

**Developing Cultural Competence Among Students: A Short-Term Study Abroad in
Morocco**

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Introduction

The U.S. has experienced growing diversity due to increased immigration rates since 1965. The immigrant population comprises approximately 13.6% of the total population, with most immigrants coming from Latin America and Asia (Cohn & Caumont, 2016; Passel et al., 2022). In recent years, this has led to cultural conflict and tensions between social identity groups (Dimock & Wike, 2020). As foreign-born individuals have also become a more significant part of the U.S. labor force, diversity has become increasingly valuable in organizations for its potential competitive advantages (Patrício & Franco, 2022). Education institutions are now focusing on preparing students to be globally and culturally competent to meet the demands of a diverse workforce (Coleman et al., 2021). Globalization has played a significant role in the growth of diversity, influencing economic, political, and sociocultural dimensions (Walter, 2021). The effects of globalization have been both beneficial, leading to increased global connections and mindsets, and controversial, with criticisms of uneven interdependence and one-way influence.

Additionally, globalization has shifted references for local and global identities, resulting in the development of bicultural identities (Melluish, 2014). Given these influences, institutions must adapt their curriculums, assessments, policies, and personnel to promote cultural competence and inclusivity on campus (Wiersma-Mosley, 2019). Study abroad programs have been used to broaden students' global perspectives and develop cultural competence, offering unique experiences to work with diverse groups. However, cultural immersion alone does not guarantee the development of intercultural competence (Rosch & Haber-Curran, 2013). Students must be challenged to think beyond a Western lens and reflect to integrate their learning from these experiences (Grant et al., 2019). This study aimed to examine the impact of immersive study-abroad experiences in developing intercultural competencies.

Theoretical Framework

The study was based on Brown's (1998; 2004) Processing Value Judgements model, which explores how instructional methods influence resistance to cultural diversity sensitivity training among preservice educators. The model describes students' cognitive process to process new information through deflection and reflective filters to determine if they will accept or reject the new information and form a new worldview. Students come into the learning process with preconceived value judgments and use filters to process new multicultural information based on their past experiences, values, and cultural backgrounds. If the information is processed beyond initial deflection filters, students reevaluate it through intrinsic filters to retain or reject it from long-term memory. Students must resolve conflicts with their current beliefs through reflective filters to integrate the information into their long-term knowledge base.

Methodology

This study was part of a more extensive qualitative study using blogs, observations, and interviews as data sources. Content analysis via MaxQDA, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDA) software, was the primary methodology, and interviews were the data source. The sample consisted of 13 students from a research university in the US who participated in a study abroad in Morocco. Aided by peer mentoring teams facilitating guided reflection and discussions, students were encouraged to dive deeper into the academic content and apply it to their immersive experience. The study focused on reflective and deflection filters when processing information. Data collection involved observations and blog posts during the study abroad, followed by semi-structured interviews after the participants returned. The data was analyzed using Brown's (1998; 2004) Processing Value Judgements model.

Results

The data analysis from observation, blog posts, and interviews revealed insights into the development of cultural competence among the students who participated in the study abroad in Morocco. Students encountered various challenges and opportunities for growth during their immersion experience. The data suggest that many students approached cultural differences with reflective filters, relying on previous experiences, existing beliefs, and personal values. Approximately 312 segments were coded into 11 emerging themes, including prior multicultural experience, limited multicultural experience, program connections, conflict resolution, experiential evaluation, aspirations and motivations, anxiety, value judgments, comfortability acting in multicultural contexts, stored perspectives on cultural diversity, and sustained conflict.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the transformative potential of experiential learning in promoting cultural competence. Despite initial resistance and challenges, participants demonstrated their ability to navigate cultural differences and engage meaningfully in culturally diverse environments. These findings also supported the importance of structured reflection and experiential learning programs designed with intention. Students could critically examine their cultural assumptions through guided reflection and engagement with diverse perspectives. In summary, the study highlights the positive impact of immersive experiences on developing cultural competence. The students demonstrated self-awareness and willingness to engage with cultural differences, suggesting the importance of educators in cultivating the skills and attitudes necessary for global citizenship.

Educators and program administrators can leverage the findings to enhance the design and implementation of study abroad programs, integrating structured reflection activities and intercultural competence training to maximize the transformative potential of these experiences. Additionally, employers and organizations seeking to cultivate a diverse and inclusive workforce can benefit from understanding the value of immersive intercultural experiences in developing employees' cross-cultural competencies. Education institutions and corporate entities can collaborate on aligning the development of students as global workforce demands continue to evolve. By prioritizing intercultural learning and fostering environments that encourage open dialogue and empathy, institutions can better prepare individuals to navigate the complexities of an increasingly interconnected global society. The insights gained from this study offer practical guidance for promoting cultural competence and fostering meaningful intercultural interactions in both educational and professional contexts.

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