Class travels: A case study of a community college education abroad program

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Presentation overview

- The problem leading to this study
- Research questions
- Methods
- Major findings
  - Emerging themes
  - Answers to research questions
- Implications and applications
- Future research
The problem

• Study abroad is viewed as a “high impact” practice (Kuh, 2008), yet community college students comprise only 2% of study abroad population (IIE, 2011)

• Community colleges often serve students from more racially and socioeconomically diverse backgrounds

• To accommodate their students’ needs and foster greater participation, community colleges typically offer short-term rather than semester-long education abroad programs
The problem

- Short-term study abroad literature focuses on:
  - 4- to 8-week programs
  - Students at 4-year institutions
  - Outcomes

- Profile of a typical study abroad participant diverges considerably from many community college students

- Results in a theoretical “black box” (Kiely, 2005)
Research questions

1. How do participants describe their perceptions of their experiences studying abroad?

2. How do participants’ biographies impact their perceptions of their experiences?

3. How do programmatic features influence participants’ perceptions of studying abroad?
Theoretical framework

Kiely’s (2005) Transformative learning model for service-learning

- Contextual border crossing
  - Personal
  - Structural
  - Historical
  - Programmatic

- Dissonance
  - Type
  - Intensity
  - Duration

- Personalizing
  - Visceral and emotional response to dissonance

- Processing
  - Individual, reflective
  - Social, dialogic

- Connecting
  - Affectively learning through relationships with community members, faculty, peers
biographies: personal elements that can restrict or promote transformative learning (Kiely, 2005)

- personality traits
- social roles
- professional background
- values
- interests
- needs
- motivations
- desires
- fears
- expectations
- prior travel experience
- sense of efficacy
- learning styles
Programmatic factors “intersect to influence and frame the way students experience the process of transformational learning” (Kiely, 2005, p. 8).

- curriculum
- opportunities for critical dialogue and reflection
- living arrangements
- extracurricular activities
- intercultural immersion
- opportunities to directly interact with host community
- program facilitators
“Transformative learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective and integrative of experience” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5).

Because learners’ biographies, expectations, and motivations diverge, there’s considerable debate about what constitutes significant change in perspective (Taylor, 2000).
Bannockburn Community College’s (BCC) two-week study abroad program in Cusco, Peru

Participants
- 8 students
- 2 faculty leaders
- 2 International Center faculty

Program
- Homestay
- 3-credit intensive Spanish course (4 hours/day)
- 1-credit Interdisciplinary Studies course (IDS 130)
- Partnered with a local language school, Instituto
- Daily cultural activities and excursion to Machu Picchu
- 6 other BCC faculty members
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The group
# Methods

## Data collection

- **Participant-observation**
  - Courses
  - Homestays
  - Activities and excursions
- **Semi-structured interviews**
  - Before, during, and after program
- **Document analysis**
  - Recruitment materials
  - Program applications
  - Course assignments and materials
  - Photographs and drawings

## Data analysis

- Glaser and Strauss’ (1973) constant comparative method
- Grounded theory approach
- Coding (and recoding)
  - Kiely’s concepts
  - Open coding
  - Categorizing
Findings: Four major themes

Impactful learning experiences

1) Newly forged connections to others
2) Intensive Spanish classes

Learning outcomes

3) Confidence and curiosity for future international travel
4) Reflection on and reassessment of one’s own life
Theme 1: Connecting facilitated learning

- Affective learning through empathizing
- Enhanced or inhibited learning
- Relationships with peers, faculty, homestay family or guests:
  - fast-forming
  - intergenerational
  - caring
  - roles and boundaries dissolved
- Impact of race
- Positive outcomes of connections
Theme 2: Spanish classes challenged and motivated students

- Students identified as greatest challenge and highlight

- Students experienced the classes as:
  - Initially: overwhelming, intimidating and frustrating
  - Eventually: gratifying, rigorous but manageable

- Supportive instructors scaffolded this transition

- From the classes, students gained:
  - communicative competence
  - confidence in their capacity to learn and interact with Peruvians
Theme 3: Studying abroad “makes the rest of the world so much larger”

- Increased curiosity and confidence to travel, study, live and work abroad
- Reconceptualization of the US’s position in the world
- Organized, group program facilitated access to travel
Students reassessed assumptions about themselves and the world.

- Personal characteristics
  - Patience
  - Humility
  - Resilience

- Cultural values
  - Happiness
  - Materialism
  - Relationships
1. **How students described studying abroad**
   - relationships, Spanish classes
   - engaging in future travel, reflecting on self and culture

2. **How biographies impacted these perceptions**
   - similarities: strong work ethic, curiosity, desire to be challenged
   - introversion, expectations, investment, travel experience, linguistic confidence

3. **How programmatic features impacted perceptions**
   - intensive Spanish classes, homestays
   - compacted nature of program
Recommendations for practice

- Participant selection
- Coursework
- Additional faculty members
- Partnering with local institutions
- Homestays
- Faculty development
Contributions and conclusions

- Fills an existing gap in literature
- Investigates learning experiences and processes, not just outcomes
- Provides evidence for transformative potential of very short-term programming
- Challenges “more is better” philosophy (e.g., Dwyer, 2004)
- Informs study abroad programming decisions
- Expands on Kiely’s (2005) transformative learning model, revealing its applicability to short-term study abroad programs
Future research

- Trace learning and behavioral changes over time
- Focus on learning *processes* and outcomes
- Generate theory
- Apply Kiely’s model in diverse contexts
- Investigate experiences of diverse students
- Examine impact of race, class, and gender


