

International Study Tour Groups

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Received: September 12, 2013

Accepted: December 12, 2013

Online Published: February 12, 2014

doi:10.5539/jel.v3n1p52

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/jel.v3n1p52>

Abstract

Using the context of international study tour groups, this study examined the personal and professional transformation that occurred among host faculty and staff at The University of Montana-Missoula as a result of their interactions with traveling academics from other countries. Data were collected from participant responses (n=27) using a mixed-methods design, utilizing a quantitative survey while simultaneously embedding qualitative questions. Quantitative responses to the survey were analyzed with descriptive statistics to generate key findings. Thematic coding strategies were applied to the qualitative responses in order to inform and help further explain the quantitative data, thereby providing greater clarity in addressing the research questions that framed this study. Findings from the analyses provided evidence that participants experienced increased inspiration and desire for self-improvement, self-discovery, and ultimately transformation. Given the reported findings, it behooves institutions of higher education to actively seek out intercultural experiences by hosting international study tour groups.

Keywords: international study tours, higher education, cultural experience

1. Introduction

Anyone who has experienced studying or teaching in a foreign culture is well aware of the challenges that come with such an undertaking. Teaching and learning styles differ remarkably from one country to another. Everything from the structure of a course to the styles of communication between students and teachers can vary greatly between different cultures, even between the U.S. and other “western” cultures (Kuhn, 1996).

For international students and scholars visiting or on exchange in a culture different than their own, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the cultural variations that can impact the experience. On the other side of the coin, cultural exchanges and international programs provide the potential to grow and learn new ways and approaches to teaching. Many scholars “have had international experiences that they consider significant in their professional development” (Vincenti, 2001, p. 44). These international experiences can help ease cultural differences. Those who encounter individuals from other cultures may gain an “increased awareness of other cultures, which often reveals alternative ways of behaving in a given situation” (Vincenti, p. 48) and this may in turn result in a decrease in ethnocentrism.

A review of existing literature reveals chronicles of international travelers, who have written about the places they visited and the lessons they learned from the local people and the experience as a whole. For instance, Kane (2004a, 2004b) documented the human connections he made during his travels to places such as Poland and Peru, and also gave advice for other travelers to follow. In addition, Juman (2005), explored the challenges of moving to a new culture and explained what he learned about how to live and succeed in India. Further review of the literature shows that American higher education has enabled many educators to travel overseas to teach or participate in the exchange of ideas (Hamza, 2010). In 2008 alone, congress appropriated \$215.4 million and bi-national commissions or foundations, contributed an additional \$60 million for the Fulbright Scholars Program (Fulbright, 2013). Since 1946, 294,000 individuals have participated in international travel as a result of the Fulbright Program. Approximately 7500 new grants are awarded each year.

One “narrative account by Garson (2005) reflects her cross-cultural teaching experience in Egypt. Her article focused on how this experience improved her global teaching” (as cited in Hamza, 2010, p. 53). In promotion of the internationalization of higher education Stohl (2007) stated,

To capture the faculty's interest in, and commitment to, internationalization, we need to move beyond the conceptualization of the internationalization or globalization of higher education in terms of how the different aspects of teaching, research, and service functions of the university are becoming more "internationalized" and examine how these activities encourage greater learning and discovery (p. 359).

Sanderson (2007) identified the need for faculty to understand themselves as a precursor to the internationalization of their curriculum. He called for a "critically reflective and self-reflective process" (p. 276) destined to help faculty understand the perspectives of others. However, "few studies have been conducted about academics' international experiences" (Hamza, 2010, p. 53) and there is limited research discussing the experiences of the local individuals and educators hosting the international study tours.

This article explores the experiences and changes that occurred among the members of the host country who interacted with international study tour participants visiting the United States. As individuals interact over time, social exchange theory indicates a need they feel to reciprocate, assist and support to the other person (Gouldner, 1960). Personal growth through these programs is bidirectional. Understanding the impact on the individuals in the host country is as important and can foster motivation to pursue such opportunities and heighten cultural awareness. The specific type of exchange program examined in this study was the international study tour group.

1.1 Purpose

The University of Montana's International Programs has a long history of student and scholar exchanges that have occurred between the United States and numerous other countries. Today there are trends developing that emphasize the value that is gained by a new kind of scholar exchange known as international study tour group. These study tours consist of groups of international scholars who travel together to a college or university in the United States, in an effort to learn more about teaching and research, cultures, and languages. What usually results is an exchange of ideas about teaching and research, and an overall expansion of understanding and appreciation of other systems of education. The experiences and the changes that have taken place in conjunction with these study tours inspired the authors to seek more information about these changes. This inspiration led to the inception of this study. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to gain a greater understanding of the impact of these international study tour groups on faculty and staff at The University of Montana - Missoula. Participants for this study were individuals at The University of Montana - Missoula who were involved with international study tour groups. This study sought to answer specific questions concerning the experiences associated with international exchanges: What transformation occurs, if any, as a result of interaction with international study tour groups? Are there transformational aspects felt by the participants?

2. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, utilizing a quantitative survey while simultaneously embedding qualitative questions that were administered to the host participants who worked with international study tours. A mixed method approach was selected to provide the "most complete analysis of problems" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 21). This single-phase study embedded qualitative open-ended questions, which played a secondary role within an overall quantitative design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). The qualitative research method for the subjective interpretation of "the content of text data was through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278).

In qualitative research reliability and validity is replaced by the idea of trustworthiness (Mishler, 2000). Creswell and Miller (2000) suggested the validity is affected by the researcher's perception of validity in the study. Stenbacka (2001) describes the notion of reliability as one of the quality concepts in qualitative research which needs "to be solved in order to claim a study as part of proper research" (p. 551). The researchers used the participants' exact words and did not interpret the answers to the open ended questions therefore the finding in the study are valid and are not the perceptions of the researchers.

The population for this study consisted of three major groups: staff, support faculty, and teaching faculty who have been involved with international study tour groups at The University of Montana - Missoula. To identify individuals that would be suited for this study, the authors contacted the International Programs Department (IP) and the Office of the Foreign Students and Scholar Services (FSSS). These two offices have worked with most of the international study tour groups that come to The University of Montana. A list of 65 individuals associated with the university was compiled and contacted through a sampling process. The sampling strategy employed by the authors was a snowball strategy, in which the potential participants provided links to other potential participants, until no further possible participants could be found. Due to the nature of the study tours being conducted through multiple departments and different programs, a complete list was not available to identify the

population. The list compiled was not entirely comprehensive because in some instances or rare occasions, there were a few departments that worked directly with the international groups, while some departments or study tours did not. Many of the international group interactions did not involve the IP or FSSS and was therefore not accessible to these authors.

The participants for this study came from many different departments across campus, including International Programs, College of Education and Human Sciences, Anthropology, School of Business Administration, School of Law, the College of Forestry and Conservation, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the College of Health Performance and Biological Sciences. Most of the participants were employees of The University of Montana. Affiliated centers such as the Mansfield Center were also contacted for their input. The sample also included several faculty members who have recently retired.

Quantitative responses to the survey were analyzed utilizing descriptive statistics to generate key findings. In order to inform and help further explain the quantitative data, qualitative responses were analyzed using thematic coding. The themes identified provided greater clarity in addressing the research questions.

2.1 Participants

A total of 27 participants responded to the survey, the 41% response rate is considered average for an email survey (<http://www.utexas.edu/academic/ctl/assessment/iar/>). These individuals included 11 staff members, one support faculty, and 15 teaching faculty. The age of the participants also varied, with 13 over the age of 50; seven between ages 50 and 40; four between ages 40 and 31; and only one below age 30. The ethnicity of the participants was 89% Caucasian; 4% Hispanic; while 7% selected other for ethnicity. Respondents were predominantly female, with 54% females and 46% males. Most participants had significant international travel, with 61% having lived in other countries and 42% participating in international exchange programs in the past. Most participants had been involved with international study tour groups more than once, with only 12% participating for the first time.

The host campus study participants held different positions when working with international study tour groups, with most of them being content presenters. The rest were involved as interpreters, technology support, administrative support, and in one instance the participant said that he was involved in all of these activities. There were 18% study participants involved with the international tour groups for research purposes only, while 41% were involved with the groups for both research and financial reasons. The remaining 41% were involved solely for financial reasons.

2.2 Data Collection

Data collection for this study began with research considerations for the protection of participants from any harm as a result of their voluntary participation. Individuals were contacted electronically and invited to participate with no external pressure or coercion. In addition, these potential participants were informed that there would be no negative consequences should they choose to stop at any time during the data collection period. Finally, the identity of each participant was protected as their responses were submitted anonymously through an electronic online survey. Demographic data were reported in a manner where identities could not be ascertained. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at The University of Montana, thus indicating it met the university standards for ethical research. A survey was emailed to the identified potential respondents, seeking their participation. The survey consisted of 29 questions. Nine of the questions asked for demographic information about the participants and their level of experience with international tour groups. The remaining 18 questions sought individual opinions regarding their experience with The University of Montana international study tour groups. There were also four open-ended questions seeking qualitative data.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Some of the key findings from the quantitative data included a clear impression that, as a result of their involvement with international study tour groups, most of the respondents were impacted by the experience in a way that changed their outlook towards international involvement. In fact, over 76% of the respondents stated that their experiences changed their opinions about the United States' responsibility to the global community. Approximately 61% of the respondents stated that they have an increased desire for travel overseas; and over 92% stated that they would consider working, studying or serving in some capacity in another country. Furthermore, interaction with international study tour groups allowed all the participants to understand how people from other countries view the United States. Finally, over 96% of the respondents answered that they would consider being involved again. Looking closely at the demographic data of the one individual who chose

not to consider participating again, this person was involved more than six times with international study tour groups and reported a plethora of experience.

Over 42% of the responding faculty stated that the participation changed their approach to teaching. Also, 50% of the staff and 69% of the teaching faculty stated that the experience changed them as a person (See Figure A).

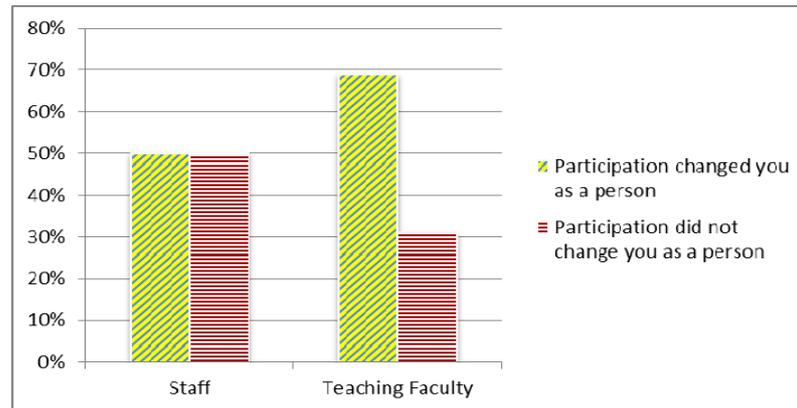


Figure 1. Participants' perceived change

The survey data showed some additional and noteworthy findings. With more females than males conversant in more than one language, the results indicated that some male respondents actually had a decrease in their interest in learning other languages, with 35.3% of the male respondents reporting that they felt a decreased desire in learning new languages. Other males had a different response, as 23% of the male respondents reportedly felt no change, while 41% felt an increased interest in learning a new language. Female respondents, on the other hand, showed a different dynamic, as 42% reported no change in interest, and over 57% indicated an increase in interest. No female participant displayed a decrease in interest in learning a new language; and 57% indicated their interest in learning new languages had increased.

3.2 Coding

The examination of the qualitative survey responses yielded four prominent themes. The themes are:

- 1) There was an increase of an individual's own cultural awareness regarding himself/herself as an individual.
- 2) The respondents' experiences lead to an increase of cultural sensitivity for these individuals as teachers, particularly a greater understanding of different perspectives.
- 3) The relationship between the increases in cultural self-awareness combined with the teachers' cultural sensitivity lead to a desire to travel abroad.
- 4) There was an increased interest among the respondents for professional development in the area of cultural diversity and teaching.

3.3 Cultural Awareness

Involvement with international study tour groups tend to lead to an increase of the individuals' own cultural awareness regarding himself or herself as an individual. For instance, in response to a survey question about whether participation with international groups at The University of Montana changed them as a person, one respondent noted that she is much more open to other cultures. Other respondents similarly stated that they are now "much more culturally aware," "much less ethnocentric," and now have a "different perspective of international opinions." Another respondent stated that "it has increased my knowledge of an appreciation for other cultures," and "as a direct result of working with international groups, I lived and taught abroad for two years."

An understanding of cultural awareness is a critical aspect of any cross cultural undertaking. "Cultural awareness is the foundation of communication and it involves the ability of standing back from ourselves and becoming aware of our cultural values, beliefs and perceptions" (Quappe & Cantatore, 2005, p. 1). Cultural awareness is a pre-requisite for successful experiences with international study tour groups. Participants from all dimensions of the study tour are exposed to values and beliefs related to other cultures. Often, perceptions are clouded by a lack

of understanding of opposing cultural beliefs and values. “What is considered an appropriate behavior in one culture is frequently inappropriate in another one” (Quappe & Cantatore, 2005, p. 1).

Berardo (2004) indicated that individuals involved in inter-cultural endeavors need to “learn to tolerate uncertainty” (p. 2). Different cultures have different tolerances for uncertainty and ambiguity. Some cultures promote asking questions when uncertainty exists while other cultures regard this practice as inappropriate or a sign of weakness. Humor is another area that varies from culture to culture. What is considered humorous in one culture may not be humorous in another and may be offensive.

3.4 Cultural Sensitivity

The survey results showed that the respondents’ experiences also led to an increase of cultural sensitivity for these individuals as teachers, particularly a greater understanding of different perspectives. For instance, one survey respondent noted that after participating with international groups at The University of Montana, her approach to teaching has changed, to now include an emphasis on the global world. Another respondent said, “I incorporate more international topics/issues in my classes.” A third respondent stated that, “Working with various international groups as an instructor has given me a much more comprehensive view of the differing needs of English language learners from different countries.”

Toffler (2011) indicated that “The illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn” (p. 134). The participants’ responses described above are in alignment with Toffler’s position. Rather than closing their minds and cementing what they had once learned, they unlearned and relearned their approach to teaching due to their study tour experiences. In addition, The National Education Association (NEA) in 2010 indicated Global Competence as a goal of education. The NEA report stated students of the 21 Century must have an appreciation of cultural diversity: within this viewpoint it will be vital that they will respect other points of view about world issues and global cultural differences. The National Education Association pointed to these outcomes: (a) Once students are exposed to different cultures they will be able to accept and respect the differences of cultures and work creatively with a global mindset; (b) Successful students will have the ability to collaborate with people of different cultures and utilize skills to function in the global community (NEA Policy Brief, 2010).

As the respondents noted, once they had experience with international study tour groups it enabled them to adapt their teaching. Therefore, it can be extrapolated, if professors have had an international study tour group interaction they may be more apt to include experiences with an international emphasis in their classes.

3.5 Desire to Travel Abroad

The relationship between the increases in cultural self-awareness combined with the teachers’ increased cultural sensitivity lead to a desire to travel abroad. The participants indicated that they had worked with groups representing a grand total of 31 countries from several different regions. The desire to travel abroad, in turn, led to additional growth of self-awareness and cultural sensitivity. This was apparent in the responses to the survey question, “What activities would better prepare you for working with international participants?” Respondents answered this question by indicating that traveling to the group’s country of origin would better prepare them for working with the tour group. Terrell and Lindsey (2009) refer to cultural proficiency as “a world view that carries explicit values, language, and standards for effective personal interaction and professional practices” (p. 21). The respondents to the survey appeared to be interested in a deeper understanding of the international group’s culture, so as to enrich their interaction with the participants. Additionally, the respondents specified that they wished they had learned more before the participants’ arrival, which suggests the respondents’ had a desire to interact in a respectful and knowledgeable way.

3.6 Professional Development

The final theme was an increased interest among the respondents for professional development in the area of cultural diversity and teaching. Approximately one third of the respondents specifically stated that they would be better prepared for working with international study tour groups if they were exposed to further training and learning opportunities. One of the survey respondents wrote to “learn more about the international group’s culture and history before their arrival” would be very helpful. Two other respondents emphasized activities such as “multicultural training,” and another respondent added that “training on culture, customs, and [the] educational system of [the] groups’ countries” would be very important. The survey results therefore implied the respondents intended to continue to develop their professionalism and expand their horizons. This effect has been previously observed in a number of studies of students and student teachers as they have experienced

international teaching, which resulted in a new found desire to improve their own practices as well as an increase in cultural awareness (Coverston, Harmon, Keller, & Malner, 2004; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Lee, 2004).

International experiences can be transformative in nature as they may impact both personal and professional attitudes as well as extending an individual's global perspective (Hamza, 2010). From the narrative responses written by the survey respondents, it appears that the interaction of faculty with international study tour groups prompted not only a desire to improve practice but an increase in cultural self-awareness, cultural sensitivity, and travel into new cultural landscapes. In addition to the increases in professional development that occurred as a result of working with international groups, it is interesting to note several similarities that emerged among the participants and their responses to the open-ended questions. These similarities included self-reported levels of tolerance, empathy, open-mindedness, and understanding. Respondents (92%) emphasized that as a result of their involvement with international groups they would consider working, studying or serving in some capacity with similar groups. The majority of them (58.3%) declared that they had changed as a person as a result of their participation with international groups.

The presence of these qualities can lead toward the ability to gain greater awareness and sensitivity toward other cultures. This played out in response to one survey question about whether working with international groups at The University of Montana has changed your feelings about individuals from other countries. One respondent stated, "I am impressed by the similarities among educators in various parts of the world." Other survey respondents noted that they are now more tolerant of differences, empathetic, open-minded, understanding, and have recognized the similarities that exist between people despite their different nationalities.

4. Conclusion

Participation with international study tour groups can transform all participants and enrich the individual. The specific questions this study sought to answer were: What transformation occurs, if any, as a result of interaction with international study tour groups? Are there transformational aspects felt by the participants? These questions were asked within a context of understanding that, the transformational outcomes from international study tours can encompass a variety of effects involving increased cultural awareness. These effects may range anywhere from cultural conflicts and challenges that arise, to deep human connections that are made between individuals of different cultural backgrounds. The transformation outcomes resulting from participation with international study tours lie somewhere in between these two extremes.

In order to answer the research questions, first the authors looked at whether there were any transformational aspects felt by respondents taking part in international study tour groups at the University of Montana- Missoula, and found that the answer was affirmative. The transformational outcomes identified by the survey clearly illustrated that the majority of the participants have experienced some kind of change resulting from their involvement with the international study tour groups. From the total participants, an average of 58% said their experience with the international study tour groups changed them as a person. This was also supported by the data showing 92% of the participants stated they would consider working, studying or serving in some capacity in other countries, based on their experience with study tour groups. In addition, more than 42% of the responding faculty indicated their work with the study tour groups changed their approach to teaching. In fact, all participants described changes that came about as a result of their encounters with the study tours, whether it related to: (a) their teaching methods, (b) their perceptions of other cultures or individuals from other countries, or (c) other aspects in their lives. Overall, the transformation that was occurring with these experiences was of a positive nature, but it was further noted that only one participant decided that they would not participate again.

The kinds of transformational aspects that were felt by the participants were not particularly surprising to the authors, considering that the whole purpose behind the study tours is for educators to promote cultural understandings and to gain a greater respect and appreciation for other educational systems. However, what was particularly noteworthy and impressive was the participants' increased inspiration and desire for personal and professional self-improvement. The consistent goal of bettering oneself can go a long way towards accomplishing the goals of the international study tours. In addition, the authors noted the similarities in the participants' responses involving their tolerance, empathy, open-mindedness, and understanding. These qualities certainly contribute towards the participants' increased awareness, sensitivity, and ultimately personal and professional self-improvement.

Given the positive nature and outcomes experienced by participants of this study, it behooves institutions of higher education to actively seek out intercultural experiences in the form of international study tours. These experiences can lead to individual self-improvement, self-discovery, and ultimately, transformation. Research has long shown that interactions between peoples of different cultures and nationalities can lead to personal

transformations, including decreases in ethnocentrism, or even shifts in the professional development of scholars (Vincenti, 2001). In particular, these transformations involved an increase in cultural self-awareness; a greater understanding of different (cultural) perspectives, which led to changes in teaching habits; a propensity toward international travel; and an increase in professional development that then led to an even greater increase in cultural self-awareness, and cultural sensitivity. Therefore, data indicated, from the participants own words, they did learn, unlearn and relearn their approach to teaching and also shifted their perspective on the Cultural Proficiency Continuum. Individual or group participation in international study tour groups supports institutions of higher education that seek global outreach and participation in the global community as a long-range mission or goal.

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