

**Visualizing Culture: Using Preflection to Understand College Students' Perception of
Culture Before a Study Abroad Experience**

Sherrie Ray, Meikah Dado and Dr. Jack Elliot

578 John Kimbrough Blvd., College Station, TX 77840

575-447-1700

sherrie.ray@tamu.edu; mdado@tamu.edu; jack.elliott@ag.tamu.edu

Introduction

As technology evolves, transportation becomes more accessible, and globalization becomes a relevant topic of conversation in the agriculture industry, it is important for college students to develop cultural competence before joining a global society (Harder et al., 2012). In response to the rapid integration of culture, politics, and economics global agriculture is facing, the National Research Council (2009) released a recommendation for institutes to provide students with international exposure and targeted learning abroad experiences to make strides toward developing culturally competent graduates. In response to the awareness of this need, many educational institutions offer study abroad programs designed to provide students with experiences to increase multicultural and global awareness (Vatalaro et al., 2015).

Reflection is a common strategy used during and after study abroad programs for students to reflect on experiences that challenge their previous values and worldview (O'Malley et al., 2019). While post-experience reflection is supported as a vital component of shaping global competence, previous literature does not examine how reflection strategies can be used prior to a student's study abroad experience (O'Malley et al., 2019). Reflection allows learners to understand the potential impact of an experience before it happens (Harder et al., 2012). This strategy gives learners the opportunity to identify prior experiences and perceived understanding of the human experience which will influence the formation of future perceptions (Harder et al., 2012). Reflection is a strategy that can be used for substantially enhancing the reflection process (Falk, 1995). Understanding the motivations and perceptions of people participating in international experiences could strengthen the development of programs and potentially diminish the prevalence of poverty tourism associated with study abroad programs.

How it Works

Prior to departure, enrolled students are asked to answer the question: *What is culture?* Students answer this question using a method of participatory action research known as photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997). This qualitative method allows participants to observe their livelihood, environment, and perceived reality of the human experience, and document observations through photographs (Wang & Burris, 1997). The photo-taking devices can include cell phones, digital cameras, or a combination of both. Participants are asked to interpret this task in any way they feel appropriate with the following parameters: photographs cannot include nudity or faces of people under the age of 18. Students are given a minimum of seven days to complete this task.

After a week of taking photos, students select two photographs they feel comfortable sharing with peers. To reflect on the photos selected, students participate in semi-structured interviews within a focus group. Conducting semi-structured interviews in a focus group environment allows students the opportunity to share the significance, rationale, thoughts, and feelings about their photographs while surrounded by peers in their natural, classroom environment (Wang, 1999). In addition, the focus group environment allows peers to engage in discussion and learn about classmates' perspectives. After discussing the photos students select, they are asked to reflect upon how this activity, and their perceived understanding of culture, will translate into their future experience in the country of their study abroad program.

Implications

The primary purpose of this activity is to understand college students' initial perception of culture and if reflection can have an effect on cultural and global competency. This activity demonstrates how using photovoice as a form of reflection can be used as a valuable tool as individuals move toward critical consciousness. Allowing students the opportunity to critically evaluate how they view culture, capturing their perception through photographs, and discussing photographs with peers allows them to (a) investigate the world as they know it now, (b) weigh perspectives, and (c) communicate ideas (Byker & Putman, 2019).

To examine the impact reflection can have on cultural realizations, we practiced this method of reflection with Texas A&M University students traveling to Namibia for an agriculturally focused study abroad program. We observed a paradigm shift throughout the reflection exercise as students made realizations about their own culture. Students realized if they view their personal culture to be best represented by their shared experiences and communities they identify with; then it is unlikely that Namibians define their own culture based upon the types of homes they live in and clothes they wear. Students shifted from focusing on what they will see when traveling to Namibia and expressed interest in interacting with Namibians to gain a deeper understanding of their cultural perceptions.

Future Plans and Advice

It is recommended researchers use photovoice as a form of reflection to conduct a comparative analysis on how college students perceive culture before and after a study abroad experience. While this reflection activity gave valuable insight to college students' perceptions of culture before a study abroad program, a photovoice should be conducted after the abroad experience to observe any change in students' perceptions of culture. Using photovoice as a form of reflection and reflection could be valuable in understanding how study abroad experiences influence college students' perceptions of culture. Further, this methodology could be useful in the space of agricultural education to observe how culture impacts agricultural practices and public perceptions.

Resources Needed

Resources needed include a sample of individuals who are about to embark on an international experience who have access to a photo-taking device. If participants do not have access to a photo-taking device, it is recommended to provide them with a disposable camera. It is also recommended to have the technology needed to project photos on a screen to enlarge photos when viewing them as a group. Enlarging photos enhances the experience for participants. Individuals or researchers implementing this methodology should also have access to a computer for collecting students' photos and taking accurate and descriptive notes throughout the interviews.

References

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