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ARTICLE

Preparing Students for Study Abroad Success: Expecting Uncertainty Leads to Adaptation

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ABSTRACT

Students graduating today join an increasingly complex society with an expectation for awareness of international/intercultural issues. One way to increase this awareness is through an international experience during college. International experiences require the student to face significant challenges because they are part of the experience, and they lead to growth. However, any experience abroad will be replete with uncertainty. Expecting uncertainty, planning to accept it and adapt to it, empowers the learner, and deepens the quality of the outcomes. We represent a PhD student, a study abroad administrator, and a senior professor, each with significant international experience. We offer a series of adaptation principles to help students prepare for international work. These include: 1. Developing a campus anchor; 2. Remaining curious; 3. Seeking the edge of the curve; 4. Remaining true to yourself; 5. Celebrating the variance; 6. Remaining flexible as you select goals; 7. Finding translatable skills; 8. Becoming a storyteller; 9. Taking informed risks; and 10. Envision the future and your role in it. Each is meant to guide and encourage consideration as students prepare for and engage in an international experience.

Keywords: Study abroad; International education; International academic experience; Adaptive behavior; Developing life skills

1. Introduction

As the world, and the problems it faces, become more globally intertwined, it is increasingly important, and often expected, that students incorporate cross-cultural, global perspectives in their education. That perspective often is achieved through an internationally

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focused experience (Delgado et al. 2013, Jones et al. 2021, Perry et al. 2021). Currently, we live in a world with dynamic borders where students and faculty need a global perspective to address imminent issues such as climate change, population growth, and global pandemics (Braskamp et al. 2009). Gaining academic perspectives beyond a student's home country can aid in creating the skills and global perspective needed to understand and address the issues we face. Such experiences also help the student evaluate which of the needs of his/her/their home culture are most relevant for individual attention and for personal and professional growth (Calikoglu et al. 2020). Beyond building a global network of peers, an international perspective, traditionally through study abroad experiences, can contribute to a student's skill set and advance employment opportunities (Haisley et al. 2021, Lahr et al. 2020). Those gains are often greater for non-traditional students: First generation students who engaged in study abroad later earned higher GPA and graduated sooner than continuing generation students (Ognet et al. 2024). Further, non-traditional students bring a diversity of perspectives that benefits all involved (Aspite-Berina et al. 2024).

International experiences can have a profound impact on a person's self-understanding and personal growth through increased self-confidence, autonomy, emotional resilience, and adaptability skills (Adler 1972, Urban and Palmer 2014, Maharaja 2018). Students who have developed adaptability and ability to motivate, especially those who have done so through an international experience, have increased career mobility and academic as well as nonacademic well-being (Philips et al. 2017, Zabidea et al. 2022). An international experience frequently involves unpredictability and unfulfilled anticipations, potentially resulting in reduced satisfaction and hindering personal development. Entering that experience with an adaptive mindset is imperative for maximizing benefits of any international experience. Research indicates that adaptability not only directly enhances engagement, but it indirectly promotes mindfulness, which can result in heightened immersion (Elphinstone et al. 2019). Optimally, a student enters a study abroad experience "ready to adapt" and deepens his/her/their adaptability through the international experience. This suggests that individuals who are adaptable are more likely to actively participate in and fully embrace their international experience. Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that adaptability is linked to increased resilience, greater job and life satisfaction, as well as reduced stress levels (Urbanaviciute et al. 2019). In fact, flexibility and adaptability have been reported as the criteria most valued by employers (Vendolska and Eliska 2016). This means that individuals who possess adaptive skills are better equipped to bounce back from challenges and setbacks encountered during their time abroad, increasing their career performance and satisfaction post-graduation (Chen et al. 2022).

We write specifically in support of students preparing for an international, academic experience, empowering them to increase adaptability. That experience, whether as guided study abroad or as independent work, will carry uncertainty and surprises (Zemach-Bersin, 2008). For example, students who expected "... an incredible abroad experience…" often were disappointed initially; however, as they engaged with the experience, personal growth and new risk-taking skill, as well as increased self-confidence developed (McLeod and Wainwright 2009). Students who studied abroad reported gaining cross cultural skills and adaptability (Taguchi et al. 2016). Students who tend to be most successful (i.e., developing career-translatable skills, self-understanding and personal development) in studying abroad (for any length of time) are those with confidence in their ability to change their circumstances or alter their environment. Short term experiences abroad, as short as nine days, increase adaptability (Dunlap and Mapp 2017, Hsiao et al. 2021, Mapp 2012). Design of the abroad experience, as well as interaction with people from another culture strongly influence development of adaptability (Niendorf and Alberts 2017). Personal reflections like

What can I do to make this experience better for myself? How does this relate to my long-term goals? What do I want to get out of this?

have been shown to make a large difference in study abroad experience decisions, independence, self-reliance, and confidence (Raby et al. 2021).

A reflexive research framework

Many authors have offered frameworks to develop understanding of study abroad experiences, and to guide future work (c.f., Perry et al. 2021, Tanhueco-Nepomuceno 2019). Explicitly reflecting on experiences and becoming aware of assumptions deepens understanding and advances growth (Webb et al. 2013). Documenting experiences through a reflective experience is a valuable tool for students during study abroad (Levine & Levine 2004). We believe recursive reflection also is a valuable way to teased out understanding from personal experience guiding the study abroad process. The authors have come to this work from three different perspectives. We follow Zhao et al, (2013) and Kwame (2017) in using personal narratives to implement a reflective model of analysis. We each developed our draft of principles developed from the literature and from personal experiences, then we communally reflected and revised those draft principals.

The three authors are a PhD student (Author 1), an administrator (Author 2), and a senior faculty member (Author 3). We offer personal stories from our experiences to provide context and raise curiosity. Those stories are followed by a series of principles that, we suggest, will allow students to optimize their experience. Our overall guidance is that we strongly encourage students to develop a mindset based on adaptation. That mindset might be framed as *Remember why you started,* asking how that original goal will help you remain centered in difficult times. Finally, the guiding principles were developed from those shared experiences using recursive reflection.

2. Personal Experiences That Have Led Us to Our Guiding Principles

Borneo: A summer in the field

Expectation: I (Author 1) accepted a summer research position in Malaysian Borneo. The position advertised a generous stipend and the development of field skills I needed to refine, as well as the opportunity to travel to one of the most biodiverse places on the planet. I became excited about the opportunity to gain experience trapping small mammals, learning thermogenesis, and participating in night jungle surveys. During the fieldwork, the experience was designed such that I was to conduct a mini-research project for potential publication.

Reality: Upon arrival, I learned that the host government had not issued collecting permits, and the permits would not be approved before I planned to leave. Furthermore, the research team was restricted to remaining on campus, with little opportunity to experience the local culture or explore the natural environment in the way intended. I was not going to achieve a research publication, gain experience trapping small mammals, or learn about thermogenesis, thus I needed to identify my options.

Adaptation: In response to the rapidly evolving situation, I analyzed the situation and sought a way to still get an acceptable experience. After reaching out to my campus anchor for guidance, I determined there was an opportunity to develop a peer reviewed paper through a literature review and experience a small part of the Bornean environment through external connections. By expressing curiosity and a desire for fieldwork, I also was able to participate in several research projects already underway at the host university, strengthening skills in the area I intended to study. My disappointment turned into acceptance of the situation and a strategy for success. By identifying the aspects of the position that I still wanted to achieve, I was able to turn the actual position into a successful experience and increase my awareness of

the need for flexible goals for future experiences in other cultures.

Thailand: Neem for yard-long beans

Expectation: I (Author 3) advised a master's student who was part of the Peace Corps International program. In that program, a person takes classes on campus for one year, serves two years on-site with the Peace Corps, and returns to campus for six months to write and defend. The process allows the student to achieve a master's degree and Peace Corps service within 3 ½ years. My field at the time was water quality, so the student and I designed classes and tentative research on that subject.

Reality: Upon arrival, the student was assigned to a resettled village, a dry, upland place to which riparian people had been forcibly resettled when a dam was built. There was no water in sight from the village. Clearly this would have nothing to do with water quality; the student was told to spend two years helping the community develop a marketable program for yard-long beans. Although the villagers had little to no experience with small-scale, commercial agriculture, everyone understood that the beans were marketable, but production was severely constrained by insect pests.

Adaptation: Through extensive interaction with host country staff, we learned which pests were threatening the beans and learned that local people were quite familiar with a range of uses for neem, an Asian tree with a wide range of interesting properties. Those discussions also allowed us to develop communication skills we later used when the student was in-country. While the student was in the Thai village, we conducted a wide range of trials for neem extract preparation, settled on one that allowed the community to thrive, and published two papers as a result. The student's master's experience was successful, although it had nothing to do with water quality.

Tanzania: Understanding wildlife dynamics

Expectation: I (Author 1) enrolled in a field semester in Tanzania through a semester abroad program. The program looked well-structured and offered a detailed itinerary full of exciting events. Further, I would be there with a group of people, whom I had never met, but who had similar interests. I expected to have my days full of wildlife-based field excursions, camping, and trips to the local village. In addition, there was a directed research aspect from which I expected to write a nearly-publication-ready paper.

Reality: Once I arrived, I found the situation to be quite different from my expectations. Due to COVID, most of the activities on the itinerary were canceled or restricted. The field excursions were minimized, camping trips were shortened, and village visits were restricted. The first few weeks were spent within our compound with no outside contact. Additionally, conducting research for the publication would be difficult or impossible given available resources.

Adaptation: All students became visibly upset with the situation, so we vocalized our discontent. The program leader was willing to discuss our issues, clarifying some misconceptions. By remaining true to ourselves and the experiences we desired, we were able to find a solution that encompassed some of the goals we intended to reach. In parallel, we had to accept the changing world and find joy in the small things. For example, seeking to celebrate the variance of the situation and find translatable situations, my roommate and I spent time with the kitchen staff instead of in the village, still learning to prepare local foods and develop meaningful relationships. Additionally, through conversations with my campus anchor, I was able to identify an alternative route to publication for the research I completed there.

Northern Macedonia: Watershed management

Expectation: VOCA (Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance) asked me (Author 3) to advise on water quality management of a reservoir near Skopje. The core issues were water quality monitoring and protection. The request from VOCA said that algal growth was causing eutrophication and degrad-

ing water quality.

Reality: Upon arrival, I was met by a team of engineers who offered a wonderful tour of the watershed, including the off-season ski lodge where I was to stay. At the conclusion of the tour, my host said, *We'll see you in two weeks for your report*. But at that time, we had identified no problems, no questions, seen no evidence of degraded water quality, and we had not even seen or discussed water quality data. From my perspective, there was nothing about which to report. I was left to wander the watershed, with neither transportation nor language capability, supposedly to develop water quality improvements.

Adaptation: I spent two weeks wandering the watershed, "conversing" with residents across a language barrier. I learned that water quality in the reservoir and lower watershed was excellent; the concern was about future changes. Water quality monitoring was ongoing and effective, and I was able to locate historical data through the agency that managed the dam and reservoir. However, there was no communication between water quality management professionals and water users. Reservoir water supplied a downstream irrigation district, which is where water quality degradation would become apparent if it occurred. I suggested that the opportunity was for a Payment for Watershed Services (PWS) program in which downstream irrigators funded riparian zone practices by small farmers in the headwaters. That PWS program was explained to both upstream and downstream users, ensuring that each understood costs and benefits, providing the knowledge base for integrated watershed practices. Changes were implemented and successful.

Ghana: Co-education in a rural school

Expectation: I (Author 2) led a winter break program in Ghana where the students were to volunteer at a local, rural, community school. The program was designed such that students would assist local Ghanaian teachers in the classroom. Secondary goals were, there would be a reciprocal sharing of experiences and intercultural learning among the U.S. University students and Ghanaian teachers and students.

Reality: The U.S. students were mostly paired with other U.S. students, with no guidance on curriculum, little interaction with Ghanaian teachers, very few resources, and frequently without a local teacher in the setting. The U.S. University students were told to teach local students in the schools.

Adaptation: The U.S. University students worked together to learn what the local students had been learning, then developed educational games from their own experiences to share with the Ghanaian students. The focus shifted from objective pedagogy (i.e., delivering content) to cultural engagement and interaction. We adapted by focusing on the process rather than the product. Through facilitated journaling and processing, expectations of the U.S. University students shifted from formal learning to broad-based relationship-building among the U.S. students, local teachers, and Ghanaian students. The result was a cultural exchange that U.S. students found enjoyable and beneficial; the Ghanaian staff reported that local students and teachers also benefited.

Peru: Don't leave home without it

Expectation: I (Author 3) taught a field class in Peru. We began in Cusco. We planned to spend a day in the city, accommodating to the altitude and experiencing the culture, before we headed to our Amazonian field station, where we planned to spend over two weeks. As we left the hotel, I received a call from the U.S. I encouraged the students to explore the city while I took the call.

Reality: That call came from several administrators (e.g., Learning Abroad Center, General Counsel) who together told me, *Do not leave town.* That was a little disconcerting because all our preparation was for academic content at the field station, all our living expenses at the field station were pre-paid and of course, student expectations were for an Amazon rainforest experience, not something in the City of Cusco. The conversation was uncomfortable, and it took some time to reach a common understanding. I learned that the problem was liability insurance: we would not have adequate coverage at our Amazon field station, placing the university at risk.

Adaptation: I came to understand that the problem was specifically related to motorized vehicles. Through discussion, we developed a plan in which we were allowed to go to the field station but not allowed to use any motorized transportation while there. That changed my teaching practice; it excluded the use of cars or boats to reach the remote areas I had planned to visit. As a result, some field activities were replaced with others. However, all class objectives were accomplished, and no student goals were compromised. In result, the accommodation did allow us to complete the class safely and have institutional protection while we did so.

Panama: Can I buy you dinner?

Expectation: I (Author 2) helped develop a summer internship program for undergraduate students traveling to Panama; the students would participate in local internships related to their fields of interest, take a core course focused on culture, history and their internship experience, and take Spanish at a local Spanish language school. Homestays were not an option, due to transportation challenges of the archipelago region, as well as limited availability of willing families. Our goal was cultural immersion. Part of that cultural experience centered on meals with local families at their homes. We felt that an evening meal with a local family would achieve several ends. Students would learn about local foods, including how those foods were gathered, prepared, and served, as well as providing opportunities for relationship building and getting a better sense of life in the region. As in any guest appearance, students would bring some small gift for the hostess, which would be a good experience for both the student and the family. We felt that the result would be a low-risk, local, cultural exchange, and connection, as is common in many programs.

Reality: We learned that many local people in this part of Panama have a long and uncomfortable history with "outsiders," a history influenced by colonialism, views of expats utilizing scarce resources, imposing influences of tourism, and disruptive effects of big companies exploiting local people. Further, this part of Panama had high levels of poverty, which meant that it was quite uncommon for a family to invite someone into the home.

Adaptation: We found that the strength of our adaptive response was in young people, as often is the case. We already had identified local young people who were employed to play the role of cultural guides for the student interns. Rather than family meals, the students and local youths visited local restaurants. This alternative offered some element of the desired local connection, provided a two-way cultural exchange, built connections with individuals beyond the students' internship sites, and resulted in students contributing to the local economy. Through this aspect of the program, visiting students were able to experience local and family-run restaurants they would not otherwise have encountered, and the interaction deepened the cultural exchange. Engaging dialogue and learning occurred, albeit in directions and ways we did not foresee.

3. Our Suggested Strategies for Adaptation

The well-known adage, *If life gives you lemons, make lemonade,* is an appropriate context for planning and experiencing international work. There will be uncertainties and surprises, but adaptability leads to resilience. We offer ten, tested strategies that we have used and that we suggest others adapt to their own experiences. At this point in the paper, we intentionally change the tone, writing to the individual student preparing for an international experience.

1. Develop a campus anchor. Having a trusted anchor on campus supports experimentation and overall student success (Christie 2013). As you plan for your study abroad experience, find a faculty mentor in your discipline, or a member of the learning abroad staff who is willing to serve as a reactant and guide. Use that person as a sounding board before you go, and in-country as you develop and try alternative strategies. Communicate with your anchor regularly about your emerging experiences. Rely on that person as a sounding board for both academic and cultural growth. The campus anchor played a

pivotal role in our experiences in Thailand, Tanzania, and Borneo.

2. Remain curious. Leaving home with plans and expectations, and with limited time and resource budgets is a natural behavior. Going overseas for a research experience is immensely exciting and often your first independent journey. When events threaten those plans and those resources, it is challenging. Maintaining curiosity, in the face of adversity increases the probability of finding success among uncertainty and increases perseverance (Feraco et al. 2023). Reflect on your ongoing experiences and ask, *What can I learn from this*? Such a reflection allowed us to redirect and make Panama, Northern Macedonia, Ghana, and Tanzania successful.

3. Seek the edge of the curve. As a study abroad participant, whether in a structured class setting or working independently, you will be learning about your discipline and about the local culture. You will have a desire to advance your own knowledge, and in doing so will encounter the complexities of your host culture's decision-making process. Your power to influence decisions will be relatively limited, leading to a reduction in autonomy which is known to increase motivation for adaptation (Huéscar Hernández et al. 2020). A mantra to keep in mind is *We make our impact as incremental changes at the margin.* Our suggestion is that you try to understand the state of knowledge (yours as well as that of others) and examine the decision being made. Accept that your influence in this setting is relatively small, but there are margins where autonomy can occur. Where are the edges of knowledge; where in decision locus might you influence change without being seen as an outlier or causing conflict? In each of our stories above, we had to accept most of the existing conditions, even though they were different than we understood as we began. And in each case, we were able to say, *Well, if that is true, adding this component or addressing this additional question would allow us to go beyond the expected*, but we did so with small changes that did not disrupt the natural flow of the host program. Stated basically, what must we accept and what can we influence? Accepting the unexpected but seeking the edge changed Northern Macedonia and Panama to success.

4. Remain true to yourself. By the time you embark on your overseas adventure, you will have accumulated experiences that allow you to understand your personal values. As you encounter challenges and are forced to consider changes in direction, remain consciously aware of those personal values. Those values are not static; they evolve through life. You will benefit from routine reflection on the goals that brought you to this time and place. As you consider necessary adaptation, retain behavior patterns that allow you to say *I remained true to myself.* This principle guided us, with some inherent struggles, to success in Borneo and Ghana. It required that we think toward, and accept, adaptability.

5. Celebrate the variance. As humans, we are prediction machines. Every moment, we use data from the world around us to seek patterns and make predictions about the future. Some predictions are very small (e.g., making it safely across the street) and others are very large (e.g., success in graduate school). The variance (i.e., different observations among similar situations) provides the data that allow us to make predictions. As uncertainty threatens our predictive power, it is natural to pull back to the familiar. However, consciously celebrating the variance allows us to gather data to make better predictions; embracing ambiguity increases opportunities for success (O'Connor et al. 2017). The variance among small experiences deepened our learning in Thailand and Borneo.

6. Remain flexible and select goals. It is difficult when things do not go according to plan. Although the situation often will feel out of control, you can influence how you react to the situation and what you get out of it. Flexibility in navigating unpredictable situations can have adaptive advantages, increasing positive outcomes (Croner and Dahl 2012). Build short-term activities that advance long-term goals. Reflect on your goals as you engage. Were you unable to get the desired field skills? Well, can you complete other goals like community involvement? You are here as a learning experience. Ask yourself,

What can I learn that is unexpected but also useful? Our best examples of this principle are the adaptation required in Borneo and Thailand, although the principle applies to all our examples.

7. Remember, everything is translatable. An experience abroad will not always go according to plan; in fact, most do not. It is important to remember that most skills are translatable to your future if you can articulate how they relate to your employer in the broader sense (Jones 2013). Although a position or experience may not be in the field you want or may not provide the exact experience you hoped for, with attention, you gain skills for your future. Our experiences in Tanzania and Borneo are expressed as specifically demonstrating adaptability, thus increasing career development.

8. Take informed risks. Life is a risky experience. You are in an unfamiliar environment, trying new things. Be aware of, and respect health and safety. However, be bold. *Fear doesn't prevent death. It prevents life* (Naguib Mahfouz). Consider explicitly seeking places to take informed risks. Try new foods. Think creatively about academic projects. Try experiences that might lead to personal and/or professional growth, but whose outcome is hard to predict. Accept the goal of "attempting to try"; you cannot entirely fail because trying leads to a learning outcome which leads to a transferable skill (Holguin and Lederman ND). Gather information and make an informed decision. Retain humility of spirit and action but be bolder than you might be at home; failing is still learning. As we encountered obstacles in every one of our stories, we adapted. In every case, there was uncertainty, a possibility of failure. And in every case, we achieved an end that was positive but was unexpected and was less than perfect.

9. Become a storyteller. You are embarking on a very personal, unique journey. You will have many experiences that are influenced by others but are unique in the ways you interact with the culture and the environment. You are investing heavily in this experience, financially, emotionally, and in other ways. You can make that experience valuable and more real by sharing it. Storytelling can be a powerful self-reflection tool that increases self-awareness (Andenoro et al. 2012). But sharing a story is a delicate process. Your audience was not there; they have their own perception of the place you went and differing personal experiences that may influence their level of interest in your experience. It is easy to overwhelm your audience with your excitement. One effective way to advance your storytelling skills is to curate lists of "my threes". For example, *my three favorite foods were* …, or *my three biggest surprises were* … Ask how the things you learned are relevant to the people with whom you speak upon your return. Share in ways that help people understand and appreciate your experiences. Share with your family, peers, any speaking opportunity but tailor the three to the audience. We have learned from our experiences, and we now use them to encourage others. Some of that encouragement is to future study abroad students. In other cases, the same ideas help our peers and current U.S. students capture their growth and deepen their learning.

10. Envision the future, and your role in it. Picture yourself five (or three) years into the future. Imagine your professional, academic, and personal self. Consider steps or paths to that future. When there is uncertainty, ask what you would need to know to become clearer about possible futures. This principle is inherent in all of our work. It encourages forward-looking reflection. In all seven of our stories, we found that thinking forward changed our behavior. Envisioning the future in times of uncertainty can help us look at the bigger picture of our experience, which may alleviate some of the pressure of momentary challenges.

4. Conclusion

With a large amount of uncertainty and the inevitable minor failures that come with an international experience, you may feel hesitant about engaging in studying or working in another country. However, the benefits of an international experience are undeniable; they address the growth inherent in becoming more self-aware, and the need to become globally aware. Many argue that such a broadening is nec-

essary for modern society. Through the adaptation principles we offer above, we believe that you can change your perceptions about global experiences during the college years to make nearly any endeavor a successful one.

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