

Using Journaling and Surveys to Assess Student Outcomes from Study Abroad Programs in Agriculture

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ABSTRACT

There are many reasons why students and faculty choose to study abroad during their education experience. The list can include language acquisition, cultural awareness, resume building, or simply learning more about self. This study focused on the impact on cultural awareness and learning about self. Many students who enroll in agriculture programs tend to have limited access to international experiences. This is unfortunate since agriculture is such a large global industry. The objective of this study is to identify and assess the attributes that impact global competence and to understand if personal growth is taking place through participation in study abroad programs. A group of 5 students and 2 faculty participated in an agriculture travel study program (7 day) and a study abroad language program (30day) with two different university partners. Participants were pre and post tested regarding their perceptions of international agriculture and cross cultural competency. Participants were also required to keep a travel journal to document their experiences. While the surveys served as a measure of student competency, the journal responses focused more on the personal growth of the travelers. Survey data revealed increased student understanding of international agriculture and cultural awareness compared to a control group. The journals revealed that students and faculty were similar in their anxiety and lack of preparedness for their in country experience. Data also revealed that more work needs to be done on the pre planning portion of international travel experiences for agriculture students.

INTRODUCTION

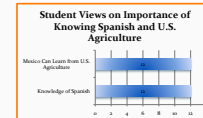
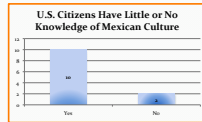
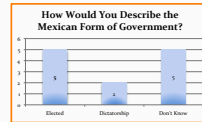
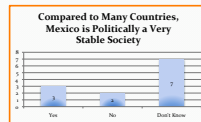
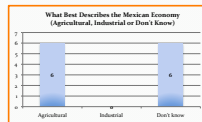
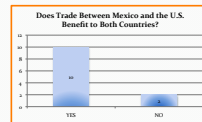
Creating global ready graduates is becoming a common topic among educators lately (Walker, 2009; Muzychenko, 2008). It is important for students to gain the most from an international travel study experience. Travel study experiences are not the same as a private travel experience such as a family vacation or spring break trip. The benefits from travel study trips have been shown to be positive in the short and long run time period (Lenz & Wister, 2008). The use of travel study integrated into a discipline curriculum like agribusiness is becoming more common. In the past the use of travel study was mostly viewed as a humanities focused educational opportunity. Opportunities for international travel study in agriculture were not common.

Student journaling can be an effective tool to capture student perceptions (Dunlap, 2006; Mills, 2008). It is important for instructors to find better ways to link education in the classroom with real world experience. Students often can forget their experiences on a travel study trip once they return home. The use of journals for students to capture their thoughts immediately after they happen can be helpful in directing and organizing thoughts. Students can be given starter questions to build on during the travel study process. Starter questions included: What did you see today that reminded you of home? What did you experience that was different from home? Do you feel uncomfortable around the local people? These types of questions can help students think about the activities they experienced during the day. I find that students will respond that they do feel uncomfortable around a foreign environment. This opens up an excellent opportunity to discuss cultural differences and sensitivity.



MATERIALS AND METHODS

Ten students and two faculty members participated in the travel study program in the spring 2010 semester. Five of the ten students had also participated in the study abroad program the previous summer semester for a month. The travel study trip took place in Saltillo Mexico and was hosted by the Universidad Autónoma Agraria Antonio Narro (UAAN). Trip planning began during the previous fall semester. Students and faculty met 3 times prior to the departure of the trip to discuss expectations and perform basic cultural education on Mexico. Only 5 participants on the trip had traveled to Mexico prior to the trip and only one student had a fluent knowledge of the Spanish language. Students and faculty were surveyed to determine their cultural understanding with a 22 question survey. Students and faculty were also asked to keep a journal to document their experiences and thoughts regarding the trip. Specific findings are shown below.



Note: All 12 respondents stated that a knowledge of Spanish was important for future agribusiness managers in the U.S. Also, all respondents felt that Mexican agriculture could learn from U.S. agricultural practices. This may show that the respondents have an ethnocentric view.

SELECTED STUDENT PERCEPTIONS FROM JOURNALS

"The Mexican factory we visited today surprised me. It was just as modern as the average U.S. factory." (Debbie, SR Agribusiness Major)

"It may sound strange, but I ate cow tongue. It really was not that bad." Mitch, SR Agribusiness Major)

"It was odd to be on a ranch and not see rolling hills and grass. It was solid rocks and cactus." (Jackie, SO Agribusiness Major)

"I have never seen anything like it! It reminded me of a scene from an old western movie. However, they could not grow anything on their ranch, only cattle." (Elaine, SR Agribusiness Major)

"I have to say, I didn't have the same stereotypes as before, but I definitely see cultural differences between the southern part of Mexico and the northern parts." (Debbie, SR Agribusiness Major)

"I could not believe how small the tortilla factory was! It was nothing like what I expected. The place had just a few workers that did everything by hand. It was very different than what I expected." (Elizabeth, SR Agribusiness Major)



FACULTY PERCEPTIONS ON JOURNALS

• Students were forced to think about cross cultural issues through the journaling assignment.

• The journals gave a tangible starting place for post trip student debriefing.

• Journals were easy and simple to grade.
• Journaling will become a common part of my grading policy for future travel study and study abroad programs. (JEM)



TEACHABLE MOMENT
The picture was on the side of one of the science buildings on the UAAN campus. U.S. students learned about the differences among Mexican culture. Students were able to learn about the diversity of views among the Mexican people, particularly about the Mexican Indian population. This was one of the best conversation starters we experienced on the entire trip.

Trip Guiding Principles

1. You will be required to keep a travel journal while on this trip. This is to document your experiences for post trip discussions.
2. Develop a group presentation about this trip to share with others when we get back home
3. Represent UTM and the U.S. in a positive manner.
4. Respect our hosts (remember we are in their country!)

Saltillo Mexico Agriculture Travel Study



Spring Break March 13 - 19, 2010
Approximate Cost: \$1,500

- Topic:
- World Class Measurment
 - Modern agricultural operations
 - Agricultural change and growth
 - Agricultural research facilities
 - Focus on international marketing



CLOSING THOUGHTS

1. The journaling added a whole new dimension to the travel study. Students were able to better focus on the differences they experienced while interacting with another culture.
2. Students were cognizant of the differences between Mexican agriculture and U.S. agriculture.
3. Students did gain a better understanding of other cultures through this travel study experience.

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