

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IMPACTS OF STUDY ABROAD

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1 ABSTRACT

As Michigan State University sends nearly 2600 students to study abroad each year, including 18-24 Landscape Architecture students, the questions remain: What are the students learning? Will this develop them professionally as well as personally? Using data from a survey of the School of Planning, Design and Construction's alum, this article explores the impact of study abroad. Transformative growth is measured utilizing the Association of American Colleges and Universities learning outcomes rubrics for Civic Engagement, Ethical Reasoning, Global Learning, and Intercultural Knowledge and Competence. Comparative analysis shows those alum who participated in a formal study abroad program measured higher in the learning outcome rubrics than those who did not participate. The article provides insight to ways in which students abroad may transform during study abroad and how the University may help a student to "unpack" their experience.

1.1 Keywords

study abroad, transformative learning, impacts

2 INTRODUCTION

Why do we invest in Study Abroad? The benefit claims include expanding professional and intellectual knowledge, changing how a young person sees themselves in the world and fostering personal growth (Brewer, 2009). As University faculty, we invest hundreds of personal hours in creating programs each year. As administrators and parents, we invest thousands of dollars annually to offer programs. We do this because we believe Study Abroad is one of the transformative experiences of a college education.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has released rubrics to assess 16 core learning goals of higher education. The AAC&U VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) (2010) includes four rubrics which are recommended to be studied together and this research team believes can be enhanced through study abroad in ways in which a traditional classroom cannot. These four rubrics are: Civic Engagement, Ethical Reasoning, Global Learning, and Intercultural Knowledge and Competency. The alum of Michigan State University's majors of Construction Management, Interior Design, Landscape Architecture, and Urban Planning, who now comprise the School of Planning, Design and Construction are used as the study group. While this study group represents more than Landscape Architecture students, study abroad research demonstrates that built environment students studying in a multi-disciplinary setting emerge with similar outcomes (Kotval et al., 2013; Myers et al., 2005).

3 MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY'S SCHOOL OF PLANNING, DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM

Michigan State University's (MSU) Landscape Architecture program offered its first study abroad experience in 1975 to Toronto, Canada. In 1977, study abroad became a formal

part of the curriculum. Though not mandatory, it is an 8 week intensive travel integrated into the spring semester and typically attended by 95-100% of the cohort. In the 35 years of LA study abroad programming, students have traveled to Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Mexico, Morocco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Turkey, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom. The first half of the semester (January-February) is spent expanding student knowledge of international design, urban design, field sketching, and foreign cultures. "We sketch in the classroom in winter," explains an alum "but not until we go into the field on our study abroad do our sketches improve. Not only technically with our perspective, but the sketches begin to show the full scene and feel of the urban environment."

Student experiences vary slightly each year depending on the faculty leading the program, but typically include design studies in business districts such as La Defense and Canary Wharf, naturally designed settings such as Stourhead, office visits with international firms such as Zaha Hadid Architects and University partnerships in France, Germany, Portugal, and Spain. University partnerships offer students the opportunity to expand their understanding of the built environment beyond the confines of Landscape Architecture and work collaboratively with related disciplines. These meetings and projects with local experts, students, and faculty help the students to effectively adapt to their new setting and thus expand their technical skills, disciplinary knowledge, and cultural knowledge (Vande Berg et al., 2012).

In 2008, Landscape Architecture joined the School of Planning, Design and Construction (SPDC) with Construction Management, Interior Design, and Urban Planning majors. Each major offers discipline specific study abroad programs that integrate international experiences into the learning process. The related disciplines regularly study in China, Cuba, Germany, Japan, Korea, Netherlands, Romania, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. These programs are summer offerings and can be taken to fulfill core program course requirements or electives. The second longest running program in SPDC is the Urban Planning partnership with Dortmund University which began in 1984.

4 ROLE AND VALUE OF STUDY ABROAD

Study abroad grew in popularity in the 1920s as American students traveled to other countries and universities to study foreign

languages (Brown, 1983). Study abroad today demonstrates improvement in self-reported student efficacy of foreign language skill attainment. The multifaceted motivation of students choosing to study abroad, however, creates difficulty in measuring how a student has improved (Cubillos and Ilvento, 2013). A multifaceted pedagogy, inclusive of experiential learning, has shown to enhance the student learning during the experience abroad (Vance et al., 2013). The learning attributed to language during study abroad includes not only the technical skills but also cultural adaptability and sensitivity (Williams, 2005).

Today, Michigan State University's ~275 Study Abroad programs service thousands of students annually, span seven continents, and 60 countries (Office of Study Abroad, Michigan State University, 2014). MSU is rated in the top 50 Study Abroad comprehensive programs in the United States (US News, 2013). As MSU was formed as a Land Grant University, the Office of Study Abroad supports the transformation of MSU into a "world-grant" university (Office of Study Abroad, Michigan State University, 2014), utilizing students and faculty skills and talent to improve the global community. In 2010-2011, this included the participation of 2,577 MSU students in study abroad.

Studying in a foreign country is considered a high-impact practice as students achieve deep learning gains, personal gains, and develop through collaborative learning environments and interaction with their faculty (Kuh, 2008). Those in hiring positions report differences in the importance of specific study abroad programs (such as a study abroad in relevant major, foreign language involvement) than those in senior management levels; those who have studied abroad place more importance on their new hires having also having done so. In an ever-increasingly urbanized, global community, the firms who work internationally place more importance on study abroad and language acquisition (Trooboff, 2008). If those who have studied abroad value the experience, while employers without study abroad experience do not value it as much, what is it that alum are not conveying in their interviews to explain its impact?

While alum, employers, faculty, and students consider international experience for the personal development and transformation of college students, study abroad is ranked behind other experiences which are more closely aligned to 'job training,' such as internships, teamwork, community engagement and leadership (Crawford et al., 2011). At the 2011 APLU (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities) Summit in Indianapolis, Indiana, the discussion on study

abroad among employers and University administrators revolved around the perceptions that study abroad helps students develop personally, but not necessarily in their technical knowledge. The question lingers among employers, if a student is not traveling to enhance their language skills, what is the benefit of study abroad?

Many of the soft skills valued by the employers, such as the ability to properly communicate, self-manage, and work on teams (Crawford, et al., 2011) can be developed during study abroad. Students, however, often have trouble depicting their growth during the interview process (Gardner et al., 2008) but instead focus on describing the places they traveled and what they saw. Brewer and Solberg (2009) suggest that for study abroad to be a truly transformative and integrated into the learning curriculum, the experience must begin with classroom preparation followed by an experience that alters personally held perceptions and a reintegration of the newly realized self and skill into society (Mezirow, 1975).

The 'preflight' and 'unpacking' of study abroad are essential components of moving study abroad from an excursion to a transformative learning experience. The majority of students attending a study abroad at MSU are either juniors or seniors (Office of Study Abroad, MSU, 2014) and thus may not be able to 'unpack' and utilize the new skills in academia (Gardner et al., 2008). Landscape Architecture students at MSU have a full year to unpack their experience and utilize both their growing technical and interpersonal skills in the classroom.

While studying abroad may help a student experience a perspective shift, it can also foster a deeper understanding of professional technical skills. A design-based education is not complete until one has achieved a "cross-cultural" educational experience (Myers et al., 2005). These cross-cultural experiences include not only working in a foreign country but also working with students who have a different educative and skill background than oneself. Technical skills develop during a built environment study abroad, such as field sketching, understanding of good and bad design, and understanding of urban interaction. While past education experiences will provide each student with a different skill set, the skills gained for built environment students on study abroad transcend siloes in the different disciplines (Myers et al., 2005). For example, while on study abroad, urban planning and landscape architecture students can both develop the communication skills to work in a community previously unknown to the student (regardless of this community being in a different

state or country) and to learn that built environment needs differ from community to community (Kotval et al., 2013). This community, service oriented approach is fundamental to a holistic understanding of the design process (Sherk, 2013)

The Association of American Colleges and Universities detail a VALUE rubric (2010) one should gain through the use of high-impact practices, such as study abroad. Each rubric has 4- 6 characteristics to describe elements of possible growth and four measurable changes from benchmark (1) to Milestones (2-3) and capstone (4). Four rubrics may be developed through study abroad in ways a classroom cannot: Civic Engagement, Ethical Reasoning, Global Learning, and Intercultural Knowledge and Competence. The AAC&U defines them as follows:

Civic Engagement: "working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes." (Excerpted from *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, edited by Thomas Ehrlich, published by Oryx Press, 2000, Preface, page vi.) In addition, civic engagement encompasses actions wherein individuals participate in activities of personal and public concern that are both individually life enriching and socially beneficial to the community" (AAC&U, 2010, Civic Engagement Rubric p 1).

Ethical Reasoning: "right and wrong human conduct. It requires students to be able to assess their own ethical values and the social context of problems, recognize ethical issues in a variety of settings, think about how different ethical perspectives might be applied to ethical dilemmas and consider the ramifications of alternative actions. Students' ethical self identity (sic) evolves as they practice ethical decision-making skills and learn how to describe and analyze positions on ethical issues." (AAC&U, 2010, Ethical Reasoning Rubric p 1).

Global Learning: "a critical analysis of and an engagement with complex, interdependent global systems and legacies (such as natural, physical, social, cultural, economic, and political) and their implications for people's lives and the earth's sustainability. Through global learning, students should 1) become informed, open-minded, and responsible people who are attentive to diversity across the spectrum of differences, 2) seek to understand how their actions affect both local and global communities, and 3) address the world's most pressing and enduring issues

collaboratively and equitably.” (AAC&U, 2010, Global Learning Rubric p 1). Intercultural knowledge and Competency: “a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts.” (Bennett J. M., 2008. Transformative training: Designing programs for culture learning. In *Contemporary leadership and intercultural competence: Understanding and utilizing cultural diversity to build successful organizations*, ed. M. A. Moodian, 95-110. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.)” (AAC&U, 2010, Intercultural Knowledge and Competency Rubric p 1).

5 METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a comprehensive analysis of Michigan State University’s School of Planning, Design, and Construction study abroad programs. The mixed method survey explored the potential of alum growth during study abroad. The online survey link was sent to alum of the Michigan State University Construction Management, Interior Design, Landscape Architecture, and Urban Planning programs.

The survey began with basic demographic data. All respondents were asked to answer their definition of the aforementioned four rubrics from the AAC&U, to define their discipline, and to explain where they have traveled or lived previously. Those who had not participated in one of the four majors’ study abroad programs were then allowed to exit the survey. This paper explores the qualitative aspects of the survey – the explanation of both the four rubrics and the definition of the discipline. The research team coded each of the responses according to the four measurable change levels described in each rubric, with a 1 (Benchmark), 2 (First Milestone), 3 (Second Milestone), or 4 (Capstone). Each respondent’s 1 through 4 values were totaled and divided by the number of provided responses to obtain a mean (dividing by three for those who only answered three rubric question, dividing by four for those who answered all four rubric questions).

The two authors coded separately and then compared and discussed the results to minimize coder bias. Coding was consistent, as the AAC&U rubrics provide descriptive characteristics that indicate whether a student is a benchmark, capstone, or somewhere in between. Until the final data was assembled into SPSS for statistical analysis, the coders did not know the demographics (having studied abroad, having traveled, age, major) of the respondents. As each study abroad is

an elected option of the student, a limitation in the methodology is that a student choosing to study abroad may inherently possess an open mind to global learning or other liberal learning and intercultural aspects of the VALUE rubric. Further limitations are explored and explained in the conclusion.

Utilizing crosstabs in the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), the research team looked for differences and correlations depending on the alum’s age, possible participation in study abroad, number of places traveled, and undergraduate major. Crosstabs further analyzed correlations among the individual responses for each rubric.

6 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Response Rate

The survey was electronically sent to 2,932 alum. While these emails are the most up to date within the university alum system, many of these domain emails are no longer regularly read or have gone dormant. Thirty-one emails were returned as ‘non-deliverable.’ The total response rate was 7.2% (208 of 2,901). This article is based upon the five, opened responses. The total survey included responses from 33 Construction Management alum, 43 Interior Design, 84 Landscape Architecture, and 42 Urban Planning. A total of 70 have studied abroad while 135 did not. No significant differences were found between the groups and the data is presented as frequency and mean scores for discussion.

6.2 Civic Engagement

Those who participated in study abroad resulted in a higher mean rubric score (3.3478) for Civic Engagement than those who did not (2.9737) (Table 6 in Summary and Conclusion). More respondents were coded to a 2 (First Milestone) that did not attend study abroad while those who did study abroad had more respondents code to a 4 (capstone) than those who did not attend, as shown in Table 2.

Those coding to the lower end of the rubric were able to recognize the importance of engaging but failed to acknowledge how to be involved in their community. Typical problems related to civic engagement in the built environment include failing to see the full picture (such as one respondent writing only “landscaping” as their response) or identifying engagement as problem imposed upon the designer by the government.

Table 1. Response rate based on participation in each question and participation in study abroad

Participated in Study Abroad?	Civic Engagement	Ethical Reasoning	Global Learning	Intercultural Knowledge and Competence
Yes	46	45	45	41
No	38	37	37	37
Total	84	82	82	78

Table 2. Civic engagement coding based on those who did or did not participate in study abroad

	Benchmark (1)	Milestone (2)	Milestone (3)	Capstone (4)
Participate	1	5	17	23
Did not Participate	2	8	17	11
Total	3	13	34	34

Table 3. Ethical reasoning coding based on those who did or did not participate in study abroad

	Benchmark (1)	Milestone (2)	Milestone (3)	Capstone (4)
Participate	1	9	20	15
Did Not Participate	0	12	18	7
Total	1	21	38	22

The fundamental difference between those coded to the upper level of the rubric (3 and 4) is the ability to not only recognize when civic engagement occurs but also demonstrate ways in which one engages themselves and their discipline for the public good. “The world beyond you deserves respect and contribution” indicates that study abroad is helping American students to not only see themselves as engaged citizens, but as ones who are willing to participate in the public good of global society. However, this response fails to extend into how respect may be shown or what areas need contribution. The responses at the capstone level, though not necessarily longer in text, describe experiences of civic engagement rather than how another might do so. One example is how one may utilize their discipline to help a community realize their own voice on a project rather than simply working on the community or local master plan. Civic engagement responses may also include non-discipline specific participation in things such as a PTA, organizing service through secular or religious organizations, and school boards.

6.3 Ethical Reasoning

As with Civic Engagement, those who participated in study abroad have a higher Ethical Reasoning mean coding score (3.0889) than those who did not study abroad (2.8649) (Table 6 in Summary and Conclusion). The greatest number of responses for those who participated were in the Second Milestone followed by Capstone. For those who did not study abroad, most of their responses were coded in within the Milestone levels (Table 3).

Responses coded to lower values in the rubric mentioned “the golden rule” or “doing the right thing” but failed to acknowledge the complexity of an ethical decision, such as the multidimensional decision making discussed by the AAC&U to understand the gray context, differing outcomes, and the perspectives of the various stakeholders in the situation. A designer specifically mentioned “form follows function,” which like the golden rule, is a technique taught early in one’s learning and is simply an expected behavior later in life.

Those coded to higher levels recognize the gray area, and that the gray area is different for each problem and circumstance. “We are not perfect beings but we try to be the best suitors that we can.” Others indicate using previous experiences and knowledge to help them make informed decisions in their professional lives today. Additionally, a typical Second Milestone code indicates a desire not to hurt others – be it a specific client or the community.

The top ranking respondents move beyond the previous levels by identifying “those without a loud voice” and ways in which underrepresented, silent, or minority voice groups are supported through Ethical Reasoning. Respondents at the capstone level discussed working with their professional organizations to encourage universal participation and relying on these organizations to ask the tough questions of the professionals. One of the most common characteristics of a top ranked individual is the ability to recognize that each situation is unique and the individual must work further to understand the complexities before moving forward with a decision.

Table 4. Global learning coding based on those who did or did not participate in study abroad

	Benchmark (1)	Milestone (2)	Milestone (3)	Capstone (4)
Participate	0	6	23	16
Did Not Participate	1	11	16	9
Total	1	17	39	25

Table 5. Intercultural knowledge and competence coding based on those who did or did not participate in study abroad

	Benchmark (1)	Milestone (2)	Milestone (3)	Capstone (4)
Participate	0	3	18	24
Did Not Participate	1	7	14	11
Total	1	10	32	35

6.4 Global Learning

As with Ethical Reasoning, in Global Learning, the greatest number of respondents were coded to a Second Milestone (value of 3). A higher percentage of those who attended study abroad fell into the upper codes than those who did not participate (Table 4). Those who did participate in study abroad have a mean ranking of 3.2222 while those who did not have a mean of 2.8919 (Table 6 in Summary and Conclusion).

Those ranking lower in Global Learning focus on fixing problems for the children at home and do not see the world as a global community. While working to support the community needs is a valuable asset, one respondent specifically discussed helping his or her own children be 'being willing to help others'. The First Milestone respondents recognized that learning can come from leaving one's traditional community confines and leaving the university itself, but failed to acknowledge what this learning entails or connect how it may change one's perspective.

Global learners of a higher aptitude demonstrate a recognition of learning from other cultures. "We cannot be isolated and must take a global view when learning about any subject" notes one respondent, indicating that different cultures and nations provide different viewpoints. This may be achieved through "having a conversation with people of a variety of cultures," "keeping an open mind," and "media and travel." These Second Milestone respondents still, however, did not describe how these experiences changed their behaviors or outlook upon return to their home culture. One response, discussing the media, does not specify whether this is meant by social media, English speaking media with international perspectives (BBC, Al Jazeera), or American news broadcasts about foreign nations. Will an American watching American news learn as much as an American traveling to those nations?

Those with a Capstone rank recognize information such as "how things are interconnected and how actions take in on area may have lasting effects on other areas." These respondents understand that they will not master how to work with all communities in the world with one study abroad, but the skills learned to adapt themselves in new settings and to always "to further knowledge to be a better citizen of the world." Without necessarily understanding the language of Mezirow, the respondents have described immersing themselves into an unknown setting and thus appreciating "life in a new way" upon their return.

Intercultural Knowledge and Competence (IKC)

Continuing the trend, the mean for Intercultural Knowledge and Competence (IKC) of those who studied abroad (3.5122) is higher than those who did not (3.0541), but this was the first VALUE rubric in which those who did not study abroad breached a 3.0 mean (Table 6 in Summary and Conclusion). For the first time in this study, the majority of respondents were ranked as Capstone, and it was not until Capstone that those who did participate in study abroad outranked those who did not study abroad in a single stage of the rubric (Table 5).

The lower level respondents openly acknowledged their inability to understand how this value differed from Global Learning. The others discussed that there are cultures different than their own, but did not discuss a way in which they grew through meeting a new culture, or if they did meet a new culture at all. A key goal of IKC is that the respondent should be able to transition their Global Learning and other skills into a new setting to create an impact in their community. In fact, one respondent coded to a Capstone indicates "This represents an appreciation for (Global Learning)

and an open mind to consider what may be learned from that.”

Those ranking in the Second Milestone manage to recognize differences, but fail to depict how they learned from these differences and how they continue to change. One respondent notes, “You cannot get (it) from a book. You have to live in other cultures.” However, the respondent fails to identify the X-Factor that makes study abroad, working in a previously unknown community, and IKC important in general.

Those ranking at a Capstone level have discussed the skills learned through working in unknown communities (whether abroad or not) and how they apply them in their professional careers. One need not study abroad to develop a higher order of IKC as the United States has minority communities within many municipalities, but studying internationally will nearly guarantee that the student has not previously worked or studied in that cultural setting. A Caucasian student may work with an ethnic minority in the United States, but will rarely have worked in a French speaking community in the United States. Barriers to communication in foreign communities include “(language), body language,” and “social hierarchy.”

7 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Overall, the impact of study abroad is apparent: alum who participated in study abroad demonstrate higher means than those who do not (Table 6). In fact, those who did not attend study abroad only met a mean ranking above 3.0 for one of the four rubrics, while those who did attend surpassed 3.0 with each rubric. Additionally, for three of the four characteristics, those who attended study abroad have a lower standard deviation, describing a higher consistency of higher scores.

The data is presented and discussed at the frequency and mean level because none of the findings were significantly different for those who did or did not attend study abroad. While this makes our major finding a rejection of the hypothesis – that study abroad significantly transforms our students

- the analysis process can help inform how we can improve study abroad. The data does show that people who participated in study abroad achieve higher levels of the VALUES rubric, just not at a significantly higher level than those who did not study abroad. This mirrors the finding for age. While one may expect the age of the respondents to skew the study as general life experience and professional development will move a person

further along the rubric, age did not emerge as a statistical indicator of change. The number of places traveled outside of formal education and the location of these experiences have not yielded statistical results. While we are headed in the right direction, with study abroad participants attaining higher levels on the rubrics, can we do better? Can we go from ‘better’ to significant?

This leads to the question of what can we do, as educators, to enhance student learning and reach the full transformative potential of study abroad. The literature suggests that to be transformative, the main components are ‘preflight’ preparation, a disorienting experience (often experiencing something new) and ‘unpacking’ upon return (Gardner et al, 2008; Brewer and Solberg, 2009). Are we preparing enough? Are we asking the tough questions, about values and ethics? Are we pushing our students to take the time to reflect on their experiences and foster deep learning? Are we challenging assumptions and stereotypes? Are we helping students make connections across time, cultures and disciplines? This is where the VALUES rubric can provide guide posts.

Before the study abroad experience, educators can assist students through classroom activities, discussions, and lectures to open their mind to experiences and thought processes different than their previously held assumptions. During study abroad, educators must continually help student to connect the classroom preparation to the real-world application in their now foreign context. By crafting reflection exercises upon return, discussions and experiences that strategically move students from Benchmark to Milestone to Capstone may be unearthed, and bring voice to, the transformative value of study abroad. Then we will have made a significant difference, statistically, as well as in human lives. Understanding the impact of a past event, such as study abroad, may take years for an alum to absorb, understand and value. Additional life experiences will influence one’s ability to move across the rubrics. This study is a preliminary step to identify and measure the knowledge and personal growth stemming from study abroad specifically connected to liberal learning in a professional degree.

The breadth of Landscape Architecture allows for multiple pedagogies in the reflection process, including discussions, drawings, project development, essay writing, and real-world site visits. Indeed, enhancing the development of students will require formal and intensive education while studying abroad and not allowing the experience to be one simply for travel or seeing the highlights abroad.

Table 6. Rubric means, sample size, and standard deviation based on those who did or did not participate in study abroad

	Civic Engagement	Ethical Reasoning	Global Learning	Intercultural Knowledge and Competence
<i>Participate</i>				
Mean	3.3478	3.0889	3.2222	3.5122
N	46	45	45	41
Std. Dev.	0.76645	0.79264	0.67044	0.63726
<i>Did Not Participate</i>				
Mean	2.9737	2.8649	2.8919	3.0541
N	38	37	37	37
Std. Dev.	.85383	.71345	0.80911	0.77981
<i>Total</i>				
Mean	3.1786	2.9878	3.0732	3.2949
N	84	82	82	78
Std. Dev.	0.82375	0.76164	0.74999	0.74046

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