



Using an Intention/Reflection Practice to Focus Students towards Future Professions in a Short-Term International Travel Experience

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Abstract:

The article describes a student-centered approach to generating meaningful learning outcomes in a short-term study abroad program. A practice named Intention/Reflection (I/R) was used to help students to identify, articulate, and reflect upon learning objectives that were personally meaningful, within the broader framework of the intended outcomes of the course. Secondly, this exercise was intended to limit the potential cultural and logistic obstacles of the travel experience, and enhance the students' overall experience. This process included three distinct reflective writing periods: prior to travelling, during the trip, and after the trip. The I/R practice encouraged the students to engage in, and take partial ownership of the quality of their learning experiences through a self-directed learning component while abroad. Qualitative data collection revealed student focus on their future professions. The evaluated effects of the student-selected activities that emerged from the I/R practice, and how other instructors may incorporate I/R for study abroad, are also discussed.

Keywords: Intention, reflection, engagement, international student-centered learning, self-directed learning

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According to the Institute of International Education (IIE), the rate of US students studying abroad had tripled in the last two decades and rose 3.4% just between the 2010-11 and 2011-12 academic school years (IIE Open Doors Fast Facts, 2013). The bulk of research on study abroad has historically been in the context of foreign language learning (Engle & Engle, 2004; Segalowitz et al., 2004), intercultural learning experiences (Engle & Engle, 2004; Jackson, 2005) or in the area of student learning and development (Hadis, 2005; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004). Understudied is the effect of student-directed formative assessments and reflective writing in study abroad programs, in which students are encouraged to articulate and reflect upon their unique interests in such an experience. Furthermore, study abroad research has primarily focused on mid-length (one or two quarters or one semester) or long-term (one academic or calendar

year) study abroad programs (McKeown, 2009). However, increases in students in study abroad programs are predominantly in short-term programs (summer or less than 8 weeks) while mid-length and long-term study abroad programs have been showing slight decreases over the last several years. Currently, short-term programs (59%) comprise a larger percentage than mid-length and long-term programs combined (41%) (IIE Open Doors Fast Facts, 2013).

Traveling for an extended period in a foreign land offers obstacles unforeseen by many college students. They may not be prepared to handle vastly different experiences in their choices of available food, different languages, lodging standards, and many other cultural idiosyncrasies (Lenz & Wister, 2008). When confronted with such differences, some students may regress in their thinking to simply technical or pragmatic tasks involved mainly with getting through the days. They can experience what some researchers have titled, “culture shock” when in such new environments (Adler, 1975). When this occurs, a rich learning experience can be missed because students may not be able to fully process their experiences. Missing such educational moments can be a distressing and frustrating outcome, for both student and instructor. Students often spend thousands of dollars on these experiences, and rightfully expect a rich learning experience. Instructors may be frustrated by students’ inability to truly embrace the experience because of the practical day-to-day obstacles. This is especially true when one considers the potential benefits to student learning that occur as a result of even short-term international travel (Ingraham & Peterson, 2004; Lenz & Wister, 2008; Mapp, 2012; McKeown, 2009; McLaughlin & Johnson, 2006; Tarrant & Lyons, 2011). In an attempt to offset or mitigate these challenges of a study abroad learning experience, the authors used an I/R practice, as outlined below.

Intention/Reflection Practice Defined

The process of reflection, along with the purposeful act of reflective writing, has been promoted as meaningful and effective learning activities for decades. Research highlighting the benefits of reflective writing ranges across a wide spectrum of educational disciplines and environments. According to Carlson, Chu, Denial, and Lyons (2007), “When students spend time thinking about the work they have done and then documenting it in a written journal, they are able to connect abstract concepts to the critical thinking that is so necessary in clinical care” (p. 44). Examples of how this can have been used in study abroad programs include blogs (Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Lee, 2012), essays, open-ended questionnaires, and other forms of reflective writing (Lens & Wister, 2008; Mapp, 2012; McKeown, 2009; McLaughlin & Johnson, 2006; Tarrant & Lyons, 2011).

Worthy of mention is the assertion that benefits of reflective writing extend beyond a particular course or discipline. Students have remarked how a journal assignment prepared them to respond to questions asked during professional interviews, and influenced the types of learning that occurred for them (Cisero, 2006). Journal writing can become a thread from one experience to the next as each entry is connected to the following entry (Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 2002). This connection of learning experiences can be especially important in a study abroad program, given the distractions and challenges mentioned above.

Joshua McKeown (2009) discussed how reflective writing contributed to the intellectual development of first-time travelers in a short-term study abroad program. He defines intellectual development thusly:

Intellectual development measures a student’s ability to think in complex ways, to view and interpret information in a diverse and pluralistic world, to embrace multiple and relativistic viewpoints

instead of rigid ‘black-or-white’ arguments, and ultimately to commit to beliefs and ways of thinking that reflect both a more sophisticated intellect and a more responsible worldview. (McKeown, 2009, p. 3)

However, as Leijen, Valtna, Leijen, and Pedaste (2012) point out, student reflection can vary dramatically in terms of quality, which affects the overall learning experience. Improving the quality of reflection – sometimes referred to as the breadth and depth of thinking (Lucas, 2012) – is consistent with overarching goals of higher education. Honesty and lack of a clear purpose are other issues that have been identified with reflecting writing activities (Duckett, 2002; Williams & Wessel, 2004). The design of the I/R practice attempts to mitigate these potential pitfalls by allowing the learner to identify their own purpose and then connecting it to course learning objectives, as outlined below.

By definition, reflective writing activities rely on learning experiences that have occurred in the past. In a study abroad program, students may find varying degree of value or interest in the broad range of these experiences. To narrow the focus on the most valuable experiences, the researchers used an I/R activity to help students identify their own learning goals or intentions. It should be noted that this short-term study abroad program included several non-structured hours each day to allow students opportunities to see and experience more and varied activities during their limited time. Anecdotal evidence from previous years suggested that students wished they had used their unstructured time more effectively, and taken time before the trip to learn more about various places they were going to visit.

As noted by Fierke and Lepp (2015), adult learners have a desire to understand why they are learning something, and how that knowledge or skill translates to their immediate or future professional work (Knowles, 1980). When this occurs, adult learners are likely to be more engaged, proactive, and focused in acquiring the necessary knowledge or skill (Brookfield, 2000). Knowles (1980) and Brookfield (2000) are not the first to suggest that student intent is important in the learning process. Piaget’s (1969) work in educational psychology, which many argue was the basis for constructivism, suggests that students who are actively involved in identifying, acquiring, and applying needed information are more likely to achieve intended outcomes. If the experience is successful, research suggests that learners are likely to repeat the process (von Glasersfeld, 1984), thereby beginning a positive 3-step cycle of intention, learning activity, reflection, and then back to intention.

With this in mind, the authors employed the I/R practice in an effort to link students’ intentions and reflections in a unified activity. As Fierke and Lepp (2015) note, “a student who has identified learning goals (intention) and then is able to document the achievement of those goals (reflection) may be more likely to engage in the learning process repeatedly” (p. 50). Through this I/R practice, the authors hoped to mitigate some of the obstacles inherent in a foreign language learning environment, and promote student focus and engagement to maximize learning outcomes.

Methods

I/Rs were introduced in 2013, 2014, and 2015 during a short-term study abroad three-credit graduate/undergraduate course, “Historical Perspectives of Community Health through Culture and Art in Italy.” An essential core of the course curriculum requires students to analyze the impact of social and cultural factors on community health and to relate to aspects of preventative health care in the present. It is also intended to connect students to their future role in health care professions. The course was offered during May term where students travel three

weeks throughout Italy. Students are from various graduate and undergraduate programs and the number varies from year to year.

The I/R questions were designed by researchers and faculty involved in the course. Questions were designed to facilitate the student's ownership of the learning process. In addition to the learning objectives of the course, questions were developed to help students seek what they were most passionate learning about their role as future health care professionals in anticipation of and during the class. Completed I/Rs were to be at least one to two pages in length.

In advance of implementation of the I/R practice, the questions were informally tested with a group of eight pharmacy and graduate students. The test group answered the questions based on an imagined trip they were about to take, or a trip they had taken in the past. The final I/R questions were then adapted (from the test group responses) to invoke greater depth of thought among the students.

Students were to complete three phases of I/Rs regarding their expectations and experiences with the course. The first I/R was done before students left on the trip, the second occurred mid-point during their time in Italy, and the third phase was finished upon return to the United States.

Pre-Excursion

The first phase was meant to capture students' expectations and goals for what they would like to accomplish during the study abroad course. It was assumed that students would be interested in deep learning, as opposed to surface learning. This approach to learning, identified by Baxter, Mattick, and Kuyken (2012), suggests that students who are intentional about what they hope to gain from a learning experience are more likely to engage in deeper thinking, which provides more meaningful outcomes for the learner. Additionally, students were informed that identifying very broad goals may not allow them the opportunity to feel fulfilled during the experience, and being too narrow and specific may not allow the opportunity to be open to additional experiences.

- Questions of Phase 1: (Pre)*
- 1.1 Describe your previous domestic and international travel experiences.
 - 1.2 What experiences have you had with cultures other than your own?
 - 1.3 Why are you engaging in this international learning experience?
 - 1.4 Identify at least 3 specific areas of interest you want to explore further while you're in the "Historical Perspectives of Community Health through Culture and Art in Italy" course. *Please take photos depicting these specific areas of interest when in Italy as they will need to be included in your post excursion write-up.*
 - 1.5 In what ways do you feel this experience will affect you in your future profession?
 - 1.6 How can you best prepare yourself to be healthy during the international learning experience (physically, mentally, and emotionally)?
 - 1.7 Share any additional thoughts/questions/revelations.

Figure 1. Phase 1 (pre) intention/reflection exercise.

Mid-Point

The second phase was designed to help capture what students had done to that point during the experience, and highlight any changes that might enhance overall learning while still abroad. The questions were designed specifically to build from the responses given in the pre-excursion exercise.

Questions of Phase 2: (Mid)

2.1 At this point in the trip, what experiences have provided the most value for you, personally and professionally? *Please take photos depicting these experiences when in Italy as they will need to be included in your post excursion write-up.*

2.2 What are some things that you didn't expect? What surprised you about yourself?

2.3 Based on the 3 specific areas of interest that you identified prior to departure (Question 1.4) that you wanted to explore, describe those you have currently experienced. What did you learn from those experiences? *Please take photos depicting these specific areas of interest when in Italy as they will need to be included in your post excursion write-up.*

2.4 If you haven't experienced them, why not? If you still would like to experience those learning opportunities, what are your plans for achieving that goal?

2.5 Describe any new areas of interest you would like to explore further while you are on this international journey. How will you achieve these? *Please take photos depicting these new areas of interest when in Italy as they will need to be included in your post excursion write-up.*

2.6 How can you continue to keep yourself healthy during this international learning experience (physically, mentally, emotional)?

2.7 Share any additional thoughts/questions/revelations.

Figure 2. Phase 2 (Mid) intention/reflection exercise.

Post-Excursion

The third phase was designed to “close the loop” on the intentions of the student. Questions prompted students to compare their expectations to what they actually experienced, and reflect on reasons for any differences. Additionally, this phase helped to capture how students plan to use these learning experiences in their future practice (i.e. how they may carry these experiences forward in their lives).

Questions of Phase 3: (Post)

3.1 Of the interest areas that you previously identified as important in Question 1.4 and Question 2.5, please include a photo of each one that you experienced. Write a brief explanation of each experience. What did you learn from each experience? Also, please describe how (or if) each experience affected you. Please include the photos depicting these specific areas of interest that you experienced into a WORD file with each photo at the top followed by a brief explanation of the experience, what you learned and how it affected you.

3.2 Were there areas of interest that you discussed in questions 1.4, 2.4 and 2.5 that you never experienced? If so, was this by choice? Discuss why you did not experience these and how you feel about it.

3.3 What was the most influential thing you learned during your international experience? What are some things you didn't expect? What surprised you about yourself?

3.4 How will you apply the learning experiences from “Historical Perspectives of Community Health through Culture and Art in Italy” course in the future? Share how this course (readings, tours, presentations, travel, etc.) might influence you in your future profession.

3.5 Describe how you kept yourself healthy during the international learning experience (physically, mentally, emotionally)? Identify additional ways that could have improved your well-being.

3.6 Share any additional thoughts/questions/revelations.

Figure 3. Phase 3 (post) intention/reflection exercise.

Results

After the courses concluded, faculty conducted a qualitative analysis of the completed I/Rs. Responses to each of these items were de-identified, and analyzed using NVivo 10 software. Specific questions, 1.5 and 3.4, were analyzed to connect students to their future role within health care professions. These I/R questions offered students the opportunity to explore in

advance their own specific and pointed areas of interest and connect them with their most influential experience(s) throughout the short term international study abroad program.

Responses to questions 1.5 and 3.4 were thematically analyzed for 51 students who took the “Historical Perspectives of Community Health through Culture and Art in Italy” course in 2013, 2014, and 2015. Descriptive coding was applied to each sentiment within the response, so as to capture the main thoughts of the student (sub-themes). The main thoughts, or sub-themes, were then grouped together into broader ideas (themes) by questions in order to identify major concepts. The resulting analysis examines the number of students who touched upon each sub-theme and theme.

Question 1.5, “In what ways do you feel this experience will affect you in your future profession,” was answered at the beginning of the course. In response to this question, four themes emerged: Professional skills or development, Patient care, Personal development, and Career (Table 1). More than two-thirds of students referred to professional skills or development in some way, and a little more than half referenced a concept related to patient care. More specifically, the most prevalent response from students is that they thought the experience would enable them to relate to patients from another culture. One student wrote, “I think that this experience will help me to better accommodate future patients with diverse backgrounds. I will be able to use what I learn about other cultures in my future practice in order to provide better care for my patients.” Another common sub-theme that emerged related to patient care was being able to incorporate practices from another culture to enhance care. An increase in cultural knowledge/competency and cultural awareness/sensitivity were also mentioned frequently by students as learning that would affect them in their future profession.

Table 1
In What Ways Do You Feel this Experience Will Affect You in Your Future Profession?

Theme	Sub-Theme	Representative Example	# of Students	(%)
Professional skills or development			34	(68.0%)
	Increased cultural knowledge/competency	“I think this experience will affect me in my future profession by furthering my cultural competence.”	14	(28.0%)
	Increased cultural awareness/sensitivity	“I think this experience will affect me in my future profession in that it will help to make me a more culturally aware individual.”	11	(22.0%)
	International travel experience	“As far as my future profession, I think this experience will provide me a better understanding of travelling outside of the country, which is a part of what I want to do for a career.”	6	(12.0%)
	Understanding history of the profession	“Knowing the history of my profession gives me background and knowledge to see how it has progressed and see how it’s still changing in profound ways.”	6	(12.0%)
	Integrate concepts	“I feel as though this course will show me that two things that may seem unrelated, like art and health, can in fact greatly impact each other and shape our cultures and communities”	1	(2.0%)
Patient care			28	(56.0%)
	Relating to patients from different cultures	“It will allow me to experience a culture of people within their own setting and could allow me to better relate to people from different backgrounds.”	18	(36.0%)
	Incorporate practices from another culture	“I believe that it will be good to compare to the US to see what is better and what is not and then hopefully bring ideas back to implement into my future practice.”	14	(28.0%)
	Community or public health	“I anticipate that being immersed in a culture with such deep roots will give me a greater appreciation for the public and for	4	(8.0%)

Theme	Sub-Theme	Representative Example	# Students	(%)	of
		public health.”			
	Art therapy	“I also hope to gain a better appreciation for how art can exert a therapeutic effect, and when combined with medication therapy, can help improve patient health outcomes.”	3	(6.0%)	
	Folk medicine	“I hope to use these experiences to inform how to navigate American folk medicine and current pharmaceutical practices.”	1	(2.0%)	
	Language barriers	“I think the language barrier is something that I can also apply later in practice, as the US has a wide variety of languages commonly spoken.”	1	(2.0%)	
	Individual person care	“When I am a pharmacist I will have patients that are different from me...It is important, to accept each patient for who they are.”	1	(2.0%)	
Personal development			10	(20.0%)	
	Open mindedness	“I think in the future this experience will allow me to be more open-minded by knowing that there is more than one way to look at things and more than one way to do things...”	5	(10.0%)	
	More responsible and mature	“I think I will also come back more responsible and matured, which will definitely help me out in my future.”	2	(4.0%)	
	Coping with different situations	“...I think I may run into a lot of obstacles while I am abroad, and it will be great for me to learn how to cope with unfamiliar situations in a different country.”	2	(4.0%)	
	Confidence and self-awareness	“I feel that an experience like travelling to a completely new country will help boost my confidence and self-awareness.”	1	(2.0%)	
	More well rounded	“Every traveling experience I learn more about myself and become a more well-rounded individual.”	1	(2.0%)	
Career			4	(8.0%)	
	Job searching	“I also think this experience will affect my future profession in the sense that I will stand out from my peers when employers are looking at my resume.”	4	(8.0%)	
Total # students responding			50		

Note: Comments may fit into more than one theme/sub-theme, so the sum of percentages may exceed 100%. Percentages reflect the proportion of the total number students responding with comments related to a particular theme/sub-theme.

Question 3.4, How will you apply the learning experiences from “Historical Perspectives of Community Health through Culture and Art in Italy” course in the future,” was answered at the end of the course. The same four themes emerged as in question 1.5, but, instead of Professional skills or development being the predominant theme, it was Patient care (Table 2). Thirty students or 75% of those students affiliated with the short term study abroad experience identified their focus on patient care. The ability to relate to patients from different cultures was confirmed as a learning experience, with a quarter of students referencing it as an application. However, the most commonly mentioned application was related to art therapy, whereas only a few students mentioned it at the start of the course. One student wrote, “The most intriguing things I learned came from exploring the hospital in Sienna where artwork was on the walls to help the patients. I strongly believe in this concept and plan on implementing it in my future practice.” An area that wasn’t identified at the beginning of course that was noted at the end by several students was an increased excitement about their profession. One student reflected, “I also feel like I can relate my drive, passion, and interest in pharmacy back to Michelangelo’s drive and passion for sculpture. His innovation is something that I hope to carry forward with me as I set out to make changes and push the pharmacy profession forward.”

Table 2

How Will You Apply the Learning Experiences from “Historical Perspectives of Community Health through Culture and Art in Italy” Course in the Future?

Theme	Sub-Theme	Representative Example	# (%) of Students
Patient care			30 (75.0%)
	Art therapy	“I think this class has made me a believer in art therapy.”	11 (27.5%)
	Relating to patients from different cultures	“In the future, when I encounter patients from a different cultural background, I will be more able to connect with them through the things we have in common instead of letting our differences put distance between us.”	10 (25.0%)
	Community/public health	“... depending on an individual’s community health aspect will determine the kind of care they will receive.”	9 (22.5%)
	Herbal or folk medicine	“Stemming from the Aboca experience, I would like to learn more about herbals and natural medicine and see how I can apply that knowledge to pharmacy practice.”	5 (12.5%)
	Language barriers	“I have gained an appreciation for a translator for the need to know exactly what is going on for my patient.”	4 (10.0%)
	Individual person care	“I think my future patients will appreciate any effort I put in to understand from where they are coming, but I think they will appreciate it even more if I treat them as individuals.”	3 (7.5%)
Professional skills or development			20 (50.0%)
	Excitement about profession	“This trip got me even more excited about the profession that I have chosen to pursue. I think this course really helped me see how truly passionate I am about health.”	6 (15.0%)
	Increased cultural awareness/sensitivity	“This class helped me to achieve my academic and personal goal of becoming a more well rounded and culturally aware individual.	6 (15.0%)
	Increased cultural knowledge/competency	“I feel that I have become a lot more culturally competent.	3 (7.5%)
	Learning history of health	“I also learned a lot about current and past health. This will help me in my future career in the health field.”	3 (7.5%)
	Communication skills	“The presentation portion definitely will influence my future profession because I will have to be good at public speaking when working with people.”	2 (5.0%)
	Ability to travel internationally	“I think that I will be able to apply this class when travelling and exploring areas of foreign places in	2 (5.0%)

Theme	Sub-Theme	Representative Example	# (%) of Students
		a smart and attentive way.”	
	Research skills	“The readings I did might influence my future profession because I may need to do research on a topic in order to do my job.”	1 (2.5%)
	Note taking skills	“The tours could benefit me because I learned to take notes on the fly.”	1 (2.5%)
	Leadership skills	“First off, this course made a better leader. Leadership is essential to my future.”	1 (2.5%)
	Ability to prepare students	“I think that will help me as a teacher because I will know how to prepare my students for field trips and other activities.”	1 (2.5%)
	Not fitting the mold	“He [Michelangelo] inspires me to not fit the mold, rather to make my own mold and be the change I want to see in the world.”	1 (2.5%)
Personal development			9 (22.5%)
	Ability to handle stress or getting out of comfort zone	“This experience will influence me in my future profession because I will be able to handle stressful situations appropriately and patiently.”	2 (5.0%)
	More well rounded	“This trip has made me more rounded as a person.”	2 (5.0%)
	Self-confidence	“I know this trip has definitely brought out a brighter and bolder side of me that has been hiding for way too long.”	2 (5.0%)
	Open mindedness	“This experience will help me keep an open mind when working with patients from a different cultural background than my own.”	1 (2.5%)
	People skills and adapting to new environments	“Dealing with and working with people I may not get along with... working with people of other cultures and practices, and adapting to different environments.”	1 (2.5%)
	Appreciating beauty	“I’ve learned that I have to slow down and appreciate my surroundings, both the beauty around me and the company that I surround myself with.”	1 (2.5%)
Career			5 (12.5%)
	Career or school path	“I loved the trip to Aboca, and am really considering going into the environmental and sustainability field.”	3 (7.5%)
	Job search	“In the future I will use my experience when finding a job...”	2 (5.0%)
Total # students responding			40

Note: Comments may fit into more than one theme/sub-theme, so the sum of percentages may exceed 100%. Percentages reflect the proportion of the total number students responding with comments related to a particular theme/sub-theme.

Conclusion

A study abroad class can transform a student's thinking. Capturing their own reflections in a systematic way is another way for students to lead their own experiences, especially when identifying ways it will affect them in their future profession. As self-directed learners in the I/R practice, students were in charge of articulating what they were interested in experiencing, adapting when necessary throughout the travels, and finally reflecting on their overall experience of what they learned and what they can continue to learn as they prepare to become health care professionals.

I/Rs also allow the faculty an up-close look at where their students are in the learning process. The I/Rs can reveal a more intimate view of the student's perspective, confirm the learning methods, and point to gaps or areas that need further refinement. I/Rs also give faculty a chance to make modifications during the trip in order for students to get the most out of the travel abroad experience and provide them additional insight to customize opportunities that they can use in their future careers.

The purpose of the study was to provide a student-centered learning opportunity to emphasize students as leaders/owners of their own learning beyond the classroom. The learning was an evolution beyond the syllabus and course objectives to enhance the overall experience and show how to connect it back to their lives and their preparation as professionals. The I/R practice continues to be used in various online and traditional classrooms as well as other short-term study abroad programs.

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