

**Digital Dialogues: Enhancing Cross-Cultural Knowledge through Student Blogging**

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## **Introduction and Review of Literature**

Study abroad programs are excellent for teaching cross-cultural knowledge through immersive experiences (Ruth, et al., 2019; Strange & Gibson, 2017), but cross-cultural competence does not develop by merely studying abroad (Deardorff, 2015). Understanding that some students travel abroad with misconceptions and stereotypical attitudes towards cultures different than their own must be met with a well-developed, proactive, and deliberate cross-cultural curriculum (Carley & Tudor, 2010; Rodsai, et al., 2017). As students encounter diverse viewpoints and cultures during study abroad experiences, a reflective curriculum is essential to serve as a platform to critically reflect and synthesize new information to change or add knowledge to their worldview perspectives (Wereszczyńska, 2018).

One way of creating a well-rounded and deliberate cross-cultural curriculum during a study abroad experience is with blogging. Blogs, a web-based online journal, provides the opportunity for a writer to express subjective ideas on which readers are invited to comment (Farmer et al., 2008; Garcia et al., 2019). By using proactive blogging techniques, educators and facilitators can create pre-determined and specific blogging topics to guide students towards synthesizing new cross-cultural information (Dumova, 2012; Efimova & De Moor, 2005).

## **Conceptual Framework**

Guided by Brown's (2004) Processing Judgements Model, this conceptual framework was developed to explain the impact an educator and educational experience had on guiding students through cross-cultural information processes. This framework examines how individuals use a reflection process to synthesize new information through filters to determine whether to continue evaluating new information and adapt it as part of their new cross-cultural worldview or reject the information for previously held views (Brown, 2004; Holder et al., 2020).

## **Purpose and Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to explore how collegiate students participating in a faculty-led, two-week agricultural sciences and leadership education study abroad experience in Morocco synthesized cross-cultural knowledge through blogging. More specifically, do purposeful, intentional, and reflective blogging topics encourage cross-cultural learning and engagement during study abroad experiences? The research questions guiding this study were:

1. Were examples of students using deflection filters (prior experiences, perceived knowledge, cultural values, history) and reflective filters (anxiety, aspirations, self-awareness, motivation, value judgments) present in the blog posts?
2. Were examples of students integrating new information (editing beliefs, making decisions, intent to act) present in the blog responses?

## **Methods**

This qualitative study analyzed a multi-faceted reflective blogging exercise involving 13 students who participated in the agricultural and leadership study abroad experience to Morocco at the University of Georgia during May 2024 term. Students completed required readings on leading across cultural differences and researched a marginalized identity they observed while in

Morocco, focusing on the following blogging topics: 1) Race, Ethnicity, Culture, or Religion; 2) Sexual Orientation or Gender Roles; and 3) Ability or Social Status.

Using blogger.com, students created blog entries addressing how the chosen identity is marginalized, what they learned, how it impacted their understanding of the identity, and what could be done to address the disparity. Furthering discussions, students were asked to comment on each other's blogs with their reaction and share a new piece of information about the identity that they found was not included in the original post. Researchers conducted a content analysis of the blog posts and responses, using deductive analytical approaches to identify patterns related to the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

## **Results**

This qualitative study looked at how purposeful and intentional curriculum design encouraged cross-cultural learning and reflection through blogging. Phrases indicating deflective and reflective filtering were found in the 38 original entries analyzed. Along with this, students exhibited more integration of culturally sensitive language in presenting the identities and leadership concepts in addressing disparities over the course of the program.

One example of gaining an understanding of cultural differences through their immersive experience was a student blogging about her experience of trying to order couscous while at a restaurant. "Surprisingly, my request was immediately shot down and redirected to another dish. Although this was unexpected, I happily and confusedly ordered something else recommended by the waiter, a dish called tajine. From this experience, I learned that these particular foods have religious and cultural significance in Morocco, which I was unaware of." She continues by sharing: "Upon discussion with my fellow travelers and through a little research, I found that couscous may only be eaten on Fridays – I had tried to order it on a Wednesday. In most Arab and Muslim countries like Morocco, Holy Friday is the last day of the week and is an official holiday of great religious significance to Muslims. Because Friday is a special day of gathering and prayer, Moroccans celebrate it in their own way by preparing couscous."

Similarly, increased integration of new cross-cultural knowledge was present in the 46 responses analyzed with phrases that discussed editing their beliefs about the identities and how to lead in these diverse contexts using strategies discussed in the assigned readings. One student described a conversation she had with the tour guide about hijabs being completely optional for Moroccan woman. The student discussed her thoughts and previous preconceptions of hijab wearing in both professional and personal life. She shares: "The sole purpose was to honor God, and I respect that."

## **Implications & Recommendations**

This study, although limited in scope, demonstrates that blogging can enhance cross-cultural competence among study abroad students by providing curriculum that encourages the use of deflective and reflective filters to process cultural differences and challenge personal beliefs, therefore shifting their worldview. Future research should be conducted exploring how educators can use the Processing Judgements Model (Brown, 2004) to develop other educational experiences to support students' processing and adoption of cross-cultural information.

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