

Beyond the Classroom: Reflections on Growth and Global Awareness After a Short-Term Study Abroad

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Introduction & Literature Review

Not all students can afford the cost or time of a long-term experience; short-term international experiences (less than four weeks) can assist students in becoming more globally engaged (Fischer, 2009). Short-term study abroad (STSA) trips are crucial in growing the global perspectives, communication skills, and self-awareness of college students (VanDerZanden & Iles, 2013). Additional studies have investigated STSA experiences on student learning objectives such as cultural competency (Bunch et al., 2018) and career aspirations (Uscanga et al., 2023).

The long-term impact of STSA has not been fully understood, but a few scholars have conducted follow-up studies with program participants. Garbers et al. (2022) interviewed students seven months after a STSA service-learning experience. Hock (2024) conducted Zoom interviews with participants on her study abroad trip five years after the experience. Both studies reported that students remembered key aspects of the experience and applied what they learned after returning.

There is a need to continue to investigate the long-term impacts of study abroad experiences to improve the planning and facilitation of these impactful programs.

Theoretical Framework

The constructivist learning theory asserts that learners actively construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiences, rather than passively receiving information (Narayan et al., 2013). This process involves engaging with their environment, interacting with others, and reflecting on those experiences to make meaning (Narayan et al., 2013). According to theorists such as Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984), learning is most effective when individuals are able to connect new knowledge to prior experiences, critically evaluate those experiences, and adapt their understanding accordingly.

Methodology

The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate the impact of a short-term study abroad experience to Austria, Czechia, and Germany during the summer of 2024. All students who traveled were invited to a Zoom interview ($N = 14$) eight months post-trip. After multiple rounds of recruitment attempts, six students agreed to participate. Qualitative interviews were conducted to investigate the research question: What was the impact of the STSA on student development?

Six students (two males, four females) were interviewed about their experiences during the trip and how it has impacted them since returning. During their undergraduate experience, three of these students studied Agricultural Education, and three studied Agricultural Communications and Journalism at Kansas State University. Five students had previously traveled outside of the country, but to locations close to the U.S. It was one student's first experience abroad.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom and ranged from 30 to 45 minutes in length. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences in the pre-departure course, their time spent in-country, and the impact of the experience on their global awareness since returning. Each interview was recorded and transcribed using Zoom's built-in tools. In addition to the recordings, the interviewer took field notes and engaged in reflective journaling following each session.

Transcripts were shared with participants for member checking prior to the commencement of data analysis. The data were analyzed using a systematic process of open, axial, and selective coding, as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990). To ensure research rigor, strategies recommended by Erlandson et al. (1993) were employed. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to protect their identities. Approval for the study was obtained from Kansas State University prior to the recruitment of participants.

Results & Conclusions

Four themes emerged: *global awareness, comfortability with travel and new situations, intercultural development growth, and meaningful connections with peers*. One quote per theme is included to provide an example of the findings.

Theme 1: Global Awareness

Students shared that they gained knowledge of global economic systems and the impact on the U.S. economic system. *“You can read interviews, read articles, but getting to talk to like other farmers, other students outside of the US.. and listening about their problems, what they face, and also like what they're good at and what they strive at compared to the U.S. I think is very cool.” - Olivia*

Theme 2: Comfortability with Travel and New Situations

Students learned how to navigate public transportation, communicate with locals, and had the opportunity to explore each location on their own. *“I think it really, really helped make me comfortable to be able to travel abroad.” - Alex*

Theme 3: Intercultural Development Growth

Intercultural development was conveyed through open-minded conversations and reflections throughout the STSA. *“We get so caught up in our little worlds. But it's always good to get a different perspective on other people's cultures.” - Jacob*

Theme 4: Meaningful Connections with Peers

Students shared that the relationships they created through this experience were truly intentional and endured since returning home from the STSA. *“When I left for the trip, I didn't really have intentions of like building such good community on the trip, but that was something that resulted from it that I appreciated... I just didn't realize that it would develop into such good friendships.” - Avery*

Overall, the participants indicated the value and impact they received from the experience and their intentions for future international trips.

Implications/Recommendations/Impact

Although there were only six participants interviewed, they were able to help the authors investigate the experience and share their perspectives. Recommendations for future research and practice include intentional pre-trip orientation sessions, more purposeful post-trip reflections, and planned methods to evaluate student learning and growth. STSAs are an impactful way to increase student intercultural development and students should be encouraged to participate in one during the college career.

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