

State FFA Officers' Autophotography of Leadership Competency Development during a Short-Term Study Abroad

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Introduction and Conceptual Framework

There is a growing need for leadership competency development within domestic and global contexts to ensure complex issues are properly managed in the agriculture industry (Deardorff, 2006; Quirk, 2018). Study abroad programs serve as supplementary learning opportunities that allow students to view practical application, gain industry knowledge, develop cultural competence, and experience identity development (Cheng, 2013; Huffman et al., 2020). Understanding participants perceived leadership competency development through a short-term study abroad (STSA) is critical for better alignment of program objectives and improving effectiveness. Annually, the National FFA Organization hosts the International Leadership Seminar for State Officers (ILSSO), a STSA focused on developing participants knowledge of global values and diversity, empathy, and awareness of global conditions. The purpose of this study was to explore perceived leadership competencies developed by participants of an STSA experience in Costa Rica.

Understanding the goals of ILSSO for state officer global learning, the framework of *diversity consciousness* (Bucher, 2015) illuminated meaning in the findings of this qualitative study. Diversity consciousness is described as a state of mind necessary to develop “understanding, awareness, and skills in the area of diversity” (Bucher, 2015, p. 26). It is a diversity consciousness mindset that can allow individuals, or in the case of this study, state FFA officers, the ability to “think through and value human differences” (Bucher, 2015, p. 37). A skill developed through increased diversity awareness is transculturation, or the ability to balance fitting in and being yourself within cultural settings (Bucher, 2015). Transculturation can allow individuals to better understand and value themselves and others through diverse cultural lenses, which aligns with the goals of the ILSSO experience in Costa Rica. Diversity consciousness and skills are components of civic responsibility student leadership competencies (Seemiller, 2013).

Methodology

This study was part of a larger qualitative research project and implemented a qualitative autophotography design (Glaw et al., 2017; Latz, 2017). Similar to photovoice research, autophotography is a visual methodology through which participants express their internalized experiences with photographs and supportive captions. Photos were collected from 52 participants via Qualtrics© upon completion of the STSA. Prompts provided to participants for selecting and uploading their photos and captions encouraged participants to express (a) the leadership competencies they developed, (b) the leadership competencies they feel are needed in agriculture, and (c) the photo that represented the most impactful learning experience during the STSA. The linguistic photo captions, rather than the photos themselves, were analyzed as the primary source of data, which is common in autophotography research (Latz, 2017; Noland, 2006). The constant comparative method was used, which included rounds of open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2021).

Findings

Five themes resulted from the participant photo and photo caption submissions: a) *agriculture industry exposure*, b) *development of diversity consciousness*, c) *strengthening of communication skills*, d) *personal growth*, and e) *expansion of social capital*. Throughout the STSA, participants experienced fifteen different agritourism operations. Many participants shared exposure to the agriculture practices in Costa Rica may better help them become agriculture advocates back home. Through these experiences, trip participants shared the development of diversity consciousness: “we are dramatically unaware of what is outside of our area/country and need to

broaden our understanding.” Many participants shared the most impactful experiences throughout the trip included unstructured immersion into cultural experiences such as a local farmers market where trip participants had the chance to interact with Costa Rican natives. Participants also shared they experienced cultural shock and were able to develop their communication skills as result of cultural barriers, finding new ways to communicate when language and culture did not align with that of their own.

A major finding was participant personal growth. Participants shared a variety of realizations and areas of personal growth such as expansion of comfort zone, adaptability, the importance of environmental stewardship, humility, and development of perspective among many others. This often existed parallel to the development of relationships, both between program participants and Costa Rican natives such as tour guides and experience hosts. Participants shared the importance of their newly formed relationships and gain in social capital: “Overall, I was able to process more of the learning opportunities because of these people and also develop friends and connections that will last after the conclusion of ILSSO.”

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Limited unstructured cultural immersion was found due to a rigid schedule. Despite this, cultural exposure was highly reported, and many participants shared further development of their cultural competence. Similarly, while agriculture industry exposure was experienced and shared to have benefited many participants, true knowledge gain was not reported. Rather, agriculture industry exposure created a sense of perspective among participants, and their agriculture experience back home in the United States. This study abroad program served as a supplementary learning opportunity that allowed students to view practical application, develop their diversity consciousness (Bucher, 2015), and experience transculturation (Bucher, 2015), but did not assist in the gain of industry knowledge (Cheng, 2013; Huffman et al., 2020). To truly determine both participant knowledge gain and development of diversity consciousness, future studies should implement a quantitative instrument to explore these phenomena. Future autophotography studies should incorporate post-trip interviews to gain a deeper understanding of photos and photo caption contexts. Finally, a comparison study should be completed to further compare the National FFA Organization’s domestic study tours and STSA programs and intended leadership learning outcomes.

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