and unconscious prior learning and their consequence' and results in a change in one's firmly held beliefs" (Kember et al., 2000, p. 385; Walters, C., et al., 2016, p. 107). Within this framework, students can practice reflective thinking, which will help in understanding what they learn from their study abroad experiences.

Reflective learning is a crucial component to students' learning, especially when they are immersed in a different curriculum and country. Being a reflective learner means being "conscious of the one's learning process" and "being an active learner by asking questions and thinking critically about one's own ideas" (deakin.edu). Metacognition plays a large role in students' reflective learning process as well. Teaching students how to reflect on their learning gets them thinking about why it was important to learn a certain issue or topic, and how does this new, learned concept applies to the world outside the classroom. In this same article, students using reflective learning helps them, "Reflect on a situation, experience, or collection of information is to absorb, consider, weight, speculate, contemplate, and deliberate. Such reflection serves either as a basis for reasoned action or to gain understanding or attach meaning to an experience" (Bradshaw & Lowenstein, 2011, p. 6; Walters, C., et al., 2016, p. 107). Reflecting on an experience, such as study abroad, becomes crucial because of the topics and cultures that learned; this is once-in-a-lifetime experience for those who immerse themselves in these trips.

## *2.3 Short-Term Study Abroad*

Depending on the university, study abroad experiences can be offered for a semester, for one whole year, or for just a set number of consecutive days. Some students take the longer trips because of internships, or because they want to gain more experience and education from a different country. Even though long-term study abroad experiences allow student to gain more familiarity with the country and its education, short-terms experiences can have similar impact. During short-term study abroad experiences, students have the potential for high transformative learning (Walters et al., 2016). The reflection of the experience becomes even more imperative because of the brevity of the study aboard experiences; students really have to "dig deep" and determine what the most important takeaways were from the experience.

There are benefits and advantages to students going on a short-term study abroad trip versus a long-term study abroad trip. One advantage is short-term study abroad trips fit better with students' schedules (Barkin, 2018). When it comes to university scheduling, and as students' progress through their program, scheduling for semesters tends to be a challenge. This is due to when classes are being offered or if those classes are offered a specific semester. With short-term trips, students will still be able to take part in a trip of their choosing, and still get the intended experiences without having to drastically switch around their schedules. Along with fitting short-term study abroad in university schedules, another benefit to this is students become less fearful of being away from family and friends for a full semester (Barkin, 2018). Splitting the semester between classes and study abroad lessens the class load for the students and allows them to partake in both the campus experience, and the study abroad experience. Overall, short-term study abroad experiences still allows students to have the full experience of different culture, and education.

#### *2.4 What Does Short-Term Study Abroad Look Like?*

With short-term study abroad, these experiences will usually be more condensed with a set a curriculum in mind. Short-term study abroad is usually faculty-led, meaning one or more professors go on the trip with a small number students. The content within a short-term study abroad experience also becomes more condensed. According to Christopher Cotten and Carla J. Thompson, the Hip-Impact Educational Practices (HIPs), "includes first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning, community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects" (Cotton & Thompson, 2017; Kuh, 2008). All within this curriculum are the HIPs practices to ensure students are getting rich experience in a different country. The innovative activities and assignments challenge students to think deeper, and to apply knowledge in just a short time when studying within a different culture. In the *Impacts of a Short-Term Study Abroad on Critical Thinking of Agricultural Students*, Roberts et al. (2018), states "there is evidence that short-term study abroad experiences help student think critically".

#### *2.5 Transformative Learning*

Both Walters et al. (2016) and Lecrom et al. (2018), discuss the importance of transformative learning within a study abroad experience. Again, transformative learning involves critical and reflective thinking, and allows one to deepen their learning within the content at hand. Walters et al. (2016), explains that "The practice of reflective thinking is to process one's thoughts and hold every idea accountable". "To reflect on a situation, experience, or collection of information is to absorb, consider, weight, speculate, contemplate, and deliberate. Such reflection serves either as a basis for reasoned action or to gain understanding or attach meaning to an experience" (Bradshaw & Lowenstein, 2011, p. 6; Walters, C., et al., 2016, p. 107). Having student reflect upon their learning is imperative, especially when the content is being taught in a different country. Partaking in a study abroad experience becomes

a unique opportunity for students, therefore, it is crucial that they are exposed to reflective practices. When students are able to reflect on their own learning, they are then able to see the learning process holistically.

### *2.6 Significance*

Why study abroad and why is it an important piece to one's education? Study abroad not only exposes students to different countries and their cultures, but it also allows them to step outside their own comfort zones. With that, study abroad experiences expose students to new ways of learning, such as transformative learning. Reflecting on one's experiences allows for a deeper sense of learning as well. Exploring and learning in a different country provides students with an understanding of the world, while also preparing them for the global world. Today's students, again, crave the hands-on experiences, and innovated instruction for their own learning. Study abroad provides students with opportunities that will stay with them for a lifetime, while allowing them to apply that knowledge beyond the classroom.

## **3. Methods and Procedures**

### *3.1 The Course*

The short-term study abroad course was called "Costa Rica: A Country Committed to Ecology and Education". The aim of the course was to provide students the opportunity to learn and explore in Costa Rica. It was conducted over a three-week winter session in January of 2020 with students in Costa Rica for fourteen days.

In Costa Rica there is a saying—"Pura Vida" or "pure life". This course embodied that spirit as students hiked through rainforests, discovered a coffee plantation, visited with students in a local school, relaxed in hot springs, and learned about preserving nature. The students experienced a colorful country filled with natural splendors. Costa Rica allowed the students to immerse themselves in ecological learning and conservation as they explored waterfalls, volcanoes, lush mountains, and beaches—all occupied by diverse animals including frogs, birds and monkeys.

Costa Rica offered adventure for the students. Through this course there were unique ways to learn about biodiversity and conservation efforts. Partaking in canopy tours and walking over hanging bridges, students discovered animals and explored nature.

Students soaked in the Spanish influenced culture of the country's capital, San Jose, and visited with administrators, teachers, and students in a local school near Montverde.

Costa Rican forests were experienced from the treetops with unparalleled views and discussions took place with knowledgeable local guides. The students gazed at nature and strolled through the tropical rain forest and paths of nature and wildlife.

The students also invested time volunteering and participating in five service learning projects with local residents and organizations at various cities in the country. These service opportunities included working with a group of impoverished women and their children, volunteering at a coffee plantation, helping children at a church learn English, participating in a beach clean-up and reading, speaking and listening with the children of Nicaraguan refugees.

The course was taught by a professor who was also the researcher. The study took place over the course of the winter session in the students' second and third years at the university. While the professor intentionally took a neutral posture to learn from the students, the students' preconceived notions about their instructor's expectations may have influenced the responses.

### *3.2 Instruction*

Methods of instruction included lectures, large and small group discussions, service work, travel, exploration, and observations. Throughout this course, students worked independently, in small groups and with Costa Ricans to learn. Topics in the course included: The Costa Rican Educational System, Economic and Cultural Importance of Costa Rican Coffee and Chocolate, The Influence of Volcanoes on the Local Geography and Environment, Sustainable and Responsible Tourism, Diverse Topography of Costa Rica's Lush Rainforests, Volcanic Mountains and Sparking Waters, and Biodiversity: The Value and Importance of Preserving Endangered Species.

### *3.3 Participants*

Participants were nine undergraduate university students from a large, Midwestern US public university. They were in the midst of their second and third years at the institution. Eight students were Caucasian. One was African American. There were nine females, and no males. Other than two students having gone on holidays out of the country with their families in the past, none of the other participants had any prior experience outside of the United States.

### *3.4 Data Collection and Procedures*

Data were collected during all phases of the project. Qualitative research methods were utilized in this study in order to gain a more holistic portrayal of the university students' perceptions of their winter session experience. The data sources consisted of surveys, interviews, and reflective journal entries. IRB approval and participant consent was obtained before students joined the study. Students were notified that their participation was voluntary and would not affect their standing in any part of the course or as a student at the university, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

During the first moments of the first class session of the winter session course, which took place on campus in December, the participants were first provided with a link to answered open-ended survey questions about their upcoming winter session's study abroad experience. Survey questions included: Why are you participating in this study abroad experience? What are you most concerned about? What are you most looking forward to and what are you least looking forward to? and What other types of traveling have you done outside of the USA?

On the final day of the winter session course, the students returned to their university classroom. The pre-course survey was repeated with a modification of the questions. While the initial survey questions were more heavily focused upon the upcoming experience and their concerns, the post-survey questions focused more on how the experience affected their perceptions. These questions included: Explain the two most important things you learned during this course. Did the experience in Costa Rica meet your expectations? Explain. Did the experience change your preconceived notions? If so, how. What part of the experience was the most impactful and why? What would you tell next year's students about this course?

Informal interviewing is an open-ended approach offering flexibility for observing and documenting what may emerge from a particular setting (Patton, 2010). These data were collected during the experiences while in Costa Rica. Questions were also generated from watching the students and listening to them talk with each other about their experiences. The researcher asked clarifying questions during the informal interviews to help capture the perceptions of the students. These data also informed the formal interview questions, corroborated other data sources, and added another facet in analyzing the overall experience of the university students. There were 18 pages of informal interview notes.

Semistructured formal interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2000) were also utilized. These semistructured formal interviews were conducted with each student upon their return to campus. During the interviews with the nine study participants, the researcher used probing to obtain additional information that helped better explain the answers given by the participants. This helped improve the accuracy of the provided answers with each question that was asked. Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and were held privately. All formal interviews were videoed and transcribed verbatim by a graduate research assistant.

Reflective journaling has been shown to be an effective way to engage students and to help nurture critical thinking skills (Lamm et al., 2011; Sankey Rice et al., 2014). It can also be a tool to foster active learning (Thorpe, 2004). Journaling has been used for students to reflect on study abroad experiences (Lamm et al., 2011; Northfell & Edgar, 2014; Sankey Rice et al., 2014). Northfell and Edgar (2014) recommended that study abroad programs should require daily reflections "to encourage meaningful and engaged learning experiences" (p. 39).

During the time in Costa Rica, students also wrote journal entries. As a part of the course, participants were provided time and required to journal nightly by responding to question prompts. Participants electronically uploaded their nightly reflections. Data were collected through the reflective journaling.

The nightly question prompts were:

- 1) What were your observations today?
- 2) What did you learn today?
- 3) What are you grappling with?
- 4) Explain the impact today's experience had on you.

- 5) What did you see or learn today that challenged or changed your previous thinking? Why did that happen?

Ultimately, the study took place over the course of ten weeks with the students coming together on campus before the start of the official winter session and returning for follow up interviews weeks after their return. While the professor intentionally took a neutral posture to learn from the students, their preconceived notions about the American instructor's expectations may have influenced the students' responses.

#### **4. Data Analysis and Results**

The data gathering was subjected to a qualitative data analysis which involved documentation, categorizing, examining relationships, and presenting of data (Mackieson, Shlonsky & Connolly, 2019). As is common in case study research, multiple data sources were drawn upon for analysis and to inform results of this study.

Data analysis consists of examining, categorizing, and recombining the evidence (Yin, 2003). According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), the essential task of categorizing is to bring together, into categories, data that relate to the same content. To analyze this study's data, the researcher used an inductive coding process.

The inductive approach is a data reduction procedure of analysis taking the raw data and moving it into meaningful themes. The primary mode of analysis is the development of categories from the raw data into a framework that captures key ideas judged to be important by the researcher. The outcome from an inductive analysis is the development of categories that summarizes the data and conveys key themes.

Following an indicative coding process, described by Creswell (2002), the data from the surveys, journals and interviews were read and reread as the researcher sought to identify segments of information in the data based on similarities, but also noting data not supporting emerging patterns. Thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data sources. After this initial sorting, emergent coding was used to identify themes that arose from participant responses.

The data from this study were then examined separately by the three researchers who individually sorted them to explore the thoughts and opinions the university students brought to their winter session course and the changes experienced through opportunities to engage with others in the related class sessions and their time in Costa Rica. First working independently with each set of data, they used selective coding to highlight the most common categories and to explain themes (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Guetterman, 2020). Data sets were analyzed, and salient themes were devised and integrated to support assertions. Manual coding for salient themes were informed by strategies recommended by Dyson and Genishi (2005) and Saldana (2013).



To control for researcher bias and to help make sense of the data, two additional researchers were recruited to help conduct the data analysis. Therefore, in this study, two members of the graduate education program and the author of this study, an education professor at the university, confirmed the categories. The three researchers evaluated and reinforced the initial results, categories, and groupings. The researchers then worked together to remove redundancy, which reduced the categories and recorded the number of times the detail appears in the categories. Next, the most important categories, based on similarities, were identified to determine the themes with details listed to support each theme. This endorsement provided validity of the explanation.

Member checks of the researcher's data analysis were then conducted to ensure accuracy, credibility, and validity. Each study participant was asked to read the findings of their data analysis and to affirm that the findings reflected their views, feelings, and experiences, or to disaffirm that the findings reflect these experiences. All nine participants agreed with the researcher's findings.

The need for triangulation arises from the ethical need to confirm the validity of the processes. Case study is a triangulated research strategy. In case studies, multiple sources of data improve validity (Yin, 2003). Data triangulation occurred because two methods of data collection were utilized. With data to analyze from the surveys, interviews and journals, the researcher was able to have the data checked, or cross-examined, from three sources. For example, data collected from the interviews was checked against the survey and journal data for verification.

Qualitative findings indicated the students preferred an active, service style of pedagogy where they could work in a hands-on manner with individuals who were struggling or less fortunate. This was something they had not experienced directly in their previous coursework at the university and the study abroad experience in an international country allowed this to happen. The interactive experiences were 100% positive for the nine participants and the required reflections were indicated as being helpful for their learning. As a result of the data analysis, three dominant themes emerged: privilege, pride/accomplishment/empowerment, and a call to serve others.

Of all of the activities that took place during the fourteen days in Costa Rica, the data analysis showed that the time invested in service projects were the most impactful. Reading and speaking with the children of the Nicaraguan refugees and the local group of impoverished women and their children was eye-opening and heartwarming. One student said, "I've seen images like this, but never did I know poverty was this awful. I didn't realize how much was just given to me because of where I was born and the family I was born in. It's so unfair!" Another student explained, "When I get back home, I'm going to find how I can help the refugees in Toledo. I did not realize how challenging their lives are until now".

Additionally, volunteering at a coffee plantation and participating in a beach clean-up was eye opening. Students were surprised by how hot the sun was and how much work was being conducted without taking breaks. Finally, helping children at a church learn to some English was endearing, especially to the students who did not have younger siblings. One wrote, "Little children are precious and need help. The two I worked with caught on quickly to color words but didn't even know how to tell me they were thirsty so that we could go get a drink of water".

Privilege is defined as a societal advantage that a restricted group of people has over another group. The data analysis reported students were previously not cognizant of their privilege, but through the various service opportunities learned they are indeed privileged. One student said, "On campus I classify myself as poor compared to other students but being here and seeing true poverty woke me up. I'm very privileged". Another stated, "It's not their fault. These children are living in horrific conditions while we have so much. Is it ok to leave my extra clothing here for these women? I have plenty at home and they need it".

Pride, accomplishment, and empowerment were also identified as a dominant theme. Empowerment comes after the process of becoming strong and more confident, especially in controlling one's own life and claiming their opportunities. This came about as student overcame their insecurities about traveling abroad and interacting with locals far from their own homes. As they found success in the different experiences, their pride and confidence grew. They felt they were doing important work.

One student reported, "I hadn't thought about it, but now that I think back over today, I realize I'm very proud of the hard work we all did. The beach was gross, but it looks great now". "I feel so good tonight about everything we all did. When the alarm went off this morning, I did not want to move, but now I'm so thankful about helping the kids. It made everyone feel really good".

The third theme was a call to service. As a result of participating in five service-projects over the course of fourteen days, students realized the impact they could have on others' lives. "With so many of us all doing a little, we are really doing a lot", one student stated during an interview. Another said, "I felt like my voice was finally heard and I wanted each child I worked with to know that they were heard too. I will find more ways to help when I get back home".

## 5. Conclusion

This study found students who took part in this short term winter session 2020 study abroad to Costa Rica gained new knowledge and understandings through the experiential learning experience, which included serving others and a nightly process of self-reflection. Through the reflective nightly journaling, students actively assessed and monitored their thinking and understanding. Students reported that while they first did not want to do this journaling and viewed the course requirement as a burden, they realized it was helping them better understand themselves and the impact of the experience. It also helped them feel in charge of their learning and led to deeper personal growth.

Transformative learning focused on the idea that adult learners can adjust their thinking based on new information. This learning follows the idea that the learners who are getting new information are also evaluating their past ideas and understanding and are shifting their worldwide view as they taken on new information through critical reflection (Collard & Law, 1989). This type of learning involves self-examination and ultimately leads to a truer freedom of thought and a better understanding.

To empower students and to build pride in students, they should be involved in actions and improvement processes in classrooms and local organizations when possible. Increase opportunities for students to help and serve others and embed opportunities for student service into classroom activities is powerful.

This travel and service opportunity opened the students' minds as they learned about ecology, education, and environment. It also opened their hearts as they worked with impoverished people in a variety of local organizations in different cities across Costa Rica. Throughout the students' reflections, they made connections to their own lives to help them contextualize their new learning and experiences. One participant stated, "Despite a language barrier, we connected beautifully with the women and children through our hearts and our hands reaching out to them".

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