

Integrating Extension Educators in Agricultural Study Abroad Programming

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Abstract

The Cooperative Extension System serves as the liaison between the public and the university. As our nation continues to diversify and globalize, it is critical that as liaisons, Extension Educators have the skills to communicate cross-culturally in their respective communities. Developing intercultural competence is imperative to successfully communicate and operate in evolving American communities shaped by diversity. The objective of this study was to describe the change in educator intercultural development during an embedded study abroad program to Vietnam. Five Extension Educators were selected to provide undergraduate students with mentorship throughout a semester-long course with international travel during week 10. Mentors were required to complete pre- and post-assessments, including the Intercultural Development Inventory, while also responding to reflective prompts during the program. As a group, the educators regressed on the intercultural continuum by 8.0 points and remained in the minimization stage. However, educators reported meeting goals, increased personal development, and a positive experience with the program. Future programming should focus on the undergraduate mentor-educator relationship and more deliberate intercultural guidance for educator participants.

Introduction

Extension Educators must be able to effectively communicate with the diverse populations that compose their clientele base. Effective cross-cultural communication requires intercultural competence. Intercultural competence is defined as the ability to deduce cultural meanings and

communicate effectively with the understanding that complex identities make up the environment in which people interact (Chen and Starosta, 1996). These abilities are not innate and must be developed through intentional instructional methods and practice (Vande Berg et al., 2012; Lockett et al., 2014; Jackson, 2015). While intercultural competence is clearly needed when working at the international level, as domestic demographics continue diversifying, it becomes more urgent that local representatives possess those skills as well. Providing Extension professionals with international experiences through engagement in university affiliated study abroad is one potential method to encourage professional development (Lockett et al., 2014; Ludwig, 2002; Harder et al., 2010).

In a needs assessment of the State of Indiana, Selby et al. (2005) explored Extension interests and experiences in intercultural learning and barriers prohibiting Educator participation in international and intercultural opportunities. They reported that 78.5% of Educator international travel was for leisure and there was limited fusion of global aspects into Educator domestic programs. Primary barriers to educator involvement with international activities included limited previous experience and lack of prioritization of international activities by Cooperative Extensions Services (CES) administration. Daniel et al. (2014) created a Cross-Cultural Program for CES personnel to develop participant worldview perspectives and gain new *cultural knowledge* for Educators in Georgia. This small study (n=7) discovered several benefits of the program including enhanced cultural appreciation and gaining first-hand experience. Harder et al. (2010) also highlighted the professional and personal development opportunities presented with hands-

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on experiences for Florida Educators (n=191). Cultural competence training was developed and implemented to address the increasing need for Extension Educators to possess skills to sustain effective programming across the developing diverse clientele base and workspaces (Deen et al., 2014). This has become an essential skill development within Washington State University's Extension and is considered in performance reviews due to the necessity of sustainable outreach. International experiences can empower Extension Educators to make informed local decisions through a global lens (Treadwell et al., 2013).

Although information is available on Extension affiliates' experiences traveling internationally, limited research is focused on evaluating the impact of involving CES personnel directly in university study abroad programming. Such programs could provide benefits for both the undergraduate students as well as the Extension Educators (Karcher et al., 2013; Treadwell et al., 2013; Grima et al., 2014; Laverick, 2016). Involving Educators as mentors provides an opportunity to engage them directly in international programming (Karcher et al., 2013). This allows for modeling behaviors such as teamwork and effective leadership in participation with the students (Gyori, 2012). The concepts (e.g. agricultural practices or cross-cultural skill development), which the mentor focuses on while mentoring students, have a direct effect on the student learning experience (Gyori, 2012). Involvement in international programs, including mentorship of undergraduate students, has the opportunity to address the development of intercultural competence Educators should possess in their public roles.

In addition to Extension Educators' responsibility to the public, they are presented the opportunity through their Land Grant institutions to build relationships with student populations. Undergraduate student exposure to Extension is mutually beneficial for recruitment and retention (Arnold and Place, 2010). Not only should CES address this need for communicating cross-culturally with the public, but also the pool from which most future educators are recruited. Student relationships with Extension affiliates were cited by students as being the most influential in their pursuit of careers in CES and their ultimate decision to become an Extension Educator (Arnold and Place, 2010). Recruiting and retaining potential educators is a priority of Extension (Penrose, 2017). This allows for personal and professional growth in congruence with developing relationships alongside students who may one day fill their shoes

Based on the limited current available literature, this case study was designed to explore the benefits of Extension Educators serving as mentors to undergraduate students in a short-term study abroad program. Researchers hypothesize that 1) the role of mentorship will be positively perceived by both student and Educator participants and 2) participation in the program will increase the development of the Extension Educators intercultural competencies.

Methods

Educator Recruitment, Selection, and Responsibilities

All methods were approved by Purdue University's Institutional Review Board. In fall 2017, an application was made available to all Extension Educators in Indiana to participate in the program. From the applications, five educators were selected to participate and serve as mentors to the undergraduate students enrolled in the study abroad course, travel with the program to Vietnam, and to participate in activities related to intercultural development. The composition of the Educator cohort was one female and four males. All Educators had previous international experience, although time spent out of the United States varied from 4 to 8 weeks (n=3) to more than one year living in another country (n=1). All program participants had been in their role with Cooperative Extension Services for more than 15 years. The cohort of Educators represented five of Indiana's 92 counties, providing a wide variety of county demographics.

Educator Mentor Role and Program Responsibilities

Throughout the program, Extension Educators served not only as subject matter experts in their individual areas of expertise in agriculture but as agricultural discipline mentors to the undergraduate students. Eleven undergraduate students, representing majors from across the College of Agriculture, enrolled in the spring 2018 embedded-study abroad program. Students met weekly on-campus for 50 minutes throughout the 16-week semester and traveled to Vietnam for 9 days during Spring Break. At the start of the semester, students were divided into four teams (3, 3, 3, and 2 students) and 3 of the teams were assigned one educator. The team consisting of two students was assigned two educators. Educator expertise provided students with a critical resource in their focus on food security and environmental challenges within the course. Each team was tasked with identifying a challenge in the current Vietnamese agricultural system. Teams worked with their mentors to identify a topic and a research plan. The semester-long project concluded with a Vietnamese Celebration night where students and Educators shared an 8 to 10 minute video they prepared to address the research topic and discuss innovative solutions. Faculty, administrators, students, and family were invited to the dinner and presentations. Throughout this process, the Educators served to 1) provide input on student assignments via email or phone, 2) present one lecture to the students based on their area of expertise, and 3) participate with their assigned team of students on creating the videos for the semester-long research project.

In addition to the mentor role, Educators participated in self-reflective activities during the international experience. In-country, reflective journaling included daily responses to provided prompts. Examples of these include: What was something you learned about Vietnamese culture/agriculture that surprised you today; Why did this surprise you?; and how have cultural differences made you more aware of

Table 1. Themes Underlined in Educator Responses to Three Open-ended Questions.

Questions	Themes
A. Did you achieve the goals you had for yourself in participation of this program? If so, how did you achieve your goals? If not, why not?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gain an understanding of the new culture. 3 of the 5 Educators included the word “understanding” while 1 used “learn about”. • 3 of the 5 Educators felt they achieved their goals.
B. How do you think your participation in this international and mentor experience may or may not impact your future teaching, research or Extension activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing worldviews/seeing a new perspective.
IC. Has this program motivated you to globalize (i.e. incorporate intercultural/multicultural learning objectives) extension programs? If so, please explain how.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share with community – by writing or incorporating in programs. 3 of the 5 Educators shared their experience.

your own culture (limitations, strengths, or biases)? While in Vietnam, educators visited local markets, interacted with students and faculty at an agricultural university, and engaged with local farmers. Additionally, program leaders led group discussions and intercultural activities throughout the program. The goal of the journaling and in-country experience was to assist in developing intercultural competence.

Program Assessment

A researcher-developed pre-questionnaire was created and administered to the educators during week 2 of the semester. The questionnaire included 4 open-ended questions designed to capture educators' goals, international involvement, and plans to incorporate learning after participation. The survey was administered via Qualtrics and was open to response for one week (n=5, 100% response rate). The researcher-developed post-questionnaire was administered at week 15 of the semester via Qualtrics and included 6 open-ended and 12 Likert scale questions, designed to capture educators' experience as a mentor, how they incorporated international components locally, overall experience in the program, and 3 demographic questions (n=5, 100% response rate). Questions about international involvement, perceptions of importance in infusing international concepts, and prompts for reflection were influenced by previous study abroad and international research (Selby et al., 2005; Price and Savicki, 2011). Additionally, students on the program responded to a post-course questionnaire that included 8 open-ended questions designed to assess the value of the educator-student mentoring relationship.

The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) was administered both at weeks 1 and 15 of the semester. The IDI is a 50-item inventory which places individuals on a continuum of intercultural sensitivity (IDI, 2018). The numbers reported in perceived orientation (PO), developmental orientation (DO), and orientation gap (OG) correlate with a developmental stage on the Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC). There are several levels of intercultural sensitivities that fall along the IDC. These levels are separated into ethnorelative stages, “meaning that one's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures,” and ethnocentric stages, “meaning that one's own culture is experienced as central to reality in some way”

(Hammer et al., 2003). Denial and polarization fall within ethnocentric, minimization is seen as a transitional stage, and acceptance and adaptation fall within ethnorelative (Hammer, 2012b).

Statistical Analysis

The DO, PO, and OG of the educators were compared using paired t-tests on sample means using SPSS Statistics Version 25 (IBM Corp). Statistical significance is reported at a $p < .05$.

Results

Mentoring Experience

Educator and student participants responded to two open-ended questions about the role of mentorship in the program. In response to the question, "In what ways did your mentor add value to your semester project?" students primarily indicated that mentors provided new perspectives and insights about course topics. Educators indicated learning from student perspectives and enjoyed working directly with them as benefits in response to "How did the mentor role benefit your international experience?." Both educators and students reported that the relationship provided new perspectives from which to view the course concepts.

One student stated that “they were able to teach us about things that we do differently inside the United States” while another said, “they did a great job giving us insight we didn't even think about.” Educators (n=4) specifically noted that they enjoyed learning and/or working with the student participants. One Educator reported, “I got to see the experience not only through my own eyes but through the eyes of a younger generation.” Another Educator mentioned they wished they could spend more time together, but during the time they did spend with their assigned students “it was valuable to hear their perspectives and the knowledge they brought to the table.” A conclusion provided by an Educator was that “each time we have an opportunity to mentor or teach, we get better at what we do.” Four of the five Educators indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed that being a mentor to undergraduate students was an important part of the Vietnamese program experience. The majority of Educators perceived mentorship as an enhancement to

participation in the program.

Professional Benefits

The group of educators responded to three open-ended questions about their participation following the semester program. Themes emerged in responses to all three questions (Table 1). Educators believed they met goals of understanding more about the culture in which they were immersed. They also reported that they developed new worldviews due to their experience in the program. Lastly, they have put into action sharing their experiences with their local communities.

Educators reported being motivated to share what was learned throughout the program. Three of the five participants have already written about, presented orally on, and/or incorporated study abroad program concepts into their domestic CES programming. One educator wrote “my goals were to increase my understanding of other cultures, how they relate to Indiana agriculture and reflect to the citizens of our community how global agriculture comes home. I have successfully done that.” Another indicated the value of the program in connecting beyond the local communities saying that “I have written articles in local papers about the trip and they have been well received. The program demonstrates that Extension is connected to a bigger world.” All Educators strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, Comparing agriculture systems across cultures enhanced my job as an educator and perceived mentorship as important for personal and professional development.

The program also prompted the Educators to reflect on what was learned throughout their interactions in Vietnam. One Educator reflected, “I need to loosen my attitude of expecting everyone to look at the world the way I do” and suggested that pushing their viewpoint onto their clients is not an effective method for creating change. This indicates how interactions abroad challenged their perspectives on their local role in CES. Another example of development was the reflection that “the most important part of the trip was the fact that I was a bit uncomfortable at times. The trip was very good for me to push my boundaries and make me deal with situations.” Increased flexibility can be a skill

	Pre-PO	Post-PO	Pre-DO	Post-DO	Pre-OG	Post-OG
Educator 1	133.8	128.0	121.9	109.0	11.9	19.0
Educator 2	121.7	115.8	94.5	72.6	27.3	43.2
Educator 3	124.8	123.6	104.8	99.8	19.9	23.7
Educator 4	125.0	124.8	105.0	102.9	20.0	21.9
Educator 5	121.8	125.3	103.1	104.0	18.7	20.3

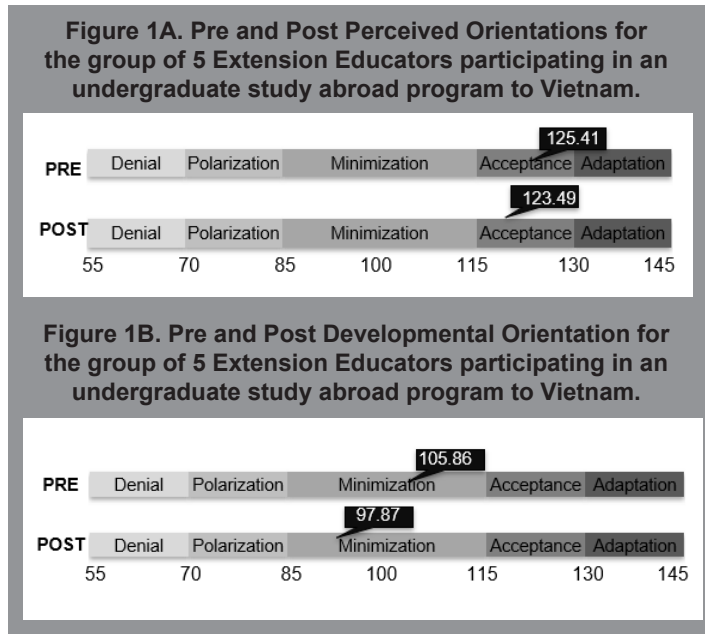
gained from facing challenges abroad.

Intercultural Development

Table 2 represents individual Educator results of pre and post PO, DO, and OG. Before the program, 4 out of 5 educators were in the DO stage of minimization while one was on the low end of acceptance. After the program, 1 of the 4 in minimization moved to polarization and the educator in acceptance shifted down to minimization. In polarization, individuals operate from a mindset of “us versus them” when faced with cultural differences (IDI, 2018).

The pre-PO for the group was 125.4 and the post was 123.5 (Figure 1A). There was no statistically significant difference between the group Pre-and-Post PO. As a group, the educators placed themselves in acceptance both before and after participation in the program according to their subjective view. This indicates that the group believes it operated in an ethnorelative stage that respects cultural difference as it is unique to individual identity and are in a state of curiosity (Bennett, 2014).

At the start of the program, the group began with a DO of 105.86 and ended with a DO of 97.87 (Figure 1B). These changes were not statistically significant, however, any change of more than 7 points is considered meaningful to IDI (2018). The subjective view of the group was in acceptance. However, the group’s operational stage (DO) was in minimization. Groups in minimization tend to obscure differences, minimizing their importance, and use their own cultural perspective to apply in cultural contexts worldwide (Bennett, 2014).



A PO seven points or above the DO (i.e. if the OG is more than seven points) signifies an overestimation of intercultural competence and is considered a meaningful difference according to the IDI (Hammer, 2012a). The OG changed from 19.55 to 25.62 from the beginning of the semester to the end. These results display an increase in the overestimation of intercultural competence, however, there was no statistically significant difference from pre-to

post-IDI.

The group of educators moved from 20% unresolved to 40% unresolved according to the pre- and post-IDI results. Unresolved indicates a sense of disengagement or a feeling of disconnection with their primary cultural group (IDI, 2018). After completion of the program, there was a 20% increase within the group of feeling detachment of membership in their community (Hammer, 2012a).

Discussion

Mentoring can foster developmental changes in skills that may be applied both academically and socially (Karcher et al., 2002; Grima et al., 2014). Educators participating in the Vietnam course reported the student-mentor relationship as important to their overall experience. A nurturing learning environment provides support to students to strengthen their ability to develop identity and mastery of skills (Crisp, 2017). Students and educators on the Vietnam program emphasized “insights” and “perspectives” by working together as a team. Relationship building is a key component of successful mentoring (Byington, 2010). Henley et al. (2018) reported valuable aspects of Extension Educators mentoring of undergraduates, including gaining an understanding of career opportunities in CES, developing a feeling of ownership in their projects, and expanding career potential. Such opportunities may increase the number of undergraduates interested in pursuing a career in extension and build relationships across the teaching and extension missions of Land Grant institutions (Seevers and Dormody, 2010; Stevens et al., 2014). The responses provided by participants, such as “getting to see and learn from student perspectives” in addition to discussing their “experience and feelings during the trip” and an explicit statement that “it was very enriching for me”, provided evidence that the Educators valued the mentoring experience.

Additionally, there were meaningful professional benefits from Educators participation in this program. Mentoring relationships are advantageous in the workplace, including Extension, to develop skills, enhance performance, and personal growth (Kutilek and Earnest, 2001). CES uses mentoring to develop employees in areas such as effective leadership, increased organizational commitment, and satisfaction in their roles (Denny, 2016). In response to open-ended questions, educators reported meeting goals, increased personal development, and a positive experience in the program (Table 1). Their responses supported the belief that they met the goals they set for themselves. The experience broadened perspectives. For example, one educator said “a broad perspective is important” and another said, “having more of a worldly view enhances my ability to be an Educator.” This aligns with results from previous studies that agents broadened their knowledge and perspectives of global agriculture through international experiences (Stevens et al., 2014). Three of the five educators on the Vietnam program reported using the program experience to influence their CES outreach. Those who have not yet incorporated the experience referred to a lack of resources such as time. As reported, many Educator

participants have already written articles or columns, while another discusses having “already incorporated some of what I learned in our educational programs.” This indicates that involvement in university study abroad programs has the potential to globalize local programs, supported by Treadwell et al. (2013) findings in participation with international programming.

In addition to the benefits of the program on personal and professional growth, a second objective was to determine if Educator intercultural development was altered by program participation. As a group, there was no progression on the IDC through participation in the program as shown by the IDI results of the study. However, there are several possible explanations. Foremost, the undergraduate course was designed with student intercultural development in mind, thus influencing the activities required for the entire class, not just the Educators. While including intercultural learning methods, the appropriate degree and type of support provided are critical for intercultural development (Paige and Vande Berg, 2012; Engle and Engle 2012). While using intercultural learning methods, a lack of intercultural development is evident because participants have not received the support needed or been engaged with effective developmental methods (Terzuolo, 2018). Developmental orientation influences which activities will help progress participants along the continuum. While the majority of Educators were in minimization at the start of the program, the class predominately completed activities that supported individuals in denial and polarization.

Stuart (2012) indicates the criticality of considering stage development when designing interventions. The ability to anticipate and influence outcomes depends on the student’s developmental stage, the environment in which they are placed, and the intervention administered; without these components, student development is, at best, uncertain (Stuart, 2012). Individuals in each stage on the developmental continuum have varying responses to cultural differences and experiences that require different support (Hammer, 2012b; Vande Berg et al., 2012; Bennett, 2014). The course assignments were selected to develop student cultural self-awareness and awareness of others. These are skills that were already developed in the educator group as indicated by the group stage of minimization on the IDC.

As a group, there was an average decrease of 8 points on the IDC. Regression on the continuum can occur as a result of overwhelming cultural differences (Jones et al., 2016). This may have occurred as educators traveled to a developing country vastly different from the United States. The educators in this study increased in cultural disengagement (20% to 40%), indicating they experienced disengagement with personal cultural identity. Cultural disengagement can also be defined as not partaking in cultural activities (Gayo, 2017). Feeling disengaged with one’s own cultural identity and being overwhelmed with cultural differences may have impacted the group results due to lack of participation or commitment to the intercultural learning activities included in the program. There are a multitude of factors that dictate cultural disengagement such as socioeconomic status, gender, age, and geographic

location, which should be further explored in educator intercultural development (Gayo, 2017).

It is critical to understand the multiple dimensions of cultural difference the educator group encountered throughout the program. Not only were they immersed in Asian culture while visiting Vietnam, but educators were also encountering generational differences. They were required to work with students, all identified in the millennial generation, on a group project as a mentor, travel with them in a different country, and serve as a university role model as affiliated with CES. These situations may have created additional challenges for educators. When an individual is placed in an environment that challenges their personal beliefs or history, it can cause overwhelming feelings and cognitive dissonance (Mitchell and Paras, 2018). It can display itself as feeling uncomfortable and present as regression on the IDC (Lambert Snodgrass et al., 2018). The study abroad destination of Vietnam is another important nuance between educators and students. Students and educators have a different relationship with Vietnam. Students learned about the Vietnam War in history classes while multiple educators were alive during this time and knew someone involved in the war. The intersection of ethnic and generational cultures begins to unravel complicated influences that may be contributors to the group IDI results.

Additionally, all educators completed the IDI, but were not required to go through a debriefing with a certified administrator. Educators were not required to complete an IDI debrief due to their various locations around the state and proximity to a qualified administrator to review individual results. Cultural mentoring is critical and plays a positive role in intercultural competence gains (Hammer, 2012b, Paige and Vande Berg, 2012). The lack of individual cultural mentoring provided to the educators may have influenced the outcome of the group IDI results. Educators participated in the course through intermittent reflections and by providing discipline-based guidance for the students. More deliberate activities, focused toward the educator stage of minimization, may have provided the support needed to progress on the IDC (Stuart, 2012).

Future studies should engage educators in more cultural activities and reflection. Paige and Vande Berg (2012) identify a lack of intentional reflection specifically on the cultural immersion and experience as a contributor to a lack of intercultural development. Increasing mentor interaction with students could prove beneficial for both groups, by increasing exposure to CES, providing different perspectives regarding discipline content and intercultural learning, and giving Extension Educators the opportunity to use experience for globalizing local programs. Educators should be required to complete the IDI debrief with a qualified administrator in order to process their results and develop an Intercultural Development Plan. Limitations included a small sample size, limited face to face interactions with the Educators before and after study abroad, self-selection of participants, and restricted authority over Educator participation in activities. Through the use of intercultural learning methods with emphasis on experiential ideals such as critical reflection, and activities aimed to give support

in the development of intercultural competence at multiple levels, this course design can be modified for use in other study abroad programs involving Extension Educators.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there were several meaningful benefits provided to both students and Educators from the participation of Extension Educators as mentors. Student and educator responses support a positive attitude towards the mentor-student relationship. As indicated, rewards encompassed both personal and professional development. Educators reported meeting their personal goals and applying what they learned during the study abroad program in their local Extension programs. In regards to the intercultural competence development component, there were no statistically significant changes in group PO, DO, or OG. However, the survey responses provided useful insight on how to enhance future programs and engage Educators more meaningfully in the intercultural learning process. By addressing the challenges these participants encountered in the program, this model can be adapted and honed for amplified benefits. Future Extension Educators have the potential to engage students in agricultural concepts using their expertise, provide insight to students about CES local and international programming, and develop intercultural competence through mentorship in undergraduate study abroad programs.

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