

## **Undergraduate Student's Reflections on Teaching Agricultural Education Abroad: An Opportunity for Soft Skill Development**

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**Abstract:**

*To be successful in society, today's students need opportunities to learn through experiences and about other's cultures and beliefs. During a study abroad program to Scotland, students from the [University] had the opportunity to work with current college students at a local university and teach primary age students about agriculture and environmental science topics. The participants in this study were from three colleges across the university and had seven different majors. Participants were asked to complete a reflective journal each day of a seven-day long service learning study abroad trip. The participants found that the service learning study abroad program helped them learn about the Scottish culture, break down cultural stereotypes, observe growth in their peers, create lasting friendships, take new risks to push themselves outside of their comfort zone, and had a positive influence on their perception of the Scottish culture. The results of this study provide evidence the students who engage in meaningful dialogue and reflection show potential to have their values and beliefs altered. This experience can have a positive impact on participants' involvement and engagement in social change movements once they return home. Further research needs to investigate the impact that group meal functions have on this development of peer relationships and the impact group interaction has on the development of participants' individual perceptions of culture.*

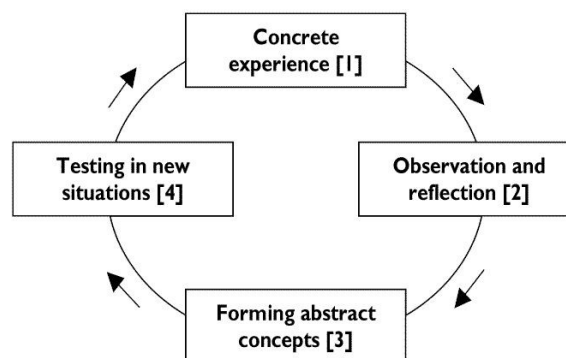
**Key Words:**

study-abroad, service learning, reflective journals, and cultural acquisition.

**Introduction and Literature Review**

Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to provide undergraduate students with knowledge and exposure to experiences necessary for success in America's society (Coers, Williams, & Duncan, 2010) and the ever-evolving workplace (Cassidy, 2006). To prepare students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace, colleges and universities are moving beyond traditional lectures and are placing more emphasis on experiential learning opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students. These opportunities include courses with laboratory sections, more and diverse internship options, service-learning opportunities and study abroad programs. According to O'Dowd (2018), virtual exchange could provide the necessary interaction to have a lasting impact on participants' intercultural awareness and their ability to interact with individuals from different cultural upbringings. According to Franek (2017), experiential learning opportunities provide students with an avenue to discover what they enjoy most in higher education; take risks by exploring new initiatives and making difficult decisions; and demonstrate their strengths to a potential employer. Perrin (2014) postulated that experiential learning has the potential to empower students and that this may lead them to play a more active role in their education because they can witness the change they have created through a direct experience. Additionally, confidence and self-efficacy can increase as students work on projects with real-world implications (Perrin, 2014). Lastly, Astin (1999) discovered that outside of the classroom experiences, which enhance students' college life, contributed to overall student retention.

As defined by Kolb (1984), "...[Experiential] learning is described as a process whereby concepts are derived from and continuously modified by experience" (p.26). The four primary steps within Kolb's model are concrete experience, reflecting on an observation, forming abstract ideas, and active experimentation (Walker, Morgan, Ricketts, & Duncan, 2007). Although those participating in experiential learning may enter the cycle at different stages, the sequence must be followed as illustrated in Figure 1 (Kolb, 1984; Walker et al., 2007).



**Figure 1. The Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984)**

A specific example of a guided experiential learning opportunity would be a global service-learning program that provides practical experience for students to engage in a given activity that they had not experienced previously and/or had little to no knowledge of prior to the experiential learning opportunity. Additionally, it may provide students with opportunities to explore, define, and refine their leadership, communication, and critical thinking skills/attributes as they collaborate with local partners to measure and address needs regarding poverty or food insecurity. Attributes such as leadership, communication, and critical thinking skills are often referred to as "soft skills" or "success skills" (AACO, 2015; Crawford, Lang, Fink, Dalton, & Fielitz, 2011). According to Crawford et al. (2011), undergraduates need to engage in the development of soft skills to be a productive member of society and in today's workforce.

Soft skills are defined as aspects of social behavior and include communication and critical thinking skills, leadership abilities, cross-cultural awareness, initiative, and personal qualities such as empathy and friendliness that are required to become successful in life (de Ridder, Meysman, Oluwagbemi, & Abeel, 2014; Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning, 2018). Additionally, soft skills enable a person to effectively relate to others by way of communication, organization, or written skills (Tyagi & Tomar, 2013). Brooks et al. (2008) reported that undergraduates seeking employment positions were heavily focused on technical skills and lacked critical soft skills. The study concluded that job candidates needed to focus more on critical thinking, problem solving, and analytical skills (Brooks et al., 2008). Furthermore, students' ability to solve problems and be resourceful is viewed by some experts as being of the same importance as mathematics and reading (Adams, 2012). Although Murti (2014) argues that soft skills are developed through prior relationships, which make them harder to teach and evaluate in a classroom setting, study abroad experiences may be one avenue to strengthen soft skills.

A National Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) study of seven soft skill clusters consisting of communication, decision-making/problem solving, self-management, teamwork, professionalism, experiences, and leadership skills was conducted to determine which soft skills employers seek in new college graduates (Crawford et al., 2011). Of these seven clusters, the top two ranked by employers were communication and decision-making/problem solving (Crawford et al., 2011). Within the communication cluster were skills such as listening effectively, communicating accurately and efficiently, and effective oral communication (Crawford et al., 2011). The decision-making/problem solving cluster included recognizing and analyzing problems, taking effective and appropriate actions, and realizing the effects of those actions (Crawford et al., 2011). Another study completed by The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) concluded that a large gap exists between college students' feelings about their preparedness level and employers' feelings about college students' level of preparedness. The majority of employers felt that recent college graduates are not prepared for the workforce in areas such as critical thinking skills, written and oral communication skills, and working with others in teams (AACU, 2015). Study abroad experiences that provide unique experiential learning opportunities have the potential to enhance soft skills. However, more examination is warranted to investigate the development of soft skills that can be associated with study abroad.

One form of experiential learning that provides avenues for college students to be directly engaged in the local and/or global community is service-learning. As a unique form of experiential learning, service-learning presents opportunities for students to gain skills and knowledge necessary for employability (including soft skills) while providing valuable resources to community organizations (Levkoe, Brail, & Daniere, 2014). The processes executed during a given service-learning program/project/course are unique due to the shared focus on both learning and service – much different from other experiential learning platforms such as internships, externships, and field courses. Additionally, service-learning enables students to integrate course content in collaboration with a community partner (Greenwood, 2015; Levkoe, Brail, & Daniere, 2014), enhances students' communication, leadership, and critical thinking skills (Cox, Murray & Plante, 2014; Fullerton, Reitenauer, & Kerrigan, 2015), and creates a greater appreciation for community programs (Duncan, Fuhrman, & Rubenstein, 2016).

Service-learning can be blended with study abroad programs to provide students with a variety of opportunities to further develop their understanding of diversity, cultural beliefs and practices, and civic engagement. International service-learning provides an alternative to traditional study abroad programs and an expansion of the learning process in domestic service-learning (Nickols, Rothenberg, Moshi & Tetloff, 2013).

Previous studies have concluded that study abroad programs with an imbedded service-learning component can have a positive impact on personal and interpersonal aspects of a student's development. Documented effects on students range from increased writing and critical thinking skills, a greater commitment to activism and racial understanding, and increased self-awareness to feeling a sense of empowerment, pride and accomplishment for their work (Cox, Murray & Plante, 2014; Crabtree, 2008, 2013; and Long, 2016). However, little is known about how experiential learning through study

abroad experiences could influence students' empathy and action regarding poverty and food insecurity.

### Theoretical Framework

This study was organized around two theoretical frameworks: critical thinking (Facione, 1990) and Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991). Facione's (1990) definition of critical thinking states that "we understand critical thinking to be purposeful, self-regulatory judgment, which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based" (p. 2). Facione reported that the critical thinking skills were Interpretation, Explanation, Analysis, Evaluation, Inference, and Self-regulation. In addition, Facione (1990) refers to his identification of critical thinking dispositions, or approaches to life that increase an individual's likelihood to participate in critical thinking. These dispositions include analyticity, self-confidence, inquisitiveness, maturity, open mindedness, systematicity, and truth seeking. Facione, Giancarlo, Facione, and Gainen (1995) described further characteristics of dispositions:

Inquisitiveness with regard to a wide range of ideas, concern to become and remain well-informed, alertness to opportunities to use critical thinking, trust in the process of reasoned inquiry, self-confidence in one's own abilities to reason, open-mindedness regarding divergent worldviews, flexibility in considering alternatives and opinions, understanding the opinions of other people, fair-mindedness in appraising reasoning, honesty in facing one's own biases, prejudices, stereotypes, or egocentric tendencies, prudence in suspending, making, or altering judgments, willingness to reconsider and revise views where honest reflection suggests that change is warranted (p.8).

Dispositions develop over time and are influenced by an individual's surrounding environment. They are strong precursors of critical thinking and even though they can be changed, they often change slowly and over an extended period of time (Irani, Rudd, Gallo, Ricketts, Friedel, & Rhoades, 2007). By being authentic and place-based, study abroad opportunities have the potential to influence one's critical thinking dispositions during and after an experience abroad. However, little is known about what elements of a study abroad trip are most impactful in influencing such outcomes.

Transformational Learning Theory developed by Jack Mezirow (1991) builds on the foundation of earlier work by John Dewey and David Kolb and emphasizes the critical importance of reflecting on one's experiences in specific stages and tailoring the learning experience to meet the needs and desires of the learner and the community they are serving. Kolb's model has been used extensively for decades when determining the extent of transformational learning processes linked to experiential learning, and more specifically service-learning contexts. According to Kiely (2005), Kolb's model does not account for educator influence nor does it account for the role that emotions, affect, and context play in impacting transformational learning processes. Therefore, the researchers of this study chose to adopt Mezirow's model for this study.

Kiely (2005) postulates that Mezirow's model for transformational learning "provides a useful theoretical framework for service-learning practitioners because it focuses on

how people make meaning of their experiences” (p. 6). Additionally, Mezirow’s model has the potential to describe how different modes of reflection linked with meaningful dialogue lead students to engage in more socially-responsible action (Kiely, 2005). Furthermore, Mezirow’s transformational learning model considers an “experience” that impacts one’s belief, interpretation, analysis, and understanding of a culture. Through dialogue and reflection, the “experience” may alter one’s values and beliefs in such a manner that their behavior is forever transformed and they become more socially responsible and empowered to pursue social change.

### **Purpose and Objectives**

In many study abroad programs, participants engage in a variety of knowledge acquisition experiences such as tours, courses at international universities, cultural activities, various dining experiences, and lecture series. However, little research has been conducted on the utilization of service-learning based study abroad programs to develop undergraduate’s soft skills. Brooks et al. (2008) reported that undergraduate students at large American Land Grant University lack the necessary soft skills required by today’s job market. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the various activities of a service-learning study abroad program’s influence on undergraduate students’ soft skill development. The research objective of this study was to describe the outcomes of a service-learning study abroad where participants were engaged in teaching agricultural topics to primary students.

### **Methods**

In this study there were three groups of individuals involved. To ensure clarity throughout the article the following terms will be used to represent each group of individuals:

1. University Students from the United States: US Participants
2. University Students from Scotland: Scottish Participants
3. Primary Students: Students

This qualitative study utilized reflective journals to collect US participant’s thoughts and reflections throughout a seven-day study abroad program to Scotland. During the program, US participants were engaged in a variety of service-learning projects to provide support to a primary school in the city of Dumfries. At the school, US participants engaged in constructing raised beds for gardening, helped to establish an outdoor teaching sensory garden, rehabilitated an outdoor classroom, and planted over 550 trees to establish a forest ecosystem within which students and teachers could interact. At the primary school visited by US participants, student personal development and empowerment are a major component of the curriculum. All students are encouraged to participate in “pupil voice” groups that were developed through student recommendation and leadership to allow students the opportunity to have an impact on their school. These pupil voice groups center around various topics that students believe to be vital concepts for themselves and their peers to further throughout their school and community. Example pupil voice topics include: poverty and hunger reduction, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, climate action, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities, and quality education. During monthly

meetings, students prepare and present discussion points to the fellow members and faculty representatives during monthly voice group meetings (facilitated by primary school students themselves) are then taken to the school's principal for consideration and potential action. The pupil voice groups build the primary students' soft skills. For example, when the school applies for an educational grant from the Scottish Government, the students in the quality education pupil voice group will develop and implement a contest for students to create and propose potential topics for the grant. The final grant proposal will be based off the top student topic and will be prepared by the Head Teacher, in consultation with student who proposed the idea.

Before traveling to Scotland, US participants enrolled in a 15-week long seminar-type course that met twice a week to prepare for the trip. One of the goals of the course was to familiarize students with their faculty leaders and the other students who would be traveling abroad with them. This was accomplished through team-based assignments and discussions of their own assumptions about the culture abroad before departing for Great Britain. The course included assignments where students were asked to facilitate a personal change in their lives and reflect on the change process. As part of the course, students are required to identify a change that they would like to make in their personal lives. Examples include: healthier eating habits, increased focus on educational activities, spend more time with family, or actively engage in more community service activities. Then over the next 21 days the US participants are asked to keep a journal regarding the efforts they made towards achieving their set goal. This activity is utilized to prepare students to consider how the service-learning activities implemented in Scotland would be most likely to "stick" with the Scottish partners once students departed.

Each week of the course, US participants were engaged in various topics about Scottish culture, the Scottish educational system, instructional techniques for formal and non-formal classrooms, and lesson plan development and implementation. With each topic US participants were asked to conduct their own research regarding the given topic and to actively engage in a class discussion and course assignment. Some of these assignments included: development of an agricultural lesson plan, development of a formative and summative assessment, reflective journal, and an educational barriers chart. In addition, the course included several technologies facilitated interactions with the Scottish faculty and Scottish participants at the University of Glasgow in Dumfries, Scotland, and teachers at the primary school. Upon their return to the United States, US participants engaged in a semi-structured reflection activity during class to "unpack" the trip, including a discussion of their initial assumptions and their reactions to the visit abroad. This reflection activity included the participation of Scottish faculty, Scottish participants, and primary teachers.

### **Data Collection**

The sample for this study was (N=20) undergraduate students attending a large, American Land-grant University. US participants were enrolled in seven different majors in three different colleges. While every participant completed the reflective journals, not every participant provided permission for their journal to be included in the study (n=18). US participants were asked to respond to each of the following questions every day during the trip.

1. What was your most memorable experience from today and how has this experience influenced your perception of the Scottish culture and people?
2. What did you see or learn today that challenged or changed your previous thinking? Why did this challenge or change your previous thinking?
3. How has your perception of one or more of your peers on this trip changed based on your experiences today? Please be as specific as possible.
4. How do you believe today's activities will influence your professional goals and aspirations?

Prior to the individual reflection sessions, participants engaged in a group reflection session each evening that was led by two of the US participants and initially facilitated by two US faculty who guided the study abroad trip. US participants were then asked to spend roughly an hour reflecting and responding to the questions that were provided. Responses could be handwritten or typed, depending on the US participants' personal preferences.

### **Data Analysis**

Student responses were all converted to an electronic document and analyzed using thematic analysis. Each journal was read independently prior to the beginning of the analysis process. Following the first read through, each article was analyzed independently and then cross-analyzed to establish consistency in the results. This cross analysis includes reducing codes by combining individual thoughts into larger categories to provide more context for the reader. Throughout the process, the researchers worked together to discuss all code combinations to ensure that data was not misinterpreted through the analysis process. A final read through was conducted to ensure that all themes were correctly identified and defined before results writing occurred. This analysis followed the steps outlined in Lincoln and Guba's (1985) constant comparative method.

The researchers ensured that trustworthiness and rigor were upheld throughout the entire study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure trustworthiness and rigor was upheld, the researchers utilized member checking, peer debriefing, and persistent observations (during the study abroad program) to ensure credibility of the results. To ensure transferability, the researchers utilized thick, rich descriptions of the findings. Finally, to uphold the dependability and transferability of the study, the researchers utilized methodological journals where notes were kept about methodological decisions that were made through the data collection and analysis processes (Dooley, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participating students.

### **Subjectivity Statement**

The researchers in this study were trained teacher educators who believed that conducting a service-learning project would help to increase the impact of this study abroad experience for students. Three of the four researchers were faculty leaders for the trips and one has had experience working with a variety of study abroad programs.



This trip was the first time that two of the researchers had spent any time in the United Kingdom and was one of the faculty members' first international experience.

## Results/Findings

Upon data analysis, the following 10 themes emerged: (a) cultural learning, (b) breaking down cultural stereotypes, (c) feeling of inadequacy, (d) observing growth in peers, (e) bonding with peers, (f) comparisons between the United States and Scotland, (g) hospitality of Scottish people, (h) environmental concern, (i) taking risks, and (j) anticipated cultural adaptation. The data included below was collected from the US participants during the Scotland Study Abroad program.

### Cultural Learning

Participants were exposed to the culture of Scotland throughout the entire program. Charlotte was impressed by the accountability that adults bestowed onto young students at the primary school. A five-year-old student at the primary school in Dumfries, Scotland, was in charge of her own actions and was allowed to walk around without an adult during the lunch period (Charlotte). According to Ann, Scottish students were "very well behaved and structured, even without the strict protocols and rules enforced at American elementary schools." Isabelle noted that teachers, "encouraged [students] to be the best version of themselves" and that competition was not prevalent. Gina and Charlotte noticed that the kids were extremely interested and knowledgeable about politics and learning. Additionally, the culture seemed to accept and promote primary students walking home unsupervised (Isabelle).

### Breaking Down Cultural Stereotypes

Throughout the study abroad program, participants were exposed to situations and experiences that helped to break down or alter the cultural stereotypes that they held prior to experiencing the people of Scotland. These cultural stereotypes were shared among the US participants during in-class discussions prior to departing for Scotland. Robert went to Scotland with the preconceived notion that both children and adults would not be open to new ideas. However, Robert quickly realized that individuals in Scotland are continuously looking for opportunities to learn and to embrace new ideas. Charlotte found it refreshing that the Scottish people were forward thinking and realized that just because the United Kingdom is older than the United States does not mean the people are not forward thinking. Robin departed for Scotland with the idea that Scottish people are dull and void of humor. She quickly realized that "you shouldn't or maybe that you can't generalize a people group." Similarly, Olivia initially thought that all Europeans were accustomed to traveling a lot. However, during a discussion with Scottish participants, Olivia noted that some of the Scottish participants were not accustomed to traveling, as she previously had thought.

### Feeling of Inadequacy

Prior to departing, American undergraduates shared a worry regarding how Scottish citizens would treat Americans. Katie was nervous about meeting and interviewing members of Parliament. She stated, "I am nervous about meeting someone of such high importance and having them basically judge the way that we are since we are American and we definitely stand out since we are not from Scotland." Katie was also

afraid that her experience level was inadequate and that she would not be of much benefit to the rest of her peers, or to the primary school in which they would be working. Emma also felt that her lack of experience would slow down the work they were doing at the school. Olivia felt that the US participants were at a disadvantage due to their American accents. Olivia further shared that she believed her southern accent caused for some Scottish people to have a harder time understanding her and that they did not want to interact with her as much as other students without a strong southern accent. Olivia also felt inferior due to the involvement level of children in student organizations at the school. She felt that elementary school students in the United States could not be responsible enough to run a school organization like elementary students in Scotland did at the primary school there.

### **Observing Growth in Peers**

This study abroad program provided an opportunity for the participants to grow as individuals. Interestingly, participants noticed the growth in their peers and continued to allude to its importance. Isabella witnessed growth in Chloe when she purposefully tried to go out of her way to talk with new individuals she met during the trip. Interestingly, this helped increase the respect level Isabella held for Chloe. Charlotte also witnessed growth in one of her peers. She noticed that Ann worked on her ability to listen and try to understand someone else's viewpoint when it is different than her own. Ann no longer seemed offended by other people's opinions, but rather she seemed to value the diversity of thought. Similarly, Addison observed Sara taking the initiative to conduct interviews with people that she did not know. Additionally, Josh felt that Emma was typically quiet, but, in one occasion she appeared to take charge of the situation at hand. She helped with measuring, and came up with several great ideas for the sensory garden."

### **Bonding with Peers**

The study abroad experience seemed to provide a meaningful experience that allowed the participants to bond and form meaningful relationships. Ann stated,

Today I felt like the group was MUCH more cohesive. For the most part, we did everything together which hasn't been as common during the first part of the trip. We also talk a lot more at meals, now that we have had a chance to "scope out" each other's personalities; we have been able to engage in deeper conversation. I think this is mostly due to the lack of technology since our phones don't really work. I have actually really enjoyed this "cleanse" of not using my phone as much! It's definitely helped us establish relationships with each other quicker!

Time to learn about each other's personalities was also important to Robert. Robert stated, "Before the trip, I thought [Travis] was probably somewhat the quiet type. However, during today's adventures, I found that he is very fun! I really enjoyed getting to know him." Robert felt learning how to bond with peers would be beneficial in his future career. Robert stated,

We explored Scotland today and all really bonded as a group. In my career, I will probably attend continuing education seminars and get to know other veterinarians in group settings like this, where I go in not really knowing anyone but end up getting to

know them. I gained confidence in myself and learned to appreciate the opportunity to meet new people in a group and not dread it because I don't know anyone. I will try to always be a leader in bringing people together in those group settings and contribute to the group experience, both educationally and socially.

Robin also valued the time she spent bonding with her peers. She noted that conversation with others allowed her to better understand what drives others to achieve their goals. Time spent with each other seemed to be critical for the growth of the participants. Mary stated, "My most memorable experience from today was dinner. I enjoyed the comradery we had. It was a chance to talk about things other than assignments and really get to know one another."

### **Comparisons between the United States and Scotland**

Participants were continually making comparisons between the United States and Scotland. Natalie stated, "We already know the United States has issues with approved foods and labeling...we are studying food insecurity and seeing that Mountain Dew sitting on the shelf really got me thinking about why foods have different perceptions in different countries." Ann stated,

When talking to Mr. Pete, he told us about how the system for having "certified organic" is much stricter than the requirements in the US. When we told him about all of our different labeling methods such as "all natural," "organic," and "certified organic," he seemed rather surprised. I was under the impression that in Scotland, what you see is what you get and they are not trying to trick you as much in their marketing techniques.

Robert noticed something that was related to social culture. "We Americans are different when it comes to social life. Scottish people seem more content to just sit and drink. While we Americans like to dance and party" (Robert). Similarly, Travis noticed that both cultures valued time spent playing with their pets.

### **Hospitality of Scottish People**

The participants were impressed with the hospitality they received from the Scottish people. Addison felt the Scottish people were extremely friendly and would go out of their way to help others. Emma stated, "The staff at the restaurant were very warm and welcoming, even though we did get a little rowdy. This solidified our expectation that one of the best aspects of the trip would be the Scottish people we meet." Similarly, Travis felt that the students at the school they visited were the friendliest people he has met. Mary stated,

Today's interactions with others reinforced my perception of the Scottish people being caring and open-minded towards others. I also like that they are trying to get to know us as best they can, even though we are here for a short time.

### **Environmental Concern**

Participants noticed the concern the Scottish people had for the environment and the actions they have taken in order to be good stewards of the environment. Isabella noticed that "The Organic Place didn't have paper towels in their restroom. They had one large towel that was supposed to be reused." Isabella also noted that she is concerned about the spread of germs, but she understands their effort to be good to the

environment. Charlotte noted that the Scottish efforts to protect the environment are not isolated and that “it’s accepted into everyone’s actions.” Charlotte was “surprised by the fact that all the farmers are aware of their carbon footprint, how agriculture affects the environment, and how the betterment of the world and the betterment of their personal farm practices go hand in hand.” Additionally, Emma noticed,

Some of the simple efforts to be a better steward to the environment, like charging for plastic grocery bags and the parking lot pavement outside the forest visitors’ center, challenged any notion I may have had that making similar adjustments or enforcing similar policies in the United States would be too difficult to get used to. These small aspects of life in Scotland came across as perfectly normal, and I would probably appreciate it if they were to be put into place in the U.S.

### **Taking Risks**

Participants seemed to be willing to take risks in order to gain as much as possible from this study abroad experience. Addison stated, “I never thought I would be able to handle traveling that far [Scotland],” and “I learned that sometimes I like doing something outside of my comfort zone and I plan to continue taking risks on this trip.” Isabella took a risk by letting her guard down so that she could form meaningful relationships with her peers. Katie quickly realized that taking the risk to speak with those she would not normally speak, opened her up for meaningful conversations and relationships. Charlotte had a similar experience with her peers. She had to make the decision not to let the negative attitude of one of her peers weigh her down. This decision helped Charlotte to form strong relationships with individuals with positive attitudes.

### **Anticipated Cultural Adaptation**

The experiences during this study abroad program led many of the participants to alter how they perceive or live their lives based on what they experienced in Scotland. Ann was extremely moved by the way the students at the primary school behaved and the way the teachers treated the students. She plans to reinforce positive behavior when she has her own classroom in the United States. Similarly, Mary stated,

Seeing the school really changed my previous views on education. They take student-centered education to a whole new level. I really like that they encourage students to take risks and live life as it comes. We do not do that in the United States. I was always under the impression that students had to be under constant supervision, but today I was shown otherwise. This challenged my perception, because it is so radically different than what we do at home. I am hoping to bring this technique home and use it when I teach. I think that the life skills these children are learning are helping them become more well-rounded individuals.

Robert reported that he wants to take the time to interact with tourists and welcome them into the United States. Robin thoroughly enjoyed Scottish meals and said, “I will be in search of them [turnip bottoms] upon arrival in the U.S.” Similarly, Katie stated,

I want to bring the idea of fellowship at meal time back to my household. Normally, we don’t even have the time to sit down at the table to enjoy a meal

and talk about our days, so I think that is something that I want to change whenever I go home on the weekends.

Robin also felt that the mid-morning comfort break at the primary school (a time for tea and socialization) could be implemented in the United States to help increase productivity. Katie felt that the short breaks allowed colleagues to spend time getting to know one another and she wants to incorporate the short breaks into her future career.

## Discussion

This study demonstrated that short-term study abroad opportunities with purposeful reflection activities can positively help develop soft skills in undergraduate students. Although not generalizable to other populations, these findings are transferable to other study abroad opportunities where experiential learning is a cornerstone to soft skill development. Students who participated in the Scotland study abroad experience were more likely to value diversity in thought and perspective from others and be comfortable engaging in conversations with those whom they are less familiar. Just as Perrin (2014) and Franek (2017) suggested, experiential learning opportunities like those provided through this study abroad experience can inspire students to take risks and empower them to play a more active role in change.

A key competency of leadership skill development is the ability to engage in conversations with others who represent different perspectives (de Ridder et al., 2014). The critical reflection activities with which students engaged during their time abroad offered a method for evaluating soft skill development. Murti (2014) emphasized the importance of incorporating diverse methods for capturing soft skill acquisition while the earlier work of Crawford et al. (2011) noted the importance of undergraduate students gaining oral communication skills when working with diverse audiences once employed.

Students who engaged in reflection through meaningful dialogue facilitated by the researchers (both orally and in writing in their reflective journals) seemed to show potential for having their values and beliefs altered—increasing the likelihood of their participation in social change movements back at home (Kiely, 2005; Mezirow, 2000). Some participants noted the likelihood that they would utilize this study abroad experience one day to facilitate meaningful conversations and relationships with their colleagues. For example, participating students valued the act of disengaging with technology (e.g., cell phones) and being more physically and mentally present during face-to-face conversations with others. This was particularly true during meals and comfort breaks with teachers at the primary school in between service-learning activities while in Scotland. These service-learning activities often occurred in teams. Working in teams to critically reflect and solve real-world problems was identified as a key skill gap in college graduates (AACU, 2015). Students participating in study abroad activities with intertwined experiential learning opportunities (and the associated reflection exercises) are more likely to demonstrate competency in team-based problem-solving and critical thinking. In fact, students participating in the Scotland study abroad experience demonstrated key elements of Facione's (1990) critical thinking dispositions, including self-confidence, inquisitiveness, maturity, and open mindedness.

## Recommendations for Research and Practice

Considering the themes that emerged from the qualitative findings, additional researchable questions still linger. Specifically, further study is needed to answer the following research questions:

- How did the service-learning activities, which were incorporated into the study abroad, experience influence soft skill attainment (including empathy toward food insecurity and poverty) in undergraduate students?
- How did the pre-trip preparation and post-trip reflection activities influence student outcomes by providing structure with which to guide student problem-solving and critical thinking while in-country and once home?
- Which experiential learning and service-learning opportunities while studying abroad are most likely to result in the greatest gain in soft skill attainment by participating undergraduate students?

For those leading study abroad activities with experiential learning and service-learning components, the following recommendations for practice can be made:

1. Consider offering a seminar-type course as part of a study abroad experience. The course can foster faculty-student and student-to-student relationship building while enhancing teamwork skills before traveling out of country. Technology facilitated “meet and greet” activities before traveling can help reduce student anxieties about working with strangers.
2. Facilitate open dialogue among student participants by requiring their attendance at group meals. This will likely foster comradery and a chance to engage in reflective conversations that can promote Kolb’s experiential learning model.
3. Whenever possible, require that students disengage with technology (e.g., smart phones) while abroad. Time away from technology may help students engage in meaningful conversations and build their soft skills.

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