

Making the Most Out of a Study Abroad Pre-Departure Class

Dr. Gaea Hock
Kansas State University
315 Umberger Hall
Manhattan, KS 66506
785-532-1166
ghock@ksu.edu

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

Students should participate in study abroad experiences to help them develop a personal understanding of another culture (Swinger, 1985) and increase their global competencies (Zhai & Scheer, 2002). In 2017, only 15.5% of bachelor's degree students in the United States study abroad before graduation (IIE, 2017). While there was an increase of 3.4% in 2016-2017 over previous years (IIE, 2017), there is still a large percent of students who are not taking advantage of study abroad opportunities. In an effort to increase the number of students able and willing to travel internationally, many universities are increasing the number of short-term, faculty-led experiences (Hulstrand, 2006). Almost two-thirds (63%) of all study abroad experiences U.S. institutions of higher education offer are less than eight weeks in length (IIE, 2017). Included in this group of experiences are "faculty-led" in which the lead instructor travels with the group the entire time in country.

To improve students' intercultural awareness, faculty members should support pre-departure work (Holmes, Bavieri & Ganassin, 2013) to better prepare students for their time abroad. "Students' pre-departure expectations and attitudes toward a specific culture or people may significantly influence outcomes" (Dekaney, 2007, p. 19). Pre-departure class sessions help students prepare and take full advantage of a short-term, faculty-led study abroad experience (Dekaney, 2007; Goldstein & Kim, 2006).

How it Works/Methods/Steps

Students were recruited during the fall 2017 semester for a study abroad experience to the Czech Republic. Once the spring 2018 semester began, the course met nine times prior to departure. Four of the 11 students were not on campus during the spring semester and had to participate via distance delivery. Sessions were shared and recorded using Zoom. The class consisted of typical pre-departure assignments including presentations, fact sheets on specific topics, and writing questions to send to hosts before we arrived. Each class session consisted of a short language practice, dealing with pre-departure paperwork, student presentations, and cultural topics.

To adequately prepare students to fully appreciate and participate in an international experience, several components of the pre-departure course were emphasized. One of them was facilitating a discussion board for "burning questions" about the experience for the instructor to answer and allow all students to benefit from the response. Another was sharing YouTube videos from Czech natives about visiting the country. In an effort to increase the language proficiency, minimize concerns about language barriers, and prepare students to be a 'traveler' rather than a 'tourist,' the Mango Languages app was required (Mango, 2018).

In addition to the coursework, a major pre-departure activity was held to help students prepare for their time in country. Students from the Czech Republic who were currently studying at Kansas State University were invited to a meal to meet students in my class. I coordinated the event with assistance from the K-State Education Abroad office. My students were asked to contribute a dessert and attend to converse with the Czech students who were on campus that semester.

Results to Date/Implications

During the spring 2018 semester, students in the course presented 18 different topics, learned photography and blog writing skills, contributed to discussion posts, and wrote questions for their in-country hosts. These activities helped them get to know each other prior to leaving the U.S. for the 11-day adventure.

While all students were encouraged to attend the Czech Student Gathering, only five were able to make it to the meal. Eleven Czech students attended to share tips, advice, and places to visit while we are in the country. Students in the class shared what they learned with their classmates during the next scheduled class session. The following comments illustrate what the domestic students gained from the experience:

- *I truly enjoyed meeting with the Czech students before going to visit their country. It was a great opportunity to learn about their favorite things in the country and things we shouldn't miss while we are there. It was a great way to get a taste of what we would be experiencing.*
- *Everyone, not just the study abroad students, learned a lot and got a small taste for what we would be experiencing on our trip.*
- *By including this activity, my expectations and preconceived ideas about the Czech Republic were changed.*

The Mango app was used by students to learn basic conversational Czech, but no one made it through the entire module. One student commented:

- *I did love using Mango to learn some Czech before departing. I was then able to use them in country. It felt really good to be able to communicate with locals. I wish I would have learned even more.*

Overall, the time and energy spent on pre-departure activities is crucial for helping the short-term study abroad be successful and impactful for each student. One student said, *"This is my third study abroad trip, and this trip I have felt the most prepared for and learned the most."*

Future Plans/Advice to Others

I learned a great deal from leading my first study abroad and ways to better prepare the students prior to departure. One recommendation is to work with the study abroad office to identify on-campus international students from the country/area you will be visiting and organize a social gathering. My students benefited from the opportunity to converse with students from the Czech Republic and wanted to set up another meal closer to the departure date. I also learned to require completion of a certain number of modules in the Mango app to achieve a higher degree of language proficiency. Students started out strong, but did not get as far as I would have liked in their language practice. The work put into the pre-departure course helped students prepare for the experience and enjoy their time in country to a deeper level.

Costs/Resources Needed

The cost of the meal for the student gathering was minimal (\$120). Students provided the desserts and I contributed a few side dishes. Tuition funds for the study abroad course paid for the event. Mango Languages is offered free from the university library. If you cannot find it for free, it can be purchased for \$19.99 per month. Technology and the learning management system were already in place to include the distance students in the pre-departure activities.

References

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