

Long Term Knowledge from Short Term Study Abroad in Brazil and South Africa: Facilitating Effective International Experiences

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Abstract

We organized and facilitated two short-term study abroad programs to Brazil and South Africa. The objective of this report is to reflect upon our international experiences, assess our approach to study abroad and encourage others to undertake future study abroad tours. We believe that participant preparation is important to making the most out of these short study tours. Although the time spent in-country is limited to twelve days, we leveraged the knowledge gained and the cultural experience by providing a semester-long course. This course addressed three important objectives: (1) academic preparation through student peer-reviewed presentations, (2) anxiety reduction through travel skill preparation and (3) team building exercises. While overseas, we utilized student leaders, who provided enormous assistance in logistics, making other students comfortable and bringing issues to our attention. We also made ourselves present as often as possible, in the attempt to bring a positive attitude towards all events and circumstances, as well as try to provide context and experience to the study tour experience. Students were encouraged to keep a journal during our travels. After arrival back home, students were required to write a paper that summarized and synthesized what they learned.

Introduction

International programs continue to expand in our increasingly globalized world, yet represent only 9.1 percent of all U.S. undergraduates (IIE, 2012). During the period 1994-2011, study abroad programs experienced growth and short-term programs grew faster than long-term programs. The total number of undergraduates

who went on a short-term (less than eight weeks) study abroad programs in 2010/2011 was 137,389 compared to 99,081 students in longer term study abroad programs during that year (IIE, 2012). Kolb (1984) defined experiential learning as, “*The process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience*” (p. 41). Based on this definition, we believe that short-term study abroad provides an outstanding form of experiential learning.

Short-term study abroad programs can provide a truly positive experience when planned and executed in a deliberate and thoughtful fashion. Bandura (1986) emphasized the idea of self-efficacy, or an individual’s confidence in his or her ability to negotiate the challenges inherent in the larger world. Bandura found that learning by doing is one of the most powerful ways that students acquire new knowledge and master skill development. We believe that staying connected to students as they experience international travel and a new culture provides a safe, powerful learning environment that cannot be duplicated in a traditional classroom setting.

Chieffo and Griffiths (2004) concluded that, “... *short term programs, even as short as one month, are worthwhile educational endeavors that have significant self-perceived impacts on students intellectual and personal lives*” (p. 174) and students who studied abroad were more confident in their levels of intercultural awareness and factual knowledge than their peers who remained on campus (p. 675). Although the time overseas was brief, preparation and assessment were rigorous, involved and occurred over a five-month

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period. The objective of this report is to reflect upon our international experiences, assess our approach to study abroad and encourage others to undertake future study abroad tours.

Methods

We planned, organized and implemented two short-term study abroad courses in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Kansas State University. In January 2012, we traveled with 28 College of Agriculture students to Brazil and in January 2013 we visited South Africa with 18 students. Both study tours were twelve days long and provided meaningful experiences for all participants, including students, faculty and one parent who joined us in Brazil. Details of these two programs are provided in the Appendix. We have been inspired and motivated to continue to offer short-term study tour courses and travel experiences for interested students. Our objective was to make the international travel experience as meaningful as possible for each participant. We believe that the care and effort put into planning and study result in beneficial outcomes and profound international tours.

Many faculty with short-term study abroad experience believe that these programs can provide the opportunity for worthwhile international experiences (Mills et al., 2010; Donnelly-Smith, 2009; Gordon et al., 2009; Long et al., 2010; and McMurtrie, 2009). Mills et al., (2010) summarized previous research with four determinants of the growth in short-term study abroad programs: (1) the need for student preparation for our global work environment, (2) a necessity for skill development for the increasingly multicultural U.S. work environment, (3) desire among universities to meet growing interest in study abroad among traditional, non-traditional and first generation college students and (4) to connect international experiences gained through study abroad programs with marketable job skills. Given these positive attributes of short term study abroad programs, we set out to provide the best possible experience to agricultural students when going overseas, many for the first time.

We selected countries, agricultural visits and experiences that would be most appropriate for our group of college students, most from farms and ranches in rural areas. Brazil and South Africa are nations that most of the students enrolled in the study tours would not venture to on their own. The destinations were selected based on impact on learning about agriculture and people, culture and places much different from our own. Because of the language, culture and location differences, we believe that strong preparation was important to the study tours.

Gordon (2009) charged faculty to provide “a careful balance between recreation and learning” (p. 134). We worked closely with an external, third party tour operator to design study tours that we believed would provide the greatest learning experiences (Figures 1 and 2). The short term study tours were relatively expensive (Figures 1 and 2), but costs were reduced with scholarships. The College of Agriculture provided enrolled students with USD500 and several students received significant scholarships from the Office of International Programs, based on merit and need.

Preparation: Pre-trip meetings

Previous literature emphasized that given the short time period in the short-term study abroad format, course design and delivery is critical to maintain academic standards, maximize personal growth and emphasize cultural learning (Hoffa, 2007; Long et al., 2010, Mills et al., 2010). Donnelly-Smith (2009) reported, “*Faculty members and program directors agree that when working with a short time frame for study abroad, preparation is tantamount for success, both for the students and for the faculty members leading the group*” (p. 13).

Following other study tour programs at Kansas State University, we designed our study abroad program to incorporate pre-trip meetings in the format of an academic class that met once each week during the semester prior to the international tour. This course addressed three important objectives: (1) academic preparation through student peer-reviewed presentations, (2) anxiety reduction through travel skill preparation and (3) team building exercises intended to assist students in getting to know one another. We hosted a dinner at our home for students to learn more about us and interact with each other.

Younes and Asay (2003) prescribed pre-trip meetings for preparation and Doring et al. (2009) and Scoffham and Barnes (2009) recommended engaging students in actively learning about the historical, political and cultural aspects of the country to be visited, as well as the historical interrelationships between nations. To accommodate this, students presented information about the country, including the economy, agriculture, international trade, culture, language and current events during each class session. Roberts and Jones (2009) found that “*By preparing lectures in advance, they can be better prepared to interpret the plethora of data and focus on aspects most important for their learning*” p. 405. These presentations were graded by the other students. The peer review provided solid feedback on both content and delivery. Peer grading provides a solid incentive for each student presentation to be of high quality. We also encouraged students who we

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Figure 1. Faculty Led Study Tour of Brazil Food and Agriculture.

Tour Dates: January 2-11, 2012

Class Dates: Fall 2011, Tuesdays 4:30-5:20 PM, Waters Annex 104

Program Description

AGEC 460, International Food and Agribusiness Study Tour of Brazil. A 10-day intensive Agricultural Economics study tour that will introduce students to the agriculture industry in Brazil, including livestock and crop production and management practices, food markets, agribusinesses, government operations as well as other historical and cultural educational opportunities. The culture and history of the country will also be studied. The course will include preparatory class meetings during the fall semester to acquaint students with the language, commodities, government and geography of the country and locations that will be visited. Prerequisites: Instructor permission. Completion of AGECE 120 or AGECE 121. Minimum GPA 2.5.

Highlights

- ✓ Arable farm, Cattle farm
- ✓ Grain and cotton cooperative
- ✓ Crops research station
- ✓ Ranch with AI and embryo transplant facility
- ✓ Biodiesel plant
- ✓ City tour of Rio de Janeiro
- ✓ Sugar Loaf Mountain and Tijuca Forest
- ✓ Samba show, beach time in Rio
- ✓ Visit to University of Agronomy
- ✓ Coffee plantation
- ✓ Food distribution company
- ✓ FATEC University of Technology
- ✓ JBS World Headquarters
- ✓ Meet with US Trade Representative

Costs

1. \$5696 tour (this includes airfare, hotels, in-country transportation, most meals, entrance fees, insurance, visa fees, contingencies, administrative fees, and tickets)
2. \$333 passport and vaccinations
3. \$688.70 tuition and fees for AGECE 460 (three credits toward ag econ elective).
 - There is \$500 financial support available to all students from the College of Agriculture.
 - Students may also apply for a travel scholarship of up to \$1000 per student through the Office of International Programs (OIP).

Figure 2. South Africa: International Food & Agribusiness Study Tour.

Study Tour Dates: January 2-14, 2013

Class Dates: Tuesdays 4:30-5:20 pm, Waters Annex 104. August 21, 2012 to December 11, 2012

Program Description

AGEC 460, International Food and Agribusiness Study Tour of South Africa is a 13-day intensive Agricultural Economics study tour that will introduce students to the agriculture industry in South Africa, including livestock and crop production and management practices, food markets, agribusinesses, government operations, as well as other historical and cultural educational opportunities. The culture and history of the country will also be studied. The course will include preparatory class meetings during the Fall 2012 semester to acquaint students with the language, commodities, government and geography of the country and locations that will be visited. Prerequisites: Instructor permission. Completion of AGECE 120 or AGECE 121. Minimum GPA 2.5.

Highlights

- ✓ Tour Cape Town, the oldest and most attractive city. Travel along the Atlantic coast to the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve, which is comprised of 1,200 plant species.
- ✓ Visit Robben Island, a World Heritage Site for its importance as both a cultural and historical shrine and "the world's most powerful symbol of resistance to oppression".
- ✓ Check out the V & A Waterfront, with the Victoria Wharf shopping mall, craft markets, a working brewery, and Two Oceans Aquarium.
- ✓ Visit the agriculture school of Mrs. Sabina Khoza, one of South Africa's top poultry farmers, producing 150,000 birds annually.
- ✓ Travel to the Inyoni Crocodile Estate in Brits, with more than 10,000 crocodiles.
- ✓ View the Loskop Irrigation Scheme, which delivers water to 16,117 hectares of land.
- ✓ Tour the farm of Danie de Beer, called "Wonderboom", which has corn, soybeans, cows, lions, and rhinos.
- ✓ Visit Kruger National Park, the first national park in South Africa in 1926.
- ✓ Check out the Jane Goodall Institute Chimpanzee Sanctuary.

Costs

- ✓ Program Fees Collected by the Study Abroad Office: \$6,470.00 (includes international airfare, program fees, group meals, gratuities/tips, OIP administration fee, class materials/bank wire/FedEx, emergency fee, and international medical insurance).
- ✓ Additional Anticipated Expenses: \$335 (for expenses such as passport fee, immunizations, and textbooks).
- ✓ Estimated K-State Tuition and Fees for Undergraduate Course: *\$693.60 for one 3 credit hour undergraduate K-State course. \$21.50 Division of Continuing Education Fee.

believed would do an outstanding job to make the first presentation, setting a high standard for all students who follow.

Jones and Bjelland (2004) stated that the first step in learning is "preflection," which they define as "the process of being consciously aware of the expectations associated with the learning experience" (p. 963). The peer-reviewed presentations caused preflection, built rapport among the students and formed the basis of a "pre-departure report" written by each student that summarized what they had learned about the nation, including agriculture, trade, economy and culture. Preflection occurred as students made presentations, wrote papers and discussed what to expect with other students and faculty leaders. These papers were 10-15 pages long and were universally well done. The cost of the study tour, together with the enthusiasm for the upcoming international travel, provided the motivation for students to put a great deal of time and effort into these papers. We believe that this provides evidence for the powerful nature of a study abroad experience: the excitement of learning becomes explicit and tangible.

Koenig (2007) reported that pre-trip sessions often focus on material on the destination country, but not on reducing student anxiety or team building. Therefore, during each pre-trip class, time was spent identifying student concerns, including group dynamics, the potential for culture shock, homesickness, language issues and fear of the unknown. The term, "culture shock" is often used as an indicator of difficulty experienced while visiting

foreign nations as tourists (Hotella, 2004; Oberg, 1960). We discussed the possibility of culture shock often during the weekly class meetings. An issue related to culture shock is anxiety due to travel. Although every student and faculty member shared some anxiety before the study tour, the fear was discussed by only some of the students, while others remained silent. We used each class meeting to emphasize that we all experience anxiety, but that we would conquer it together.

We also emphasized the unpredictable nature of international travel and how keeping an open mind will provide a more positive experience. The repetition of these ideas each week for an entire semester paid off when the study tour experienced logistical hurdles, or when exhaustion set in: by recalling the pre-trip mantra of being flexible to unexpected changes, students were more able to deal with the frequent changes in plans that arise during travel overseas. We experienced frequent changes in the itinerary during both tours, as the schedule was altered based on timing and availability of our farm and agribusiness hosts. When participants had been warned that this is a common, interesting and fun part of the study abroad experience, they seemed better able to accommodate unexpected changes,

Long et al. (2010) recommended using such pre-trip meetings to build student ownership in the course through teambuilding activities and each class session included a team building activity. Many of these activities are fun and include learning each other's names and learning

more about the background, interests and expectations of each participant. One activity that was particularly worthwhile was student interviews of each other: we provided a series of questions that students used to ask each other, which started conversations that were often meaningful and led to students becoming friends prior to the study abroad tour. We also invited students to a dinner at our home, to allow them to learn more about our background and lifestyle. This event allows students and faculty to get to know each other in a setting that is more similar to the travel experience than the classroom. We also schedule a dinner at a restaurant to continue the process of getting to know one another.

Use of Student Peer Leaders

Both study tours had student leaders, who helped with the logistics, organization and flow of the study tour experience. We found these leaders to be important components of the international travel experience. The leaders made sure the students were ready to go each morning, that no one was left behind and they took care of a large number of small crises, including headaches, sunburn, group dynamics (interpersonal relations) and a myriad of other small issues. The feedback and interaction between the student leaders and the faculty kept the study tour on track and facilitated providing a safe, positive experience for all participants

The student leaders for the first tour were selected by the other students in an election process on the first day of class. For the second tour, we were fortunate to have two of the students who traveled to Brazil enroll in the South Africa study tour. These experienced travelers were the obvious choice of student leaders and were invited by us to perform the student leader role. We had leadership meetings for an hour prior to each class meeting, to plan, organize and discuss each weekly meeting. This provides for deeper relationships between the student and faculty leaders, which facilitated our ability to work together while in-country. The student leaders did an outstanding job and there was no compensation for their excellent work.

Faculty Presence during the Study Tour

Daily group meetings were suggested by Younas and Asay (2003) as a strategy for greater learning. Although we did not have formal meetings each day, we made use of constant informal interactions, discussions and small group meetings, particularly during meals and during periods of downtime. Our experience working with college students provided the foundation for significant, meaningful conversations, interactions and, at times, admonitions. Being present for any and all issues that arise allowed us the opportunity to engage, assist and

mentor the study tour participants. This is perhaps the most meaningful aspect of the study tour experience for us as educators. Our emphasis as a teacher and student services professional is to provide students with information and experiences to learn and grow. For each participant, the personal growth was evident for each individual during our time abroad.

Student Journals and Post-Study tour wrap-up

Canfield, et al. (2009) recommended that students keep a personal journal for self-reflection during the study tour. We recommended, but not required, this practice and were pleased that nearly all students kept some sort of journal. Many students wrote by hand, others typed on a tablet or laptop and others took photos and wrote captions. Huesca (2013) found technology to be a hindrance to student experience during study abroad, since students remained in constant communication with their family and friends during a study tour to Africa. We found, however, that the use of phone and tablet cameras to capture and post photos provided a rewarding experience for many students. Keeping a photo journal, or blog, allowed students to review, reflect and digest their experiences. Given our full itinerary and how many destinations we had each day, this provided a good way to keep track of what happened on the study tour.

Although the journals were not required, we did require a final report that summarized and synthesized what each participant learned on the tours. Gardner, et al. (2008) reported that, "*The use of journals, blogs, reflective papers and group discussions permeate some of the best instructional design we have in our collegiate programs*" (p. 6). The journals provided a great source for writing the final paper, allowing students to recall their impressions, thoughts and views on the people, places and locations visited. For example, one student provided a careful description of her thoughts and emotions when we visited a poultry farm in South Africa run by workers who had difficult backgrounds, including prostitution and AIDs. A second student provided a detailed account of his first urban experience in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

Post study tour reflection papers were recommended by Long et al. (2010) and were assigned after both the Brazil and South Africa study tours. Gardner et al. (2008) stated that, "*Ideally, study abroad programs integrate experiential pedagogy with purposeful reflection to capitalize on the unique cultural learning laboratory in country. Reflective learning exercises are common among study abroad programs, both structured and unstructured*" (p. 6). The final paper was an open-ended assignment that provided students with a great deal of flexibility to summarize what they had learned.

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For most students, the final papers were well done and meaningful.

Gardner, et al. (2008) reported that post-tour meetings can provide a good practice for reflection, synthesis and integration of ideas and emotions experienced during the study tour. We met for dinner after each study tour, approximately two weeks afterward. These dinners provided a great way of reconnecting with a group of people who have shared an intense and meaningful experience together. We also had students complete assessment tools for each trip and used student comments to affirm our approach to short term study abroad. Student feedback was primarily about how the itineraries could be improved, but had no suggestions for improvement on the course format.

Marketable Job Skills

Sachau et al. (2010) found that marketable skills associated with study abroad programs can include increased knowledge, shaping attitudes and building confidence. Further, Gardener et al. (2008) asked employers to identify traits that set candidates with study abroad experience apart from others. Some of the most significant traits identified included:

- Interacting with people who hold different interests, values, or perspectives
- Understanding cultural differences in the workplace
- Adapting to situations of change
- Gaining new knowledge from experiences.

As facilitators and observers of student learning during our short-term study abroad, we believe that our students were exposed to multiple experiences which provided them with opportunities for enrichment on many of these traits. Site visits in both Brazil and South Africa were diverse and enabled students to further their knowledge in the areas of global agricultural production and international trade. Informal conversations occurred between members of our group and host-country nationals in both Brazil and South Africa. While some students were more open to these encounters than others, these “unscripted” conversations provided the opportunity for students to gain exposure to perspectives outside of their own.

International travel by its very nature requires adaptability. Students were exposed to changing itineraries, new foods and diverse viewpoints and cultural practices. At times, some participants were tired, homesick or not feeling well. As leaders, we watched students adapt to new experiences and overcome the challenges inherent in traveling. Through this process, and arguably, because of it, we also noticed what we viewed as their increasing confidence as the trips went

on. For example, one student was extremely nervous and withdrawn upon arrival in Johannesburg, but later became more talkative and interactive as he became more comfortable with being overseas.

Beyond merely acquiring marketable skills, Gardner, et al. (2008) further outlined the importance of students being able to articulate the added value of their experience to prospective employers and provides a model for “unpacking” the study abroad experience. Currently at Kansas State University, the Career and Employment Services office, in partnership with the Study Abroad office, offers a similar workshop entitled “Putting Your International Experience to Work” twice yearly. The goal of this workshop is to help returned study abroad students more effectively describe their international experiences on their resume and in interviews. Each workshop involves discussion of possible skills gained, a period of guided reflection and role playing. Attendance at these workshops has been primarily students returning from summer or semester long study abroad experiences. One recommendation to enhance participation of short-term study abroad students would be to partner with faculty leaders, to make the workshops a joint effort.

Conclusion

We organized and facilitated two short-term study abroad programs to Brazil and South Africa. We believe that participant preparation is important to making the most out of these short study tours. We selected challenging destinations that provided many opportunities for students to learn about agriculture and other cultures. We utilized an external tour operator to provide experience and connections that allowed us to take advantage of a wide variety of overseas opportunities. Although the time spent in-country is limited to twelve days, we leveraged the knowledge gained and the cultural experience by providing a semester-long course. This course addressed three important objectives: (1) academic preparation through student peer-reviewed presentations, (2) anxiety reduction through travel skill preparation and (3) team building exercises intended to assist students in getting to know one another. We hosted a dinner at our home for students to learn more about us and interact with each other.

While overseas, we utilized student leaders, who provided enormous assistance in logistics, making other students comfortable and bringing issues to our attention. We also made ourselves present to students as often as possible, in the attempt to bring a positive attitude towards all events and circumstances, as well as try to provide context and experience to the study tour experience. As experienced international travelers, we were able to explain and interpret a great deal of

situations and experiences that our first-time travelers encountered. Students were encouraged to keep a journal during our travels. Journal formats included notes on paper, photo blogs, typed entries on tablets and extended captions on cell phone camera photos.

After arrival back home, students were required to write a paper that summarized and synthesized what they learned. These papers were enjoyable to read and provided anecdotal evidence that the students had learned a great deal about other cultures and about themselves. We had a “post-tour” dinner at a local restaurant and enjoyed getting back together and reflecting on what was for most students a “once-in-a-lifetime” experience. We hope to inspire other faculty members to facilitate similar future study tours.

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