

**Broadening the Lens: A Study of Effects on Student Communication Practices from
Short-Term Study Abroad Experiences**

Study abroad has emerged as an essential element in many U.S. students' college careers, as many degree programs have implemented study abroad as a degree requirement and globalization has fostered a flourishing globalized economy and society. Over half of these students are choosing to go abroad for short-term programs of six weeks or less, and thus my Master's thesis considered the effects short-term study abroad programs can have on participants' communication practices. During my Master's degree, my focus was on intercultural communication with a tendency toward mixed method analysis. Currently, I am continuing in this field of research but I have recently added the element of innovation and science communication when considering innovative advances being promoted and understood across cultures.

The study included a study abroad participant group who went abroad for one month or less and a control group of students who did not go abroad. The study utilized a pre-posttest design, and participants in both groups were sent online surveys before and after the one month study period. The study utilized Martin and Rubin's (1995) Cognitive Flexibility Scale and Chen and Starosta's (2000) Intercultural Sensitivity Scale to measure changes in participant intercultural personhood, to which both cognitive flexibility and intercultural sensitivity contribute. The study also used open-ended questions in the posttest to gather study abroad participant narratives and add qualitative depth to the findings.

The data analysis found the study abroad students did exhibit an increase in cognitive flexibility after their trips abroad ($M = 5.00$) when compared with the longitudinal data for control group participants who stayed in country ($M = 4.72$). The study encountered an

unexpected trend when study abroad students exhibited lower intercultural sensitivity after their trips ($M = 3.55$) than control group students who stayed in country ($M = 4.00$). Through analysis of the study abroad participant narratives upon their return, I found that returning home after only a few weeks abroad might hinder these participants from completing a full cycle of culture shock. This means the surveys and open-ended questions they responded to upon return might have caught the participants in the midst of culture shock, where they are still unable to fully process their emotions and enter into the final stage of cultural acceptance and mastery (Oberg, 2006).

In addition to shock and cultural obstacles encountered while in their host countries, participants could also be experiencing reverse culture shock upon their return home, as they resume school and everyday practices that suddenly feel different than before. Participants on short-term programs might even be more susceptible to reverse culture shock upon reentering the country due to the rapid nature of their one-month trip. Due to this chaotic shift in realities, future research could assess study abroad participants and attempt to discern when culture shock is occurring.

From my findings, I gave suggestions for institutional support for short-term study abroad participants. These suggestions included mandatory journal entries throughout their experience or directed focus group discussions about intercultural personhood upon return.

References

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