A Student's Guide to Experiential Learning

The Magic of Study Abroad: How we do it and why


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Don't Just Read About It – Experience It!

Experiential Learning [EL] is the process of making meaning from direct first-hand experience. Study abroad courses help you draw upon your own experiences, learn from them, and learn from and teach your fellow students as well. Your instructor assists you by selecting some learning experiences—the guided part of our inquiry-guided learning approach. Using his models, you can then construct your own additional learning opportunities.

Students & instructors derive multiple benefits from EL. The opportunity to take an individual “peak experience” and guide students to transcend the mere memory of a situation, to coach them to analyze, theorize, and to better understand themselves and others is a golden opportunity for instructors. Integrating experience with guided learning and reflection significantly increases the depth and breadth of cultural competence and knowledge retention. Assignments should require students to use what they learn in the real world thus ramping up both cognitive [thinking] & affective [knowing and feeling] outcomes. Building on experiences strengthens practical abilities, critical thinking skills, and core intercultural competencies. It's also much more fun & engaging than molding in a classroom!

EL supports individualized learning outside the classroom walls and allows you to stretch in unique and creative directions. Concrete learning experiences expose you to different ways of acquiring and processing knowledge. EL creates a place for the odd-shaped, bulky kind of learning that doesn't “fit” as neatly into the constraints of a traditional classroom format. Effective learning outside the classroom pushes you beyond old comfort levels and predictability but stops short of the panic zone. You explore places new and unfamiliar, such as a new city, culture, and society, and use new perspectives and tools to do so. So embrace experience—it's our best teacher!

Enhancing Our Intercultural Curiosity

To develop our own sense of intercultural curiosity, we need to focus on:

1. Seeking out opportunities to speak with (and interview) English people.
2. Suspending our assumptions and value judgments
3. Practicing cultural humility
4. Enhancing our perception skills
5. Developing and appreciating multiple perspectives
6. Increasing our tolerance of ambiguity [lots of grey areas in life]
7. Asking culturally appropriate questions
8. Becoming participant observers as appropriate
9. Becoming analytically inquisitive
10. Assessing the credibility of intercultural sources

Source: Janet M. Bennett, Ph.D., © 2011

Improving Our Intercultural Competence:
We'll work on developing four basic intercultural competency [IC] skills

1. Increasing cultural and personal self-awareness;
2. Increasing awareness of others within their own cultural and personal contexts;
3. Learning techniques for “bridging cultural gaps”—which is to say, interacting with culturally different others in effective and appropriate ways;
4. Cultivating emotional intelligence—developing the capacities to identify, manage, communicate, and apply emotions effectively and appropriately.

IC is a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts.

Cognitive
• Cultural self-awareness
• Culture-general knowledge
• Culture-specific knowledge
• Interaction analysis

Affective
• Curiosity
• Relationship building skills
• Cognitive flexibility
• Empathy
• Motivation
• Open-mindedness

Behavioral Skills
• Active listening,
• Problem solving
• Sensitive questioning
• Information gathering skills

A TAXONOMY OF SIGNIFICANT LEARNING

Note the competencies [model on the left by Bennett] mesh nicely with L. Dee Fink's learning taxonomy [above right]. Bennett's Cognitive domain includes Fink's
foundational knowledge, application, and integration, as well as the important area of metacognition, learning how to learn. Bennett's Affective domain and Behavioral skills are somewhat blended in Fink's model, including both the human dimension and caring. We practice and teach these things in a new culture and in consideration of another culture [ethnorelativism] to build intercultural competence. Students gain an enhanced understanding of a new culture & tools for viewing their home culture.

Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

The model below begins with 3 ethnocentric stages [left columns below], in which our own culture is experienced as central to reality. In the latter three ethnorelative stages [righthand columns], we view our own culture the context of other cultures. As we experience and reflect on those experiences, we seek to progress from ethnocentric to more ethnorelative perspectives.

**Ethnocentric** ="assuming that the worldview of one’s own culture is central to all reality." The concept is closely connected with egocentrism in which the "individual assumes that his/her existence is necessarily central to the reality perceived by others." In its extreme form, ethnocentrism may exhibit as racism or xenophobia, with negative evaluations of dissimilar cultures (e.g., in-group/out-group differentiation).

**Etnnorelativistic** ="different cultures are perceived as variable and viable constructions of reality." As part of a process of constructing reality and identity, we consider our own culture within the context of other cultures. Source: Bennett, M. J. and Bennett, J. M. (1993) http://www.intercultural.org/documents/competence_handouts.pdf

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnocentric</th>
<th>Ethnorelative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Denial</strong></td>
<td><strong>Acceptance</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My cultural experience is the only one that is real and valid.</td>
<td>I accept but may not agree with other cultures. Generally, I am curious and respectful.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>We</em> are superior and &quot;they&quot; are inferior. One feels threatened and is highly critical. What is strange may be labeled as stupid.</td>
<td>I &quot;see&quot; the world through different eyes and make intentional changes in my own behavior and values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Defense</strong></td>
<td><strong>Adaptation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other cultures are trivialized or romanticized. One tends to deny differences (e.g., &quot;color blind&quot;) and only seek similarities.</td>
<td>I easily move in and out of different cultural worldviews.</td>
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