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Understanding the study abroad experience of university students

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Understanding the study abroad experience of university students

by

Christine Lynne Gemignani

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:
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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2009

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of culture learning in study abroad through the perceptions of undergraduate students who studied abroad. The study is based in an interpretive qualitative research approach. Interviews were conducted with 13 undergraduate students who studied abroad in a variety of study abroad programs. What students shared about their perspectives on culture learning is situated within the context of their overall learning experience abroad, thus allowing for an understanding of the meaning of the study abroad experience for students. The study is framed by the theory of student involvement (Astin, 1985). This theoretical approach provides a means to understand how studying abroad is often a profound learning experience for students.

The findings and interpretations of the study are presented in two ways. First, six individual student case vignettes allow for understanding the study abroad experiences of students in the entire context of the experience. Each of the students in the case vignettes interprets the meaning of his or her experiences in a different way, demonstrating how the study abroad experience is highly individualized and can be impacted by events that are happenstance. Second, the results of comparative analysis across all 13 student cases are presented in accord with nine themes that emerged from the analysis. The themes reveal students' perspectives on their learning abroad. The themes also indicate patterns related to specific types of experiences and specific types of study abroad programs.

For the students in this study, culture learning was focused on perspectives, including an acknowledgement of differing perspectives and their own changing perspectives. When students' experiences were centered on the people of the host culture, they perceived their learning as occurring primarily in the context of their interactions with people. The study abroad experience was most profound when students made a connection to people in the host culture.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction and Problem

Over the past decade, the number of U.S. students studying abroad has more than doubled. In the 2006-2007 academic year, 241,791 students studied abroad, an increase of 8% from the previous year (Institute for International Education, 2008). While participation rates in study abroad programs continue to rise each year, in terms of the percentage of total college students, this level of participation currently represents 1-3% nation-wide (depending on how this statistic is computed), a rate generally thought to be low by higher education institutions and professional organizations (nafsa.org, April, 2008). In 2008, an American Council on Education [ACE] study asserted that most institutions exhibited a low level of commitment to internationalization (American Council on Education (ACE), *Mapping Internationalization on U.S. Campuses*, 2008). Professional education associations including the ACE and NAFSA: Association of International Educators advocate for increased internationalization in education (ACE, *Mapping Internationalization on U.S. Campuses*, 2008; NAFSA: Association of International Educators 2008).

Many comprehensive colleges and universities intend to increase participation in study abroad. A 2006 report, *Public Higher Education Reform Five Years After the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities*, concluded that several institutions saw expansion in the numbers of students studying abroad and increased innovation in the kinds of opportunities institutions made available to their students. The report states, “several presidents mentioned that the Kellogg Commission stimulated them to revisit their international goals and ultimately to expand them” (National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, 2006, p. 5).

Undergraduate students in the United States are interested in participating in study abroad. The data suggest that student interest and intent far exceed participation rates.

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey [CIRP] (2007) asked students to estimate the chances that they will participate in a study abroad program. The data from all public universities show that 31.5% of students indicated this intent. The survey also asked students how important it was to improve their understanding of other countries and cultures. For all public universities, 54.4% of students indicated the importance of this objective (CIRP, 2007).

Other comparable national surveys of undergraduate students have shown similar findings. ACE conducted two key surveys in 2000, one of incoming college freshmen, thus a similar group to the group targeted in the CIRP surveys, and the second on attitudes of adults age 18 and older (ACE, 2001). The first survey found that of incoming college freshmen, 48% expected to study abroad during their college or university years. Over 70% of these students said it was important that their college offer study abroad programs. In the general adult population survey, over 70% believed students should have a study, work, or internship experience abroad some time during their college or university education, and three out of four adults believed that international education opportunities were an important consideration when selecting a college or university. A set of secondary surveys was conducted in 2002 as a follow-up to these surveys to see if attitudes had changed after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (ACE, 2002). It appeared that overall support for study abroad had not diminished but had increased slightly.

New federal legislation hopes to significantly increase the participation of United States university students in study abroad programs. United States House and Senate Resolutions for this initiative passed in the spring of 2007 as the *Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act of 2007*. The expressed purpose of the act is

to significantly enhance the global competitiveness and international knowledge base of the United States by ensuring that more United States students have the

opportunity to acquire foreign language skills and international knowledge through significantly expanded study abroad. (H.R.1469, March, 2007; S.991, March, 2007)

The legislation proposes a goal of no fewer than 1,000,000 students studying abroad annually within a decade. Academic institutions of higher education will be faced with the responsibilities of meeting this goal.

Given the interest in study abroad in many different sectors (the federal government, institutions of higher education, students and parents, and the general population), the national legislative goal of sending 1,000,000 students abroad annually might be obtainable. If the goal of 1,000,000 students abroad a year can be reached, are the objectives of culture learning tenable? The central tenet of the proposed federal legislation is that study abroad will result in an increased cultural knowledge storehouse among the citizenry of the country; however, there is reason to doubt that simply sending more students abroad will result in an increase in cultural knowledge. A close examination of the assessment research in study abroad for university students in the United States is reason for caution. The literature review in Chapter 2 illustrates why the assumption of culture learning in study abroad is problematic.

This is not to suggest that students do not learn about culture by studying abroad but rather that the experience is a complex one and, outside of measures of specific competencies such as language and other skill based knowledge, assessment and evaluation of the study abroad experience has been rather limited. This is particularly the case in regard to understanding what the study abroad experience means to the students themselves and the purpose they see the experience having in their lives.

A greater understanding of what students learn by studying abroad is necessary. To adequately address the issue of cultural knowledge, there is a need to more accurately assess what students learn about other cultures. Further, there is a need to anticipate what

students will potentially learn about other cultures and then both to prepare students and to find ways to best foster that learning when they are abroad. In addition, understanding the greater context of the study abroad experience and understanding how students make sense of the experience and incorporate it into their lives may alter existing assumptions about culture learning, the goals of the national legislation, and the role of study abroad in higher education.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to gain an understanding of culture learning in study abroad through the perceptions of undergraduate students who studied abroad. The study seeks to understand how undergraduate students who studied abroad perceive learning another culture and perceive what it means to learn another culture. What students report that they learn about culture is situated in the context of what they report about their overall learning experience abroad. In this sense, the study explores what students say about culture in the full context of their experience, thus allowing for an understanding of the meaning of the study abroad experience for students.

Research Questions

1. What do undergraduate students perceive that they learned studying abroad?
2. How do undergraduate students who studied abroad perceive culture learning?
3. What are students' perspectives on the meaning of their study abroad experience?

Overview of the Study

Content Theory

This study is framed by Astin's (1985) theory of student learning called involvement theory. This theory presents a simple and basic approach to student learning that has the ability to encompass other theories of student learning. The essential tenet of this theory is that "*students learn by becoming involved*" (Astin, p. 133). For Astin, the

focus is on the behavioral aspects of student learning, rather than simply mental or motivational aspects. He states “quite simply, student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (Astin, p. 134). Further discussion of the theory is included at the end of Chapter 2, Literature Review.

Astin’s theory has particular relevance for this study on students’ study abroad experience because while the theory is concerned with academic learning, it is also equally concerned with student development. Astin has shown that both of these areas of learning are significantly enhanced through involvement in a combination of academic and extra-curricular activities. This study demonstrates that in students’ study abroad experiences it is especially the activities that fall outside of the strictly academic portions of the experience that become significant to student learning. Further, students are involved in the study abroad experience in such a complete manner that the lines between types of learning become altogether blurred. This study shows that the more students became involved in their experience abroad the more they learned from the experience and the more meaning the experience had for them in the context of their lives.

Theoretical Perspective of the Methodology

This study is a “basic interpretive qualitative study” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). In this study, because the goal is to discover students' perspectives on culture learning in study abroad, the interpretive qualitative research design was most suitable. Through an interpretive qualitative approach the researcher is seeking “to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved, or a combination of these” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6).

The theoretical approach of this study is based in an epistemology of constructionism (Crotty, 2003, p. 9). In constructionism, meaning is constructed by individuals as they interact with their environment or circumstances. In interpretative

research the focus is on the individuals, or participants, as they try to make sense of their own experiences. This study is aimed at discovering the meaning of the study abroad experience from the perspective of the students who studied abroad. The interpretive approach is best aimed at obtaining an understanding of what meanings the participants themselves construct of their experiences (Esterberg, 2002, p. 15) or how they “make sense of their experience” (Merriam, 2002, p. 5).

Another characteristic of interpretive research is that the “product of qualitative inquiry is *richly descriptive*” (Merriam, 2002, p. 5). The findings of this research project are presented through thick, rich description in Chapter 4, Analysis and Results. This kind of detailed presentation of students' unique perspectives allows for a deeper understanding of the study abroad experience.

Methodology

Standard means of data collection in the basic interpretive qualitative approach are interviews, observations, and document analysis. These data are then “inductively analyzed to identify the recurring patterns or common themes that cut across the data” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). The core of the data in this research project comes from semi-structured interviews. Limited document analysis supplements the interview data. For almost all of the participants in the study, written statements regarding the students' study abroad experiences were obtained. These statements were produced for other reasons and were not solicited as part of this research project, but they do offer a secondary form of data for this study. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary form of data collection because this type of data can best address research questions that seek to understand perspectives and to understand the meaning of an experience for the participants (Esterberg, 2002, p. 87).

Methods

To understand how undergraduate students who studied abroad perceive culture learning, interviews were conducted with students at Iowa State University, a large public, land-grant and Carnegie Research-Extensive institution in the Midwest. A total of 13 students were interviewed who had participated in a range of study abroad programs. The students represented 11 different programs. Several students participated in programs that involved direct enrollment in a foreign institution for a semester. Many of the programs represented in this group took place in English-speaking locations. Four students participated in faculty-led, short-term, service-learning programs. The attempt to include students from various types of programs followed the method of purposeful selection (Patton, 2002, p. 230). Striving to achieve as much breadth in program types as possible was desirable in order to represent programs that may have variance in terms of the potential for culture learning.

Following the interviews, preliminary interpretations were shared with each student, and then a second interview was conducted. Students were given a chance to respond to the preliminary interpretations and were allowed to offer clarifications or to revise their initial statements. Data from the second interviews were then analyzed and incorporated into revised interpretations.

Statements that students had written for potential use in Iowa State University Study Abroad Center promotional materials were obtained from nine of the 13 participants. One student shared a copy of a paper that was written for a class. The statements are all relatively brief, but they do offer another source of information and serve ultimately to corroborate the interview material.

Data analysis was completed through an inductive process (Merriam, 2002, p. 5). Since “data collection and analysis is a *simultaneous* activity in qualitative research” (Merriam, 1988, p. 119), data analysis began even in the course of the first interview. The

more formal coding of the data began while the interviews were in progress, and a preliminary interpretation was completed for each participant and shared with each participant prior to the second interview. Emerging themes became evident early on during the coding of the data and shaped later interview coding and analysis. These characteristics hold true to the nature of the research approach chosen since “a qualitative design is emergent” (Merriam, 1988, p. 123).

To facilitate data analysis, the data on each participant were organized into a “case record” (Merriam, 1988, p. 126). This study is not a case study *per se*, but because data were organized and analyzed and the findings of the study ultimately presented in this way, these cases might be more appropriately termed “case vignettes of individuals” (Patton, 2002, p. 451). Data analysis generally followed established qualitative interpretative methods (Esterberg, 2002; Merriam, 1988, 2002), but was especially inspired by Patton’s method of content analysis. This method begins with the identification of “indigenous concepts and practices” bringing to bear the researchers’ concepts or “sensitizing concepts,” then forming “indigenous typologies” and “analyst-constructed typologies” (Patton, p. 458). These methods of analysis are described in greater detail in Chapter 3, Methodology.

Significance of the Research

This study provides an understanding of culture learning in study abroad from the students’ perspective. As the review of the research literature in Chapter 2 shows, previous studies have been limited in terms of what they illustrate about the study abroad experience from the perspective of those individuals who actually took part in this kind of experience. A few qualitative studies have presented important insight into how and what students learn about other cultures, and these studies provide an important foundation to this research project. For the most part, apart from testing for specific competencies, quantitative studies of students’ experiences abroad that have been conducted to this

point in time provide vague information on the student experience. This is particularly so in regard to culture learning. Further, quantitative studies, by their nature, do not allow for an in-depth understanding of the experience.

This study makes an important contribution to study abroad research because it is centrally focused on the experience of students and how they make sense of the meaning of the experience. With a foundation in interpretive research, the study provides for the kind of data-rich description that is fundamental to the interpretive approach and that allows for a presentation of the experiences of students in such completeness that greater understanding of the study abroad experience is possible. The research demonstrates how in many ways the experience of studying abroad is truly an individualized experience. This is particularly the case in regard to how students make sense of the experience and how they ultimately incorporate that meaning into their lives.

In the presentation of the interview interpretations in Chapter 4, there are examples of how students' experiences were significantly shaped by either unusual and happenstance events, by past life experiences, or by their own identities and self-perceptions. What became incredibly interesting during the course of the research was how much the experiences of students had to do with these other unanticipated and unpredictable factors. As the experiences of students were incorporated into their lives, it was these factors that moved to the forefront and played a major role in students' making sense of their experience. This is particularly the case as students frame their understandings of culture learning and place their perceptions and perspectives of others in the world into the contexts of their own lives. This more complex kind of learning in study abroad is fascinating and adds an entirely new way of approaching assessment of the study abroad experience.

This study provides a means to assess the proposed objectives of the national policy on study abroad and to prepare for the direct implications the implementation of

the legislation may have for higher education in the United States. The research is timely because the field of international education may likely be led into a major national commitment to study abroad but is not yet well-positioned to react to this initiative or to take good advantage of the opportunity.

Limitations

Apart from culture learning, other kinds of learning take place in study abroad programs and have value. These other types of learning include personal development and academic or discipline-based learning, among others. It is important to note all types of learning that students report in order to better understand the overall context of their experience and to better understand how culture learning is situated in the context of the study abroad experience. While this research reports all of the types of learning presented by the students interviewed, the focus of this research is on culture learning.

There is a body of literature within language acquisition studies that includes assessments of culture learning, but this research is not considered in this study nor is this body of research reviewed in the literature review in Chapter 2. This study does not consider culture learning in study abroad as it is nestled within language learning or second language acquisition. Although some of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 involved programs where language learning took place or programs in non-English-speaking destinations, the focus of the original assessment conducted was on the study abroad experience.

Delimitations

The analysis in this research is limited to study abroad in higher education in the United States. Students from other countries do study abroad, and some of them study in the United States, but analysis of their study abroad experiences is not included in the scope of this research project, nor does this research consider the context of other national agendas and initiatives to increase study abroad participation in other countries

or regions of the world, for example, those initiatives that are underway in Western Europe, Australia, and Asia.

Within the context of the United States only a select group of interviews with undergraduate students at one institution is analyzed. The experiences that these students share are not intended to represent the breadth of experiences of United States university students who study abroad. Further, since the research is focused on individual experiences of study abroad students, there may be other perspectives regarding learning in such programs that are not incorporated under the umbrella of this analysis. This study, although it is inclusive of the entire context of the study abroad experience as the students reported it, is focused on an in-depth understanding of a particular slice of that experience, that of culture learning.

Definitions

Culture learning:

Term used in this study to refer to all that can be learned regarding culture and cultures in the modern world. No distinction is made in terms of cognitive, affective, or behavioral learning dimensions, and all are referenced by this term in this study.

The following definitions follow Peterson, Engle, Kenney, Kreutzer, Nolting, & Ogden, (2007), who proposed them for adoption as the standard for the field of study abroad.

Study abroad:

“Education abroad that results in progress toward an academic degree at a student’s home institution” (Peterson et al., 2007, p. 176).

Education abroad:

“Off-campus education that occurs outside the participant’s home country.

Besides study abroad, examples include such international experiences as internships,

work, volunteering, and directed travel, so long as they are driven to a significant degree by learning goals” (Peterson et al., 2007, p. 177).

International experience:

“Broad, sweeping term for any opportunity undertaken by a US student that takes place outside the United States. Because of the all-encompassing nature of this term (may include really any kind of international travel), it should not be used interchangeably with education abroad or study abroad” (Peterson et al., 2007, p. 175).

Learning outcomes:

“1) The knowledge, skills, and abilities an individual student possesses and can demonstrate upon completion of a learning experience or sequence of learning experiences (e.g., course, degree, education abroad program). In the education abroad context, learning outcomes may include language acquisition, cross-cultural competence, discipline-specific knowledge, research skills, etc. 2) Advance statements about what students ought to understand or be able to do as a result of a learning experience” (Peterson et al., 2007, p. 173).

Culture:

“The ‘set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs’ (UNESCO)” (Peterson et al., 2007, p. 178).

Perception:

“The internal process by which an individual acquires, selects, evaluates, and organizes stimuli from the external environment. People behave as they do because of the ways in which they perceive the world, and behaviors are learned as part of their cultural experience.” (Peterson et al., 2007, p. 179).

Ethnocentric (or Ethnocentrism):

“The natural tendency to look at the world primarily from the perspective of one’s own culture and to evaluate all other groups from that viewpoint. People tend to use their own verbal and non-verbal codes, their own assumptions and rules to evaluate others. Many claim that ethnocentrism occurs in every society; ironically, ethnocentrism may be something that all cultures have in common” (Peterson et al., 2007, p. 183).

Cultural relativism:

“The principle that practices and customs of another culture should be understood only in terms of its own context and its own standards. All customs are relative to a particular cultural context and should be understood only in terms of that context” (Peterson et al., 2007, p. 183).

Summary of the Introduction

Study abroad participation among undergraduate university students in the United States continues to increase. New federal legislation to dramatically increase student participation in study abroad has the potential to greatly impact institutions of higher education. The objectives of the legislation are built on assumptions regarding culture learning in study abroad, but an examination of the assessment research in study abroad presents reason for caution.

This study seeks to understand culture learning in study abroad through the perceptions of undergraduate students who studied abroad. Through a qualitative interpretive analysis of interviews and documents, this study presents an in-depth understanding of culture learning in the study abroad experience that is situated in the greater context of student learning abroad and the meaning the experience has for students. The study is framed by the theory of student involvement (Astin, 1985). This study differs from other research on culture learning in study abroad in terms of the focus of the research. Discussion in the next chapter (Chapter 2, Literature Review) shows why the assumption of culture learning in study abroad is problematic and why this study adds

an important dimension to understanding the study abroad experiences of undergraduate students.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The body of research literature in the field of study abroad is not extensive. Research in the area of evaluation and assessment of study abroad comprises the bulk of this literature, but this type of research is relatively recent; subsequently, evaluation and assessment in the field can be seen as being in its infancy (Bolen, 2007, p. 2). This literature review explores the breadth of the research literature in the field of study abroad with particular attention to research on, and assessment of, culture learning in study abroad. In many of the sources reviewed, there is coverage of other kinds of learning in study abroad, such as can be characterized broadly as personal development and academic or discipline-specific learning, but these are not the focus of the analysis of research presented here. Likewise, research on second-language acquisition and the literature that pertains to this area is not included in the scope of this literature review. Further, in the review of the research literature on study abroad, consideration is given only to research addressing the experiences of United States undergraduate students abroad.

In the examination of the research, critical review is given to what previous research has sought to measure or understand about culture learning in study abroad, and an understanding of what is known about the state of assessing culture learning in study abroad from these studies is sought. Consideration is also given to the research methodologies that were employed in previous studies.

Most quantitative studies have been limited in revealing or understanding what students learn in regard to culture. Qualitative studies have been more successful in identifying important dimensions of culture learning. A number of qualitative studies have also highlighted some inherent problems in study abroad research. Particularly problematic has been the impact of prior characteristics of students, the impact of prior goals for the experience, the impact of expectations, and inflated self-perceptions of

students. The last factor is part of a greater general methodological problem of self-reported student outcomes, a problem that affects both quantitative and qualitative studies. Understanding what previous researchers have sought to measure in regard to culture learning in study abroad and how they have measured it will allow for an explanation of how this research project differs from other research on culture learning in study abroad and what new contributions this research makes to this field of study.

The State of Evaluation and Assessment in Study Abroad

Most of the research directed at evaluation and assessment of student learning in study abroad has been conducted in recent years. One of the key journals of study abroad research is *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, and in 2004 it dedicated an entire issue to assessment in study abroad. The journal was incorporated as the primary publication of a recently-established professional organization for study abroad, the Forum on Education Abroad, for which it continues to provide the main avenue for publication of research in study abroad assessment.

In 2007 the Forum on Education Abroad published an assessment manual, *A Guide to Outcomes Assessment in Education Abroad*, which grew out of the work of the organization's Outcomes Assessment Committee (Bolen, 2007). The guide's editor stated, "we quickly discovered there was not a single guide for outcomes assessment projects specifically related to education abroad" (Bolen, 2007, p. 1). Further, the editor lamented that "our field does not yet have a vast array of research to draw on" (Bolen, p. 3).

Academic institutions of higher education have historically either had little interest in outcomes assessment of study abroad, leading one researcher to state that "many colleges and universities have a *laissez faire* attitude to the programs chosen by their students" (Steinberg, 2007, p. 18), or they have "traditionally relied on institutional indicators of effectiveness such as credit hours generated, number of student participants,

and records of student health and safety” (Sutton, Miller, & Rubin, 2007, p. 24, citing Gillespie). Typically, questionnaires given to students returning from abroad often ask them to rate their satisfaction with certain aspects of study abroad programs (Sutton, et al., p. 24). Seeking this kind of information “is less than optimal in identifying specific student academic gains” (Sutton et al., p. 25).

In the new guide for assessment, Sutton et al. (2007) suggest considering learning in study abroad in terms of cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning by the use of the categories: “knowledge and skills, attitudinal development, and resultant life choices” (p. 34). Meyer and Evans (2007) propose that assessment of the effects of study abroad on students “can be broadly classified into four categories of development: language learning, intercultural competence (including host-culture-specific knowledge), disciplinary knowledge, and social growth” (p. 63). In this scheme, “intercultural competence” consists of cognitive/knowledge, affective/attitudes, and behavior/skills (p. 63). This corresponds directly to the divisions made by Sutton, et al. For Meyers and Evans, the “cognitive/knowledge” area includes “understanding cultural differences and cultural interactions, cultural specific knowledge, global awareness, international perspectives, and world mindedness” (p. 64). The “affective/attitudinal” area encompasses “attitudes toward self (identity) and attitudes toward others” (p. 64). The authors admit that these kinds of categories are difficult to form since cultural attitudes have been defined many different ways by different researchers. Sutton et al. postulated “intercultural awareness, development, and sensitivity are among the most commonly acknowledged outcomes of many study abroad programs” (p. 47).

Since there is not a standard language in use in the literature, the term "culture learning" in this research project is employed in a broad, inclusive manner and is used in reference to what is alternatively termed in the literature as cultural awareness, cultural perspective, cultural sensitivity, cultural understanding, cultural knowledge, cultural

competency, cross-cultural learning, international perspective, or worldview. There is no doubt that there are differences in what these terms reflect, but the research and methods employed in the literature to date indicate that from a research perspective these distinctions remain sufficiently muddled to allow for their grouping for the discussion here.

Within the study abroad evaluation and assessment literature, there is evidence for student learning occurring along several key dimensions. Some studies have demonstrated that study abroad learning has had a profound impact on how students view their home culture in relation to others (Barbour, 2006; Dolby, 2004; Laubscher 1994; Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004). Some studies have highlighted long-term impacts of study abroad learning by looking at the potential for individuals with study abroad experience to enter into international careers (Gerner & Perry, 2000; Orahod, Kruze, & Pearson, 2004). A particularly prominent theme in the assessment literature for student learning in study abroad is personal development (Carlson, Burns, Useem, & Yachimowics, 1990; Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Christie & Ragans, 1999; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Gmelch, 1997; Hadis, 2005; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004; Kauffmann, Martin, Weaver, & Weaver, 1992; Laubner, 1994). Predominately, the study abroad literature illustrates a prevailing assertion that study abroad experiences are significantly effective in terms of culture learning (Anderson, 2003; Black & Duhon, 2006; Carlson et al., 1990; Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Christie & Ragans, 1999; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Engle & Engle, 2004; Gray, Murdock, & Stebbins, 2002; Hadis, 2005; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004; Kauffmann, et al., 1992; Kitsantas, 2004; Landau & Chioni Moore, 2001; Lindsey, 2005; Montrose, 2002; Stephenson, 1999; Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004).

In this review, attention is first given to large-scale assessment projects or those involving hundreds of students, often from different types of programs. These studies tend to be based primarily on quantitative methods. In a few of these large-scale studies,

a qualitative component of the study supplements the data, but typically this component is limited to much smaller subsets of participants. Next, small-scale, and predominately qualitative, studies are reviewed. An evaluation of studies from discipline-specific programs is also provided. The discipline-specific studies represent an array of research methods. Finally, qualitative research that bears evidence of methodological problems in research of study abroad are discussed, and a critical look at what the literature shows about the state of understanding of culture learning in study abroad is presented.

Large-Scale Assessment Research in Study Abroad

An early large-scale assessment project involving over 800 students from four United States institutions produced one of the few monographs on assessment in study abroad (Carlson et al., 1990). The study included students from junior year abroad programs, primarily in Western Europe with direct enrollment at a foreign institution. The study was primarily a quantitative analysis of survey results comparing the study abroad students with a control group of students who did not study abroad. In responding to why “it was worthwhile to study abroad,” students indicated “language proficiency, perspectives gained on the United States, and perspectives gained and knowledge acquired about the host country and its people” (Carlson et al., p. 43).

In another section of the survey, students were assessed in terms of their “knowledge change” (Carlson et al., 1990, p. 84). Students rated language change as the most significant, and “positive opinions concerning the host country” was the second most significant measure (Carlson et al., p. 84). It is not surprising that language learning features so prominently as a student learning outcome in the study since language learning was a typical focus of the junior year abroad model for Western European destinations at that time. That aside, in focusing on the issue of culture learning, it is interesting to note that the last survey item was stated as an opinion regarding the “host country,” not the host people or culture. As such, this item does not directly assess an

opinion on culture. It is possible, therefore, that this survey item may better reflect students' travel and tour experiences within the country.

The survey more directly addressed the issue of culture in the section on "international understanding" (Carlson et al., 1990, p. 59). This survey area addressed essentially two issues: "cultural interest and respect" and "peace and cooperation" (Carlson et al., p. 59). Examples of survey items from this area were:

- Respect for historical, cultural traditions, achievement of nations other than your own
- Negative feelings about foreigners
- Views that values of your own society are not universal and that values of other societies are just as valid
- Respect for traditions, culture, way of life of other cultures (Carlson et al., p. 60).

These questions seem to be well directed at detecting students' perceptions of culture. A complicating factor in this study is that although the study abroad group scored higher on these items following their study abroad program, the change from the pre-test to the post-test was not significant (Carlson et al., p. 59). Additionally, prior to the study abroad experience the study abroad group showed greater "cultural interest" than did the control group (Carlson et al., p. 33-34). The survey area on cultural interest included the items "awareness of problems of many nations," "awareness of problems of the Third World," and "the need for closer cooperation among nations" (Carlson et al., p. 33-34).

Two important methodological problems in research in study abroad were brought to light in this study. The first one was that "the reasons given for the study abroad period being worthwhile are very similar to the reasons that they [students] gave for wanting to participate in study abroad in the first place" (Carlson et al., 1990, p. 43). The second one was that, when students indicated prior to going abroad what they hoped to learn about their host country, their responses were paired with responses produced after studying

abroad about what they actually did learn (Carlson et al., p. 57). The general consistency between what students hoped to learn and what they did learn brings into question the role of prior goals and prior expectations in both shaping student perceptions and also in shaping what they actually learned. Further, the researchers noted “perceived change in one’s attitudes and perspectives may not accurately reflect the actual change that occurred...students studying abroad are in a situation where significant changes in self and worldview are expected by themselves and by their contemporaries” (Carlson et al., p. 2). It is interesting that these methodological problems are still very much persistent in study abroad assessment and evaluation in research conducted over a decade later.

In a more recent study, nearly 4000 students from various institutions in the United States were included in a large-scale study of multiple programs offered through the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES), a third-party agency or provider of study abroad programs (Dwyer, 2004). This quantitative study was designed to measure longitudinal correlations between specific program features such as language study, housing, duration, direct enrollment in a foreign university and participation in an internship or field study, among others, and variety of student outcomes (Dwyer, p. 152-153). Five survey areas were reported: “general findings, academic attainment, intercultural development, career impact, and personal growth” (Dwyer, p. 155). The survey items in the “intercultural development” area were:

- Still in contact with host country nationals
- Since visited country studied in
- Helped me better understand own cultural values and biases
- Influenced me to seek out a greater diversity of friends
- Continues influencing my interactions with people from different cultures
- Opened up an interest/passion for learning about another culture or language

- Contributed to developing a more sophisticated way of looking at the world (Dwyer, p. 158).

The study concluded that studying abroad significantly impacted development in all of the surveyed areas. In terms of culture learning, the last item from the intercultural development area seems particularly relevant, but the study provides no further comment or elaboration on this item, and therefore the measure remains vague since there is no way of understanding what students meant in their response to a “more sophisticated way” of looking at the world.

The study compared programs of differing durations and, while duration affected differences in all measures, in some cases shorter-term program students showed greater impact compared to semester students (Dwyer, 2004, p. 161). The researcher concluded that “well-planned, intensive summer programs” can have a significant impact on students (Dwyer, p. 161). This conclusion lends support to the notion that the study abroad experience can be affected by factors other than program duration and that many of these other factors are controllable in the program type or the program design. Studies reviewed later in this chapter detail what kinds of program features have been found to enhance culture learning in study abroad.

IES published the results of another study the following year in which they continued their focus on the comparison of program types, in this case direct enrollment and hybrid programs (Norris & Dwyer, 2005). Hybrid programs generally involve more student support services, more activities, and more regular contact with local staff. In the areas of cultural and personal development, they employed the following survey items:

- Gave me a new and ongoing appreciation of the arts
- Met host country friends with whom I maintain
- Opened up an interest/passion for another language and/or culture
- Allowed me to better understand my own cultural values and biases

- Influenced me to seek out a greater diversity of friends
- Increased my self-confidence
- Enabled me to tolerate ambiguity
- Enabled me to learn something new about myself
- Served as a catalyst for increased maturity
- Caused me to change or refine my political and social views
- Continues to influence my interaction with people from different cultures
- Continues to influence my political and social awareness
- Continues to influence my participation in community organizations
- Continues to influence my choices made in family life
- Continues to influence my perspective on how I view the world
- Continues to influence me to explore other cultures
- Continues to influence me to develop a more sophisticated way of looking at the world
- Revisited the city or country where I studied one or more times after studying abroad (Norris & Dwyer, p. 133).

The results of the study indicated that the two program models differed in the first three survey items and were the same on all other items. Even though this study was focused on the comparison of the two program types, it more generally revealed that all students who studied abroad responded positively to the survey items.

Another large-scale study quantitatively analyzed survey responses from approximately 500 students (Sutton & Rubin, 2004). Comparisons were made between a study abroad group and a comparison non-study-abroad group. Survey areas were “functional competencies, knowledge of global interdependence, knowledge of cultural relativism, knowledge of verbal acuity, knowledge of world geography, knowledge of interpersonal accommodation, and cultural sensitivity” (Sutton & Rubin, p. 73). The

cultural sensitivity measure was later eliminated from the analysis. The authors commented that the cultural sensitivity measure was a “somewhat unreliable measure” but offered no further explanation (Sutton & Rubin, p. 73).

The study abroad group exceeded the comparison group in four areas: functional competencies, knowledge of global interdependence, knowledge of cultural relativism, and knowledge of world geography. This was the case even when the researchers controlled for the effects of students’ majors. The cultural relativism measure was not elaborated upon, but the authors commented that they believed the

knowledge of cultural relativism is the cognitive realization that one ought not judge other cultures or respond to individuals from those cultures based on one’s own ethnocentric values and practices. Because this is an academic learning outcome, it should not be confused with attitudinal orientations toward ethnorelativism (Bennett, 1986) which has also been pursued as a measurable outcome of studying abroad (Paige, et al., 2002). (Sutton & Rubin, 2004, p. 78)

The authors comment that they have not yet explored the relationship between these two outcomes.

Overall, the survey was directed at a measurement of students having obtained specific knowledge. What is not known is how the two comparison groups may have differed prior to the study abroad experience. This is a particularly relevant methodological question since these are not randomly selected groups. The students fall into what are essentially self-selected groups, and this causes some difficulties when trying to employ a quantitative methodology.

A mixed methods study of over 2000 students looked at the study abroad experience in short-term programs of at least four weeks' duration (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004). The research compared study abroad students to an on-campus group that did not study abroad. The authors stated that the intent was to assess perceived activities and

attitudes, not actual learning outcomes (Chieffo & Griffiths, p. 167). They measured what they termed “global awareness” by measuring “intercultural awareness, personal growth and development, awareness of global interdependence, and functional knowledge of world geography and language” (Chieffo & Griffiths, p. 167). The measure of global interdependence was focused on economic issues, and the study showed no statistical difference between the study abroad group and the comparison group. Although this study was focused on attitudes and not learning outcomes, the global interdependence area of the survey seems better suited to measuring academic knowledge. If this is the case, then this study does not support what Sutton and Rubin (2004) found in the study discussed above.

Significant differences were found between the comparison groups in intercultural awareness. The items on the survey in this area were:

- Patient with those who don't speak English well
- Read article, watched TV show about how Americans are viewed
- Watched non-American TV
- Consciously withheld judgment on international event/issue
- Thought about differences between myself and people in other countries
- Thought about similarities between myself and people in other countries
- Thought about a current issue important to people in a developing country
- Thought about why other countries have different perspectives than U.S. (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004, p. 170).

This study is consistent with other quantitative studies in showing that study abroad students report a difference in behaviors and a difference in how much they think about international issues in comparison to students who did not study abroad. Again, what is not known is how the two groups may have differed in this respect prior to going abroad.

Open-ended questions regarding “the most important thing learned” were categorized by the authors and include, in order of percentage: “knowledge/appreciation of another country or culture, tolerance/patience/understanding, course-related knowledge, difference between home and host country, and language/communication issues” (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004, p. 173). More relevant for the purposes of this review were the students’ quotes presented in the article. One student stated that “people are the same everywhere” and another that “there are lots of people who are just like me” (Chieffo & Griffiths, p. 174). Although brief, and perhaps, simplistic, these comments reveal how students think about their study abroad experience.

In a multi-year, multi-program study involving 2500 students conducted by Michigan State University, quantitative data were combined with qualitative information from faculty observations conveyed in study abroad program director reports (Ingraham & Peterson, 2004). In the quantitative portion of study, the survey area that was designed to assess cultural issues was termed “intercultural awareness” (Ingraham & Peterson, p. 88). This survey area included the following items:

- My study abroad experience has enhanced my understanding of international issues
- Study abroad has contributed to my understanding of other cultures
- Study abroad had increased my appreciation of human difference
- My study abroad experience has increased my curiosity about other cultures
- Studying abroad has contributed to my understanding of my host country
- My study abroad experience has increased my understanding of my own culture (Ingraham & Peterson, p. 88).

The authors note that, in the post-test, “intercultural awareness” had high scores (Ingraham & Peterson, p. 90). When compared to the pre-test, however, there was no

significant difference. This mirrors the earlier Carlson, et al. (1990), study outlined above.

From the qualitative portion of the study, the authors assert that the faculty comments assess “intercultural awareness.” One faculty leader, quoting a student, noted “cultural immersion takes effort” (Ingraham & Peterson, 2004, p. 95). Another faculty member wrote that his/her students were affected by exposure to different standards of living and came away with an understanding that happiness has less to do with material wealth and possessions (Ingraham & Peterson, p. 95). Other faculty members noted that their students had the experience of being in the minority (Ingraham & Peterson, p. 96).

Small-Scale Assessment Research in Study Abroad

In a smaller-scale project, a mixed methods methodology was used to analyze student learning in Michigan State’s twelve-week program in Nepal (Farrell & Suvedi, 2003). The study abroad program’s learning objectives were “global perspective, professional development, academics, and personal development” (Farrell & Suvedi, p. 186). The research study involved a mix of quantitatively analyzed surveys and qualitatively assessed interviews. In the survey, the highest scores were in the survey area on global perspectives (Farrell & Suvedi, p. 179). The survey items were:

- Contributed to my overall understanding of Nepal
- Increased my desire to work/study abroad in the future
- Contributed to my understanding of other cultures
- Increased my curiosity about other cultures
- Enhanced concern with problems of developing countries
- Enhanced my understanding of international issues
- Increased my appreciation of human difference
- Contributed and/or created a new understanding of critical social issues

- Increased my level of comfort around people different from me (Farrell & Suvedi, p. 179)

The highest score was on the first item. Perhaps this is because this is the only item that specifically addressed Nepal, and students could have been more comfortable in what they had learned regarding Nepal than they may have been in generalizing that knowledge.

In the qualitative portion of the study, interviews were analyzed to reveal what the authors termed “transformational learning, self-efficacy and passion” (Farrell & Suvedi, 2003, p. 177). One student commented in regard to Nepal’s system of arranged marriages, “when faced with their efficacy in the Nepali context, however, I had to reevaluate my beliefs about the institution of marriage” (Farrell & Suvedi, p. 183). Another student stated that “there are so many different ways of thinking and doing things. Your [one’s own] reality is not the reality of the world” (Farrell & Suvedi, p. 185). In these comments there is the sense that the students are wrestling with culture learning and making sense out of the experience.

A mixed methods approach to assess students in three differently-focused short-term programs to Cuba yielded similar results regarding student perspectives on values (Bond, Koont, & Stephenson, 2005). Students in this study responded to statements both prior to and following the program focused on assessing the change in “basic values, goals for themselves and families, day to day challenges, day to day opportunities, responsibility of community and government” (Bond et al., p. 110). The analysis showed that students believed that they were more similar to Cubans than they had originally thought prior to the program in terms of basic values and goals for themselves and families. They believed that they were less similar regarding views of the responsibilities of community and government (Bond et al., p. 111).

From the qualitative interpretation of student journals, the researchers found that “nothing had a more profound impact on how students understood Cuba, its people and, for that matter, themselves than the personal relationships the students established with Cubans” (Bond et al., 2005, p. 114). The researchers noted that the students’ experiences in Cuba made them rethink their own values and behaviors (Bond et al., p. 116). The authors concluded that “visiting an ‘other’ that is as controversial, mythologized, elusive, and compelling as Cuba is bound to be powerful” (Bond et al., p. 118).

A small-scale study at Missouri Southern State College assessed language proficiency, career advantage, empathy for non-native English speakers, and cultural awareness through a qualitative analysis of student journals and reflective papers to assess cultural awareness (Gray, Murdock, & Stebbins, 2002). Students indicated the benefits “from cultural immersion as the single most important aspect of study abroad” (Gray et al., p. 49). One student commented that “the people there were just as human as I” (Gray et al., p. 49), a sentiment expressed by students in other studies. The researchers concluded from student writings that “third world poverty seems to have a particularly powerful effect on many students” (Gray et al., p. 49).

Discipline-Specific Studies

The published discipline-specific studies in study abroad assessment are generally small-scale and are often focused on the assessment of discipline-specific knowledge. They represent a range of research methods. An assessment of a short-term engineering program through Worcester Polytechnic Institute was based on the discipline’s educational objectives (DiBiasio, 2004). A comparative group of non-study abroad students also completed similar team projects and reports, and the assessment compared student academic performance on these standard and established measures. The study concluded that the international group satisfied objectives at higher performance levels than participants at the home campus.

A study conducted with a study abroad business program through Indiana University focused on career objectives within the business field (Orahood, Kruze, & Pearson, 2004). This study also employed a comparison group who did not study abroad. The study posed only three research questions.

- Are business students who studied abroad more interested in positions with an international dimension than business students who have not studied abroad?
- Do former KSB study abroad students believe their study abroad experience to be marketable while searching for jobs?
- Does foreign language competency of KSB students affect international interest? (Orahood et al., p. 121).

In regard to the first two questions, the researchers concluded that the response was positive. For the third question, they reported that results were not clear. While the first two questions seek students' interests and beliefs, the third question is of a different nature. The third question is knowledge-based and probably not best addressed through student self-reporting.

Research on another business program evaluated the program in light of the intended educational outcomes established for this summer study abroad experience in London (Black & Duhon, 2006). The objectives of the program were that the students would become “more cross-culturally tolerant and empathetic, and more self-confident and independent” (Black & Duhon, p. 141). The researchers used a fairly well established assessment tool that was designed to assess the ability to adapt to living in another culture and to interact effectively with people of other cultures. The tool measures “flexibility and openness,” “perceptual acuity,” “emotional resilience,” and “personal autonomy” (Black & Duhon, p. 141). The researchers reported that the results were positive. A flaw in this study is that the measurement tool does not seem to be a good fit for assessing the program objectives that the researchers were trying to evaluate.

Similar research on a short-term study tour of two weeks focused on assessment of “business educational outcomes, cultural awareness and sensitivity, and work related gains” (Peppas, 2005, p. 160). The study was qualitative and considered students' prior preparation, journals, and final papers from program participants spanning seven years of the program. Open-ended questions regarding advantages and disadvantages of the program were posed to students. The researcher found that “gains in regard to increased cultural awareness and knowledge were cited as an advantage by over 50% of the respondents” (Peppas, p. 155).

Assessment of a social work program in Scotland also used a qualitative approach and analyzed student journals and a final reflective paper (Lindsey, 2005). The author concluded that the students had changed in terms of “social awareness” and “challenges to societal values and beliefs” (Lindsey, p. 237). The students were also seen to have progressed in their “appreciation of difference, cultural sensitivity, and anti-discriminatory practice” (Lindsey, p. 241). One student wrote, “my image of Scotland had not previously included such a wide variety of culture and religions” (Lindsey, p. 241). Again in this study, quotes from students are particularly insightful into students' perspectives on their experience. These comments point more clearly to the changes the students have perceived themselves undergoing and to the impact of the experience.

In another qualitative study that reports a faculty member’s perceptions of student behaviors and attitudes, similar assertions regarding the impact of the experience of studying abroad are made. Richard (2001, p. 95-119) observed his anthropological field school students and, including supporting data from students' field notes, made interpretations based on Mestenhauser’s list of 13 cognitive adjustments. Richard offers descriptive examples of the following: ability to recognize differences, understanding the differences between emic and etic thinking, ability to recognize a knowledge gap, ability to communicate cross-culturally, ability to recognize scarce knowledge, ability to think

comparatively, ability to change self-perception, ability to know how to compare one's own country, possessing knowledge of other countries, possessing diagnostic skills, understanding differentiation, ability to recognize trends in other cultures, understanding cognitive complexity and cognitive integration (p. 95-119). The article presents an interesting look at the field experiences of Richard's students, but because the analysis is focused on general cognitive adjustments it is limited in terms of advancing an understanding of students' study abroad experiences.

Methodological Issues in the Study Abroad Research Literature

The research literature in study abroad represents a broad range of approaches and an even broader range in terms of the aspect of the program or the experience that has been the focus of study. Within the field of study abroad there are no specific agreed-upon outcomes for the study abroad experience. In part, this is what the authors of *A Guide to Outcomes Assessment in Education Abroad* (Bolen, 2007) were trying to advance. Even if it is assumed that at least one generic outcome of all study abroad experiences is, or should be, culture learning as the proposed national policy asserts, there is no singular standard of measuring this objective.

Generally, while quantitative studies have given the field some general data to support the assumption that study abroad is a positive experience for students, the studies are limited in terms of analyzing the student experience abroad and student learning in study abroad. A perusal of the specific survey items noted in the various studies discussed above reveals that these items are particularly limited in soliciting insight into students' perceptions on culture, culture learning, and what it means to learn another culture. While study abroad students may provide a higher rating than students who did not study abroad on a survey item such as "respect for traditions, culture, way of life of other cultures" (Carlson, et al., 1990, p. 59), this really does not go very far in providing an understanding of what students are really thinking in regard to their experience.

Several studies discussed above exposed specific methodological problems and issues. As noted in Carlson, et al. (1990), the reasons students gave for the study abroad experience having been worthwhile following study abroad were similar to the reasons that they gave for wanting to participate in study abroad prior to the experience. Further, students' stated goals prior to study abroad were linked with what they reported having learned abroad at the end of the program. The implication is that prior goals seemed to shape what students learned abroad. In the survey results, although study abroad students scored high on a number of survey items, when the post-test was compared to the pre-test there were no significant differences. This phenomenon of post-test results mirroring pre-test results was also noted in Ingraham and Peterson (2004). If preexisting student perspectives that students take into the experience with them ultimately shape what they learn from the study abroad experience, this is an important mediator of learning that has been largely unexplored in research on study abroad.

The role of students' goals prior to study abroad was the focus of a quantitative study of over 200 students (Kitsantas, 2004). The study compared student responses in regard to three main goals: to enhance cross-cultural skills, to become more proficient in the subject matter, and to socialize. The results of the study showed that where cross-cultural skills actually increased, this change was associated only among those students who stated this as a goal in the first place. In Bond et al. (2005), the students who returned from Cuba showed that the expectations that they had prior to the experience were confirmed following the experience (p. 112). This is reflected in the pre-test and post-test administered to students in three difference programs to Cuba.

An equally significant factor that prior study abroad assessment has had trouble accounting for is the characteristics of students who chose to study abroad. A longitudinal study that followed nearly 200 students over the course of their college career found that the students who participated in study abroad differed significantly from those who did

not in terms of ethnocentrism, prejudice, and foreign language interest (Goldstein & Kim, 2006). Early on in their college careers, the students who indicated high levels of ethnocentrism or prejudice were less likely to study abroad (Goldstein & Kim, p. 517). Similarly, Carlson, et al. (1990) also found higher levels of “cultural interest” in the study abroad group prior to the experience (p. 33-34).

Two other characteristics were noted in an interesting psychological study that measured study abroad students on two personality dimensions (Schroth & McCormack, 2000). The results indicated that study abroad students scored high on tests that measured the need for achievement and also on tests that measured sensation seeking. The researchers qualified, however, that in regard to sensation seeking, because study abroad students actually scored lower than average on certain variables within this category, “the finding does not fit the stereotype of sensation seekers in search of dangerous activities, parties, and so forth” but rather “suggest they were serious young scholars who sought experiences not available at home” (Schroth & McCormack, p. 533).

Methodologically, it is difficult to account for the direct effects of study abroad or the specific outcomes of study abroad. Studies that include a comparison group of students who did not study abroad can only control for part of the methodological problem, and there is still the question of whether or not the control group is really a control group since both groups are comprised of self-selected participants. A study that presented more promising results included a group of students who studied abroad, a group who did not, and a group who planned to study abroad (Drews & Meyer, 1996). The study showed that study abroad students' conceptualizations of other national groups was personalized in comparison to both other groups. Since it can be assumed that the group that planned to study abroad was more similar to the study abroad group in terms of self-selection factors, this study provides greater support for the claim of the direct effects of the study abroad experience. The authors qualified, however, that a pre-test

would have been desirable (Drews & Meyer). Studies that assert a measured change in specific variables as support for the direct effects of the experience need a measure of the variables prior to the experience, but the studies that have used a pre-test bear less than supportive results. In both Ingraham and Peterson (2004) and the earlier Carlson, et al. (1990) studies, there was no significant difference between the pre-test and the post-test. On even less firm footing are studies in which a post-experience survey relies entirely on study abroad students' self-reported recall of their attitude or thoughts prior to the experience in an attempt to measure change as a result of the experience (Hadis, 2005).

Shedding more light on the problems inherent in studies that include both pre-test and post-test was a quantitative study of nearly 200 students from a single program in which “intercultural sensitivity” was measured using an established measurement tool (Engle & Engle, 2004). The results demonstrated that students not only scored high on the pre-test measures, leaving very little room for advancement on the measure, but that some students actually scored lower on the post-test. The researchers made sense of this problem by looking more closely at the measurement tool. They concluded that the tool was designed to measure the “development of a more complex worldview construct” (Engle & Engle, 2004, p. 231). Based on their own experience in leading the program, they believe that students often arrived over-confident in their abilities.

Often American students come abroad secure in their cross-cultural skills because they have been culturally conditioned to accept a world of ethnic and racial diversity. The problem arises abroad when the domestically conceived superficial difference of race and ethnic origin have been mistaken for genuine cultural difference. Then, when abroad, and in contact with true cultural differences...some students will judge the action as shocking or backward or inappropriate. (Engle & Engle, 2004, p. 231)

It seems that as students were forced to wrestle with the difficult reality of learning another culture, they had to adjust their perceptions of their ability to deal with issues of culture. It was this more realistic self-perception that seemed to be reflected in the lower self-reported understanding in the test administered at the end of the program.

Two other studies have been particularly important in uncovering the issue of student over-confidence. In a mixed methods study of participants from two Mexico programs that was designed to look at the difference in the development of intercultural sensitivity based on program duration, the instrument used measured actual and perceived gains and showed that in all cases self-perceived scores were higher than actual scores (Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004). Further, the research included a qualitative analysis of student interviews and journals. The qualitative study revealed that, for students in both programs, the quantitative data showed higher levels of development of intercultural sensitivity than was indicated in the qualitative data (Medina-Lopez-Portillo, p. 184). The researcher concluded

Students need to be advised — prior to departure, during and after the program — that their experiences will allow them only to observe and experience some relatively thin slices of a much larger and more complex culture...they also need to be cautioned about rushing into incomplete and simplistic interpretations about the target culture. (Medina-Lopez-Portillo, p. 195)

The study did demonstrate that, although the problem of over-confidence was found among students in both programs, the students in the longer-term program fared better in terms of culture learning and were able to recognize the impact of their own cultural perceptions on their ability to learn culture. They were also better able to move beyond superficial cultural differences and begin to compare value systems.

Another study that also exposed the issue of student over-confidence was a small mixed-methods study designed to gauge value change among students in a program in

Chile (Stephenson, 1999). The study identified that students anticipated at the beginning of the program having the greatest difficulties with language, but at the end of the program expressed that cultural differences of class, race, time use, food patterns, and sexism were most difficult. A few students held more negative impressions of Chileans following the program. Other students realized that it was harder to be open-minded than they had thought. As one student commented, “my greatest challenge has been that I am not sure yet if I can respect Chilean beliefs” (Stephenson, p. 16). The researcher recognized that value change does not just happen because students go abroad, and it is not always positive. Citing Bochner and Furnham, the author upholds

The idealists regard it as self-evident that educational exchange must lead to improved international relations. They take it for granted that cross-cultural contact, particularly among young people, creates mutual understanding and when these students in the fullness of time assume positions of influence in their societies, this will be reflected in harmonious relations between their respective countries, and thus contribute to world peace. The evidence...indicates that the connection between inter-group contact and inter-group attitudes is very complex, such that contact may either increase or reduce mutual tolerance and understanding, depending on a very large matrix of interaction variables. Indeed, there have been instances when educational exchange has led to a worsening of cross-cultural attitudes.” (Stephenson, p. 2)

To facilitate greater culture learning, it is the other interacting variables that need to be identified. The study contributed to that identification in demonstrating that it was basic cultural differences affecting everyday interactions that became most problematic for the students.

Similarly, another small-scale qualitative study of students from a program in Costa Rica found that, even given a great deal of prior preparation, students often misread

and misunderstand cultural contexts, often causing a promotion of stereotypes of the host culture (Anderson, 2003). The researcher asserted

Unless students are provided early and regularly with the tools and interpretive support to challenge their preconceptions and to help them process their experiences, they will often continue to apply single-culture stereotypes and wonder why there are so many exceptions, or why they cannot find the ‘true culture’ of the place. (Anderson, p. 47)

Student over-confidence can be dangerous when it fosters a misreading of cultural information and when students are not able to understand perspectives that differ from their own or to even recognize when perspectives differ from their own. The researcher in this study, who is also the program director, concluded that program directors must intervene and discuss students' experiences with them.

Other qualitative research in study abroad demonstrates that students often do not realize the difficulties of study abroad prior to the experience. Landau and Moore (2001) found that students were disappointed at how Western their host country actually was in contrast to their conceptions before the program. Bryant’s (1995) assessment of a research project in Africa found that students were overwhelmed by the emotional demands of the experience. Tonkin and Quiroga (2004), as well as other studies discussed previously in this review, found that students had a particularly difficult time with poverty (p. 140). All of these studies support the notion that experiences in other cultures are complex and that this complexity presents difficulties that are often unanticipated by program participants. This is a phenomenon that has long been known by experts in culture and intercultural studies. As one commonly cited source stated, “there is, by and large, agreement that exposure to new cultures is stressful” (Furnham & Bochner, 1986, p. 50). Intercultural education theory also supports the notion that culture learning can be a difficult and long process (Bennett, 1993). In Bennett’s developmental

model of intercultural sensitivity, individuals move through six stages, from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism.

Several study abroad programs have been designed to anticipate the complexity and difficulties that students will face abroad, and they have sought to employ principles from the field of experiential education. Key in this learning approach is reflection. Reflection is a process in which students process the experience by writing or talking about their experiences and then sharing this with peers or program leaders such that there is opportunity to reformulate interpretations and understandings. When this kind of activity is embedded in a program it usually involves the students maintaining a journal that is shared with others at least once a week. Many study abroad programs have employed these reflective activities to some degree (Anderson, 2003; Bond, et al., 2005; Farrell & Suvedi, 2003; Lindsey, 2005; Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004; Peppas, 2005).

Service-learning programs have been built on the pedagogical approach of experiential education. Engle and Engle's program in France involved students in community volunteer work, and the program directors met with students weekly for reflective sessions (Engle & Engle, 1999). The Tonkin and Quiroga (2004) study was conducted with participants from 15 years of programs through the International Partnership for Service-Learning. In all of the Partnership's programs, students are involved in community service work for 15 to 20 hours per week and are also enrolled in academic work that complements the particular program. The study found that "the academic work that they [the students] did in the classroom was vital in allowing them to contextualize and understand their cultural interactions" (Tonkin & Quiroga, p. 139).

In 2002, *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* published a special issue dedicated to experiential education. The editors commented that "while it has long been recognized that the learning outcomes of study abroad are closely related to out-of-class experiences, until recently surprisingly little attention had been paid to this

topic” (Frontiers, 2002, p. vii). The issue includes articles from leaders in the field of experiential education abroad (p. vii). Montrose cites Dewey stating

what makes this an educational enterprise is not so much the activity in and of itself, but the analysis of the activity through personal reflection, discussion, writing, or projects that help the learner transition from the experience to integrated meaning and finally to subsequent understanding. (2002, p. 6)

Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich (2002) also support the importance of the principles of experiential education to study abroad. They state “that study abroad in and of itself does not lead to the development of global citizenship, but that it can do so when it is designed with that goal in mind, putting into practice the principles of experiential education” (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, p. 43). In fact, also citing Dewey, they further term “some experiences as ‘mis-educative’ if they have ‘the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience’” (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, p. 44). These authors find coherence with intercultural education theory and cite the work of Bennett (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, p. 64). They posit that many of the current assessment tools can serve to evaluate progress through Bennett’s stages (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, p. 64). The journal’s special issue includes examples of study abroad programs that employed a specific experiential education pedagogical design (Brandt & Manley, 2002; Chen, 2002; Peterson, 2002).

The research shows that the issue of student over-confidence is mediated by the difficult realities of interacting in another culture and that culture learning is a process that is difficult. The research also suggests that culture learning in study abroad can be enhanced by purposeful program design elements, chief among these being reflective activity; however, not all study abroad programs incorporate reflective activity nor are they designed to necessarily be about culture learning. In many cases, cultural issues are seen as peripheral to the program. The reality of being abroad, however, mandates that at

some level, even if minimal, students deal with cultural difference. The research literature has also demonstrated that measuring what students learn about this cultural difference or measuring their attitudes regarding the difference is tenuous.

The Position of This Study

The present study strives to avoid the problems inherent in previous research by posing a different set of research questions. The study is designed to focus on the perspectives that students who have studied abroad have about their experience and on the meanings they have given to these experiences. This study is not designed to measure what students learned abroad or to measure their attitudes or behaviors. Rather, it seeks to discover how what students may have learned about culture is embedded in and incorporated into their overall learning abroad and into the greater context of their individual lives. This approach lacks the need to filter out the individualized aspects the students bring to the experience; this approach also sidesteps the issues of self-reporting. In fact it is just these factors, individual characteristics and self-perception, that are the focus of concern. The study is motivated by a desire to understand what it means for undergraduate students to study abroad and to return to the United States.

The approach to student learning in this study places the study within the parameters of Astin's (1985) involvement theory. Involvement theory affirms that "*students learn by becoming involved*" (Astin, p. 133). Astin asserts that students' involvement in an educational endeavor is about the "physical and psychological energy" devoted to the experience (p. 134). In this sense, involvement theory is about behaviors rather than mental states. Astin states that

involvement implies a behavioral component. This is not to deny that motivation is an important aspect of involvement but rather to emphasize that the behavioral aspects, in my judgment, are critical. It is not so much what the individual thinks or feels but what he or she does that defines and identifies involvement." (p. 135)

On the level of student behavior this means that “the theory of involvement emphasizes the active participation of the students in the learning process” (Astin, p. 142).

This theoretical approach is particularly relevant for this study because the theory encompasses within the realm of student learning not only academic learning but also personal development. Astin’s research showed that “nearly all forms of student involvement are associated with greater-than-average changes in the characteristics of entering freshmen” (1985, p. 147). In this study, the focus is on the students and on the entire array of activities and behaviors that form the total experience of studying abroad. Student learning is viewed in this entirety of activities and behaviors. Further, culture learning is positioned within the greater context of all of students’ learning abroad. Culture learning is used in this study as an inclusive concept and, as stated in the Definitions section of Chapter 1, Introduction, use of the term in this study refers to all that can be learned regarding culture and cultures without distinction between what are typically differentiated in much of the study abroad research literature as cognitive, affective, or behavioral learning dimensions.

This study is focused on the students and on their perspectives, not on an evaluation of the content or educational objectives of their study abroad programs. In involvement theory, what students learn has less to do with the specific structure of a program or the “resources or techniques typically utilized by educators” and more to do with “what the student does” (Astin, 1985, p. 142). In this sense, the theory allows room for what the students bring to bear on their learning and on their experience. The theory allows for consideration of both the prior characteristics of students and for their perspectives.

Although involvement theory is not centered in consideration or measurement of the resources or techniques utilized in an educational endeavor, it can foster an understanding of how different aspects of a program or an activity can impact student

learning. Astin suggests two “key educational postulates” of the theory (1985, p. 136). First, “the amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of students’ involvement in that program,” and, second, “the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement” (Astin, p. 136). This study reveals several examples of how and why student involvement was increased and the patterns in which involvement was associated with specific elements of program structure.

Summary of the Literature Review

The research literature on study abroad comprises a relatively small body of work. Much of the research regarding evaluation and assessment of culture learning in study abroad is based on a quantitative approach. While prior research has often been large in scale, encompassing thousands of study abroad students, the results have been limited in terms of providing an understanding of culture learning in study abroad. Small-scale and discipline-specific research can be just as constrained by the limits of quantitative methods, but those that have employed qualitative approaches have exposed important methodological issues in assessing and evaluating the results of the study abroad experience. Prior research provides valuable information on the positive nature of study abroad for students and provides a foundation for new directions in research on culture learning in study abroad.

This study differs from the existing research on study abroad in that it asks a different set of research questions and utilizes a classic qualitative interpretive methodology that allows for understanding culture learning in study abroad within the context of the entire experience abroad. Further, this research is focused on students’ perspectives and students’ construction of meaning and presents the results of the analysis in thick descriptive detail. Because student learning in this study is defined as

academic or knowledge-based learning and personal development, the study is positioned within the framework of student involvement theory (Astin, 1985). The simple and encompassing nature of involvement theory allows for a good fit with a qualitative interpretive research approach. The chapter that follows, Chapter 3, Methodology, explains the rationale, the foundations, and the value of this qualitative and interpretive research approach. It also presents the details of data collection and data analysis, allowing a means for assessing the trustworthiness of this study.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to gain an understanding of culture learning in study abroad through the perceptions of undergraduate students who have studied abroad. As the review of the research literature in the previous chapter suggests, although previous studies have provided useful information and direction for further research, they have been rather limited in furthering an understanding of culture learning in study abroad. Previous research has also been less than satisfactory in facilitating insight into the meanings the experience has for students who study abroad. Since the scope of this study includes seeking an understanding of student perspectives and seeking an understanding of how students make sense of their experiences abroad, a qualitative research approach is appropriate.

This chapter will present a discussion of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this study. The methods used to obtain relevant data for the study are presented. This discussion also includes an overview of the methods of data analysis employed in this study. The chapter concludes with an explanation of how criteria for judging the trustworthiness of this qualitative study are met.

Theoretical Perspective of the Methodology

As a “basic interpretive qualitative study” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6), this study is grounded in an epistemology of constructionism (Crotty, 2003, p. 9). In constructionism, meaning is created by individuals. Constructionism differs from subjectivism primarily in that in subjectivism external factors play a larger role in determining meaning for the individual, whereas in constructionism the external world is always assigned its meaning by individuals; in other words, there is no meaning apart from that assigned by the individual or individuals.

While Crotty places interpretive approaches under the umbrella of the epistemology of constructionism, or in other words, constructionism is the guiding

epistemology and interpretive approaches are a type of theoretical approach, other researchers draw less distinct hierarchical relationships and instead talk about the relatedness of the approaches. “Social constructionist and interpretive approaches are enormously varied. What they share, however, is the notion that all social reality is constructed, or created, by social actors” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 15). What becomes central in interpretive research is these social actors, or the participants of the study, in terms of how they interact with objects in their worlds. The interpretive meanings sought are guided by the presiding question of “what meanings do they attach to them?” (Esterberg, p. 15).

Esterberg posits that “one of the most influential approaches in qualitative research, especially as conducted by many anthropologists and other field researchers, has been *naturalism*” (2002, p. 13). Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) foundational work was also written with specific regard to lines of qualitative inquiry that they termed “naturalism.” Merriam (2002) defines interpretive qualitative research in terms of the characteristics that are similar among the various approaches (p. 4). For Merriam a key characteristic is that “researchers strive to *understand the meaning* people have constructed about their world and their experiences; that is, how people make sense of their experience” (2002, p. 5). Merriam, placing more emphasis on the role of the researcher, asserts “*the researcher is the primary instrument* for data collection and data analysis” (2002, p. 5). Merriam also avers that in interpretive approaches “the process is *inductive*” and “the product of qualitative inquiry is *richly descriptive*” (2002, p. 5).

Constructionism and subjectivism both differ from objective approaches in terms of the criteria that define good research. Since in qualitative research “the goal is not to abstract a few concepts and to determine the causal relationships among them, but to understand the social world of those being studied” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 14), researchers do not talk about reliability.

Reliability refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated...Replication of a qualitative study will not yield the same results, but this does not discredit the results of any particular study; there can be numerous interpretations of the same data. The more important question for qualitative researchers is *whether the results are consistent with the data collected*.

(Merriam, 2002, p. 27)

For Lincoln and Guba (1985) what are important in qualitative research are trustworthiness criteria (p. 301). Trustworthiness criteria are “activities increasing the probability that credible findings will be produced” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301). Trustworthiness criteria for this study are listed and addressed at the end of the present chapter.

In terms of the application of research findings or results, in qualitative research the understanding or insight derived from the research is the end objective of the study. Merriam (2002, p. 5), citing Patton makes the point that “this understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily.” In qualitative approaches, the responsibilities of transferability of the results or findings of research rest less with the researcher of a study, aside from providing the audit trail, than with future researchers.

Thus the naturalist cannot specify the external validity of an inquiry; he or she can provide only the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility...It is, in summary, *not* the naturalist’s task to provide an *index* of transferability; it *is* his or her responsibility to provide the *data base* that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316)

In this study, Chapter 4, Analysis and Results, presents much of the original data from the research. The next section of this chapter addresses how these data were obtained and analyzed.

Methodology

The basic interpretive approach in qualitative research allows for a great deal of flexibility in how the subject is approached and ultimately in how the data are interpreted. A fundamental aspect of the basic interpretive approach is in allowing room for the data to lead the researcher or for the data to speak for itself. In this kind of approach the researcher is often drawn in directions that are unanticipated prior to the start of research. It seemed particularly appropriate to incorporate a great deal of flexibility in the planning stages of research since “qualitative research is emergent rather than tightly prefigured” (Creswell, 2003, p. 181). Creswell further states that “aspects of an unfolding research model make it difficult to prefigure qualitative research tightly at the proposal or early research stage” (p. 182). For this study, elements of the original research plan are discussed as well as the directions the research took in the course of data collection and analysis.

Since, as Merriam (1988) supports, the researcher is central to the process of research in qualitative interpretive work, the researcher must be keen to adhere to certain “investigator characteristics” (p. 37). Since “there are no set procedures or protocols that one follows step by step...one must enjoy searching for pieces to the puzzle and tolerate uncertainty for an indefinite period of time” (Merriam, 1988, p. 37). To endure this kind of research activity, the researcher must have “tolerance for ambiguity” (Merriam, 1988, p. 37). Finally, “the researcher must be sensitive to the context and all the variables within it” (Merriam, 1988, p. 38). Additionally, because in many cases the researcher is relying on interviews with participants and there can be a high level of interaction with

participants, the researcher must be sensitive to the participants and able to create an “atmosphere of trust” (Merriam, 1988, p. 40).

Because the interpretive qualitative methodology is flexible and there is no established singular process (no magic number of participants, for instance), the researcher must determine at what point enough data has been collected. Merriam (1988) citing Lincoln and Guba (1985) offers “four theoretical guidelines for ending the data collection phase of a study” (p. 125). These are “exhaustion of sources, saturation of categories, emergence of regularities and over-extension, or the sense that new information being unearthed is very far removed from the core of any of the viable categories that have emerged” (Merriam, 1988, p. 126). These guidelines were adhered to in this study. As a result, the study grew from the originally-proposed six participants to 13 participants.

The Researcher’s Position

I bring to this research great interest in issues of culture and culture learning. These interests grow out of a combination of my personal experiences, my educational background, and my current profession. I grew up in a dual-cultural household, I began to travel internationally at the age of four, and I have been to nearly every continent in the world with extensive experience in some. I have always been keenly interested in culture, and that led me to seek education at the baccalaureate, master’s, and doctoral level in anthropology. I have worked professionally for nearly 20 years in university teaching and administration, the most recent 12 years in study abroad administration.

Through my work experiences, I have had opportunities to observe and conduct research with United States students studying abroad. My professional life places me in a position of constant interaction with students studying abroad. I have the good fortune to interact with colleagues from other cultures around the world, and a typical day at work often includes numerous email communications with individuals across the globe.

Intercultural communication and cultural understanding are, for me, part of everyday life and usual. I am able to understand the experiences of undergraduate students who study abroad because I was one of them once and I also went through similar processes of making sense of my experiences abroad.

This research is indebted to the student participants. They were excited about participating, they took their participation seriously, and they were incredibly thoughtful and open as they shared thoughts and feelings that, in some cases, they stated they had not shared before. Because of the manner in which they conducted themselves and made their contribution, I was forced to reflect on the project in such a way as to change my approach to the research. I had initially envisioned a quite limited amount of culture learning taking place, particularly in one of the programs types, and I was prepared to offer up a critique of this state of affairs. As the interviews unfolded, however, I realized just how much the students had learned. Although what they had learned was not necessarily culture learning, or at least not culture learning as I defined it, there were far more significant and interesting aspects of their experiences abroad. As the qualitative researcher, I learned to let the data lead.

I was also inspired by Patton's comments that

The purpose of a research interview is first and foremost to gather data, not change people. Earlier, in the section on neutrality, I asserted that an interviewer is not a judge. Neither is a research interviewer a therapist. Staying focused on the purpose of the interview is critical to gathering high-quality data...on the other hand, the interviewer, in establishing rapport, is not a cold slab of granite. (Patton, 2002, p. 405)

I concluded that my role as researcher was not to teach lessons about the best way to learn culture. I also developed a great respect for all of the student participants, and I became more respectful of them as unique individuals sharing in my project. I took

seriously my responsibility to handle and to value the personal information they shared with me. I wanted to represent them and their stories of their experiences abroad well.

Methods

Methods of Data Collection

In a basic interpretive qualitative approach, data are collected from three main sources: interviews, observations, and documents. In this study, interviews are the primary source of data, supplemented by limited document analysis. These methods are most appropriate to answer the research questions in this study. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of culture learning in study abroad through the perceptions of undergraduate students who studied abroad. The specific research questions designed to meet this purpose are

1. What do undergraduate students perceive that they learned by studying abroad?
2. How do undergraduate students who studied abroad perceive culture learning?
3. What are students' perspectives on the meaning of their study abroad experience?

It was first determined that interviews were the best way to understand students' perspectives and perceptions (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). Secondly, realizing that many of the students had produced some kind of written comment on their study abroad experience, an analysis of what they had written was included in the scope of the research. This also served as a means of triangulation in the research methodology by drawing data from difference sources through different means of data collection, thus improving the trustworthiness of the study. Data collection methods for each source, interviews and documents, are described in greater detail below.

Interviews

The initial research plan was to interview a total of six undergraduate students who had studied abroad; however, since “there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 244) and since “how long one needs to observe or how many

people need to be interviewed are always difficult questions to answer ahead of time” (Merriam, 2002, p. 26), research concluded with a total of 13 participants. All participants were interviewed two times for a total of over 20 hours of audiotaped material. This was necessary in order to adhere to best practice research collection guidelines and to achieve sufficient saturation of information to fulfill the methodological objective of the study and to answer the research questions above (Merriam, 2002, p. 26). Participants were undergraduate students who studied abroad while attending Iowa State University, a large public, land-grant and Carnegie Research I institution in the Midwest.

Interviewees were selected by means of the information collection method of “purposeful sampling” (Creswell, 2003, p. 185; Esterberg, 2002, p. 93; Merriam, 2002, p. 12; Patton, 2002, p. 230-242). The initial research plan was to select undergraduate students from two particular types of study abroad programs in order to represent program types that were anticipated to have the most variance in terms of the potential for culture learning. Two programs were identified for each program type. The solicitation of student participants began by sending an email message to past participants from the following programs:

1. Semester group program, English language, direct enroll, United Kingdom
2. Semester group program, English language, direct enroll, Australia
3. Short-term program, language and service-learning, faculty-led, Peru
4. Short-term program, service-learning, faculty-led, Uganda

(direct enroll means enrolled in regular courses at the host institution)

The first two programs were situated in cultural contexts that present the least cultural difference for Iowa State University students. Both programs were in Western countries where the local language is English. The last two programs were situated in cultural contexts that presented the greatest potential for cultural difference for Iowa State University students. Both of these programs were in countries where the local language is

not English. Additionally, the first two programs were based on a model of direct enrollment in a foreign partner institution. In this model the student is independent throughout the semester in the sense that there is not a program director or coordinator on site from Iowa State University or the United States. The last two programs are both service-learning programs and are based on a model of experiential education. The pedagogy of this program model includes reflective activities, and in both programs there was an on-site program director from Iowa State University who was in constant contact with the students to facilitate reflective activities.

Five participants initially responded to the invitation to participate in the study and they represented three of the four programs listed above. Student recruitment for the remaining participants needed for the study proved to be problematic. This may have been compounded by the fact that many study abroad students were already solicited for participation in another research project just weeks before recruitment for this project began. Because of the difficulties in securing participants, the solicitation of students was expanded to four additional programs. At that point in time, interviews began with the five participants who had committed to the study. Three of the initial five students happened to work in the Study Abroad Center and during the first interviews, the students were forthcoming, open, and genuine in sharing their thoughts and feelings. Building trust in the interview process was greatly aided by the fact that they were probably comfortable with staff in the Center who they were familiar with and who they likely viewed as interested, supportive, and non-judgmental concerning their experiences. In addition to the successful first interviews and the problem of student recruitment, and because the students who are hired in the Center generally represent a broad range of study abroad programs by virtue of the needs of the Center, a determination was made to invite all the student employees of the Center to participate in this study. All but one of the student employees of the Center during the Spring Semester of 2008 participated in

this study. Scheduling problems prevented the remaining student from participating. All of the research participants had studied abroad within their college careers at Iowa State University. Most of the students had returned from an experience within the last year, but one student was over two years removed from his experience and another student had participated in a total of five programs that stretched back over the course of nearly four years.

In this study the 13 participants were from a total of 11 study abroad programs. Participants, by pseudonyms, and programs were:

Abby: Semester group program, English language, direct enroll, Australia

Alivia: Five different programs

Allen: Short-term program, service-learning, faculty-led, Uganda

David: Semester, language, direct enroll, Germany

Diana: Short-term program, language and service-learning, faculty-led, Peru

Erica: Short-term program, language and service-learning, faculty-led, Peru

Johnny: Semester group program, English language, direct enroll, Australia

Kathryn: Short-term program, language, faculty-led, Spain

Kent: Short-term program, service-learning, faculty-led, Uganda

Mandy: Semester group program, English language, direct enroll, Greece

Scott: Semester group program, English language, direct enroll, New Zealand

Shelley: Semester group program, English language, direct enroll, U. K.

Tara: Semester group program, English language, direct enroll, Ireland

(direct enroll means enrolled in regular courses at the host institution)

Four participants were from service-learning programs, six participants were from semester programs in English, and four participants were from programs in which language learning was involved. The participants, therefore, bring to the research experiences from a breadth of program types.

The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of open-ended questions intended to elicit the views and perspectives of participants (Esterberg, 2002, p. 109; Creswell, 2003, p. 188; Patton, 2002, p. 353). The guiding questions for the interviews were:

1. What were the highlights of your study abroad experience?
2. What did you learn by studying abroad?
3. Did you learn about the culture of your host country? If so, what did you learn?
4. How did you learn about culture or from whom?
5. Describe people of your host country.
6. How do you think the experience affected your thinking about other cultures?
7. What do you think it means to learn another culture?
8. Could you have learned what you learned without going abroad?
9. Why should university students study abroad?

These questions were designed to foster thorough responses from participants. Many of the questions above, as well as many of the unstructured and informal questions that emerge in the course of the interview, were “presupposition questions” (Patton, p. 369). These kinds of questions make certain assumptions about the participant’s experience and proceed to eliciting a description of perceptions or perspectives. This is an effective means of focusing on the information that the researcher is gathering, and it avoids first posing “dichotomous questions” (Esterberg, p. 98) since “the presupposition format bypasses this initial step by asking for description rather than asking for an affirmation of the existence of the phenomenon in question” (Patton, p. 369).

All interviews were recorded on two sets of audiotapes and transcribed into written texts. The transcriptionist is a staff employee in the Study Abroad Center at Iowa State University, but her second job outside of the university is as a medical transcriptionist so she is experienced and proficient. The transcriptions were produced

verbatim and included most of the incidental parts of speech. The interview data was further edited by the researcher for inclusion in this paper; however, the language of the participants was not otherwise edited or corrected.

Notes and comments on each interview were written immediately following each meeting with a participant (Esterberg, 2002, p. 107). These notes detail initial impressions of the interview, the overall attitude of the participant, and any comment that seemed important. The notes guided later work on data analysis by allowing reference to initial impressions or an important aspect of the interview. Interview notes became part of the research journal and aided in forming preliminary interpretations.

Documents

Documents were obtained for 10 of the 13 students. Nine of the documents were responses to questions that the students who worked in the Study Abroad Center were previously asked to write for potential use in the Center's promotional materials. One student shared a copy of a paper written for a class. The paper was in the format of a travel log. Documents by participant (by pseudonym) and document type were:

Abby	promotional document
Alivia	promotional document
Allen	course paper
David	promotional document
Diana	promotional document
Erica	none
Johnny	promotional document
Kathryn	none
Kent	none
Mandy	promotional document
Scott	promotional document

Shelley promotional document

Tara promotional document

The questions posed to the students for the promotional documents were written by the Director of the Center. Each of the students was also asked to submit photos of them from their time abroad. The objective of the promotional documents was to present material about the study abroad experience that other students might find interesting and appealing. The questions the students responded to in the documents were:

1. Why did you decide to study abroad?
2. What did you get out of the experience?
3. How has studying abroad changed you or impacted your future plans?

The students' responses were edited by the Center for spelling only. They were not edited further for inclusion in this paper.

IRB approval

Because the interviews involved research on human subjects, an application was submitted to the Institutional Review Board for approval of this research. The interviews did not entail risk to participants, and participants could have chosen not to participate or to withdraw their participation at any time. All written forms of the research results do not and will not contain any means of individual identification of the participants. The project met the criteria for exempt status for research on human subjects, and this study was approved.

Methods of Data Analysis

The analysis of data in this research project began even as the first interviews were taking place. "Data collection and analysis is a *simultaneous* activity in qualitative research" (Merriam, 1988, p. 119). The nature of a qualitative interpretive study allows for this concurrence since data analysis is an inductive process for the researcher.

"Inductive analysis involves discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one's data"

(Patton, 2002, p. 453). Writing notes following each interview in the course of this project meant reflecting on each interview and beginning to identify emerging themes and developing early ideas about where the research was heading.

The more formal process of data analysis began with the preliminary analysis of each complete interview transcript. Preliminary analysis began for some interview transcripts before all of the 13 initial interviews were completed. The ability to recognize emerging themes or typologies aided the identification of saturation of the data, but interviewing continued beyond the point of saturation because remaining interviews were already scheduled, and there was a conscious effort to avoid hurt feelings by not including some of the participants in the study when they had already been invited to participate.

For qualitative interpretive research, formal data analysis usually begins with some kind of content analysis. Content analysis is a broad term used in reference to “any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 453). Esterberg contends that “many researchers use some version of grounded theory to work with their data and develop meanings” (2002, p. 158). This is the initial means of beginning with the data and beginning to analyze what is in the data. Most researchers refer to this process as coding the data.

Essentially, this method involves a two-step process of coding. In the initial stage, called *open coding*, you work intensively with your data, line by line, identifying themes and categories that seem of interest. In this early stage, you should remain open to whatever you see in the data. (Esterberg, p. 158)

In this research project, the process of open coding included reading through the interview transcripts and looking for what Patton calls “indigenous concepts and practices” (Patton, p. 454). In order to identify these, Patton recommends the researcher

ask, “what are the indigenous categories that the people interviewed have created to make sense of their worldview?” (Patton, p. 454). As these concepts and practices were identified, they were written in the margin of the transcript or underlined in a particular color.

“After you have done open coding for a while, some recurring themes should begin to emerge” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 159). In this research project, similar terms and phrases that the students used were then grouped by a common term. For example, “it definitely got me more open-minded,” “it just opened me back up,” and “opened me up more” were grouped as “open.” The term used, in this case “open,” remained a variant of the terms used by the participant. In Patton’s model of analysis, these are “sensitizing concepts,” defined as the “categories that the analyst brings to the data” (Patton, 2002, p. 456).

The interview transcripts were then read through a second time in their entirety. This time the consolidated terms or sensitizing concepts were noted. The themes identified at this point and other material that seemed particularly relevant were copied from the transcript, and a separate list of themes and relevant examples formed the early summaries of the interview. This was the second coding of the data. “Like open coding, *focused coding* entails going through your data line by line, but this time you focus on those key themes you identified during open coding” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 161). As a result of this activity, what Patton calls “indigenous typologies,” classification systems that the participants use, should begin to emerge from the data (2002, p. 457); however, in this study, it began to appear during the course of data analysis that distinctions between indigenous concepts and practices and indigenous typologies were artificial and were not adding value to the analysis. Therefore, this third category from Patton’s method was not differentiated in the process of data analysis. What was most useful for this study from Patton’s model was that the process of data analysis began with what the

students said, their actual words and concepts, and remained focused on using the words and concepts of the students as much as possible in the formation of categories or themes. Patton asserts that “what people actually say and the descriptions of events observed remain the essence of qualitative inquiry” (p. 457).

Following the two-step coding or analysis process, a one- to two-page outline containing a summary and preliminary interpretations of the interview was produced. These were printed and shared electronically with each participant prior to the second interview. The participants’ own words and phrases were used in the summaries. This served to keep the summaries close to the source and to more accurately represent the perspectives of the participants. The preliminary analysis was drawn from the sensitizing concepts and began to form the beginning of “analyst-constructed typologies” (Patton, 2002, p. 458). At this point, “the analyst moves to a different task of induction — looking for patterns, categories, and themes for which the analyst can construct a typology to further elucidate findings” (Patton, p. 459). These concepts and typologies were later revised based on feedback from the second interviews and also in response to recommendations from peer debriefers; however, the core concepts remained significant, shaped the direction of the study, and formed the foundation of analysis and results.

All of the research data were organized into a case record for each participant (Merriam, 1988, based on Patton’s term, p. 126; Patton, 2002, p. 447). Each participant’s data were analyzed by case analysis. “Case analysis involves organizing the data by specific cases for in-depth study and comparison. Well-constructed cases are *holistic* and *context sensitive*” (Patton, p. 447). Ultimately, each of the case records demonstrated a great deal of consistency. Second interviews checked material from the initial interview, documents generally corroborated what the students revealed in their interviews, and further correspondence with the student participants served to clarify the other forms of data in their case record.

Data analysis continued with close work with the data, rereading interview transcripts, notes, summaries, preliminary interpretations, documents, and the research journal. Data analysis was fluid, and there were many returns to the data to search for indigenous concepts and practices and sensitizing concepts (Patton, 2002, p. 458). Master lists of all of the indigenous concepts and practices were written so that cross-case comparisons could be made. For Merriam (1988), analysis of case records involves combing the data through “intensive analysis” (p. 127), which leads to “developing categories” (p.133). For Esterberg (2002), analysis is “looking for patterns,” “comparing cases”(p. 168), and “building typologies” (p. 169). Each of these researchers shares suggestions for making sense of data and is speaking to the same inductive process in slightly different ways. As Patton assures

Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings. No formula exists for that transformation. Guidance, yes. But no recipe. Direction can and will be offered, but the final destination remains unique for each inquirer, known only when — and if — arrived at. (2002, p. 432)

Analysis was completed when findings and interpretations seemed well-grounded in the data and provided understanding in accord with the research questions. The findings and results are, in many cases, unexpected and enlightening. New insight obtained through this qualitative interpretive research project has satisfied the purpose of the study.

Trustworthiness of the Research

Although there is still much debate regarding the evaluation of good research in qualitative studies (Esterberg, 2002; Merriam, 2002), there has begun to be some consensus among researchers (Esterberg, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002). Lincoln and Guba (1994) propose the following criteria: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, member checks, thick descriptive data, and external audit.

Prolonged Engagement and Persistent Observation

Two interviews were conducted with each research participant. Initial interviews were one to two hours in duration with each participant. Second interviews, or follow-up interviews, were 20 minutes to 1 hour in duration. In total there are over 20 hours of audiotaped material. Because the interviews were focused on culture learning, and the information collection methods were selected to allow for efficient and effective use of time, most of the interview material was directly relevant to the study. Documents consisting of written statements or papers from the students provided a secondary source of data and served to check interview data.

Triangulation

Triangulation is achieved by employing different sources or different methods (Esterberg, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002). In this research project, data were obtained from individual interviews and documents consisting of written student statements, two of the three major sources of data for qualitative research (Merriam, 2002, p. 12). Therefore, analysis did not rest with an interpretation of a single source but rather was derived from two different sources gathered by different methods.

Peer Debriefing

This study was reviewed by two peers from the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies department at Iowa State University. The two peer debriefers are current doctoral students who are presently in the process of research for the dissertation and were fellow graduate students in a dissertation-writing seminar one year previous; we have all reviewed each others' work before. The peer debriefers' own research projects for the dissertation are based in qualitative approaches. The peers reviewed the summary and preliminary interpretations of the student interviews and document analysis that were shared with the student participants of the study, the additions and revisions that resulted from the second set of student interviews, and the revised interpretations that became

Chapter 4, Findings and Interpretations. They also reviewed Chapter 1, Introduction, and Chapter 3, Methodology.

Negative Case Analysis

Negative case analysis is “the active search for negative instances relating to developing insights” (Lincoln & Guba, 1994, p. 653). Through the course of data analysis in this study, negative cases were continuously searched for so that interpretations accounted for the data in a comprehensive way. In this study, general patterns presented in the discussion of themes and interpretations are specified and qualified such that, where the patterns do not apply, this is noted in the discussion.

Member Checks

Member checks are a means of “testing information by soliciting reaction of respondents to the investigator’s reconstruction” (Lincoln & Guba, 1994, p. 654). Member checks with all 13 student participants were completed. Full interview transcripts and summaries and preliminary interpretations were shared with each participant prior to the second meeting. This provided an opportunity for the students to clarify material, to add to the material, and to allow each participant to have a greater role in the project, ensuring that the depth of information was both significant and an accurate reflection of each student’s perspectives. Further, this allowed clarification of and revision to the individual preliminary interpretations. Two of the student participants communicated by email following the second interviews to provide further input and clarification. Member checks allowed the participants to play a role in shaping the direction of the study.

Thick Descriptive Data

Chapter 4, Analysis and Results, includes major portions of the raw material gathered. Complete passages of interview material are presented. This allows readers to closely monitor the process of analysis and the interpretations that were developed and

derived from the data. Providing the original or raw data also aids in keeping the interpretation close to the source material.

Audit Trail

All research notes, working papers, journals, transcriptions, and tape recordings will be kept on file and available for review. This research project will leave an audit trail, but an external auditor, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1994), for the complete product of the dissertation will not be obtainable. This recommendation is more relevant and applicable to program evaluations.

Providing an audit trail is related to providing thick descriptive data in research writing, and the two factors work hand in hand. A large part of leaving an audit trail rests in providing the original raw material to the reader (Merriam, 2002). By fully describing the research process and fully unveiling the process of analysis, readers are able to evaluate for themselves if the conclusions drawn from the research are trustworthy. The important question for qualitative research is “whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (Merriam, 2002, p. 27).

Summary of the Methodology

This study achieves its objectives through a basic qualitative interpretive approach. The research is founded in an epistemology of constructionism in which meaning is envisioned as a construct of individuals as they make sense of the world. Qualitative interpretive research is fundamentally focused on understanding the meaning that participants make of their experience. This study seeks to understand the meaning of the study abroad experience for the participants of this study. Data for this study consist primarily of interview material triangulated by documents. Student participants were recruited through purposeful sampling methods. Data analysis is consistent with established methods in interpretive research and includes multiple codings of the data. The insight obtained through this research, presented as findings and interpretations, is

the end product of the study. Discussion of how the study meets the criteria of trustworthiness in qualitative research was provided to aid in evaluation of the quality of the study.

The next chapter, Chapter 4, Findings and Interpretations, presents the product of this research project. It presents thick and rich description of the student perspectives that were shared for the purposes of this project. The results from this research allow for an in-depth understanding of culture learning and student learning in study abroad. The manner in which the findings of the study are presented in the following chapter allows the deeper meaning that the study abroad students in this study constructed of their experiences abroad to be revealed.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

In many ways, the findings of this research project are surprising and unexpected. They are also fascinating. This chapter presents details of what became amazing stories of being abroad and amazing stories of learning. Shaped by what students shared about their experiences and their perspectives, the research study was transformed. Although the purpose of the research was achieved, the study became less about understanding culture learning in study abroad and more about understanding the meaning of the study abroad experience for students. The research questions for the study were

1. What do undergraduate students perceive that they learned studying abroad?
2. How do undergraduate students who studied abroad perceive culture learning?
3. What are students' perspectives on the meaning of their study abroad experience?

These questions ultimately were answered, but it was their relative levels of significance and emphasis that shifted in the course of the project. This was part of the process in which unexpected findings and context emerged as much more significant than was envisioned at the beginning of the research process. This should have not been so surprising, since this kind of flexibility, detouring, even meandering, of research is the hallmark of qualitative interpretive research.

The first section of this chapter presents six “case vignettes of individuals” (Patton, 2002, p. 451). The second section of the chapter provides a comparative analysis that draws on all 13 student cases and is arranged by the themes that emerged from the data analysis. The case vignettes allow for presentation of selected student cases in the context of the entire experience for each individual. They demonstrate that the study abroad experience is individualized. Understanding the greater context of each student's experience allows for greater insight into students' perceptions on the meaning of their experience. The comparative analysis allows for identification of patterns in the data. The

patterns reveal the role that program type may play in shaping the overall study abroad experience for students.

The Vignettes

Six student cases were selected for presentation as vignettes. The students, by pseudonyms, and the programs they represent are:

Tara: Semester group program, English language, direct enroll, Ireland

Allen: Short-term program, service-learning, faculty-led, Uganda

Johnny: Semester group program, English language, direct enroll, Australia

Alivia: Five different programs, Nigeria, Sweden, Germany, and Turkey

Diana: Short-term program, language and service-learning, faculty-led, Peru

Erica: Short-term program, language and service-learning, faculty-led, Peru
(direct enroll means enrolled in regular courses at the host institution)

The six student cases that were chosen for vignettes were selected because they are particularly striking examples of students' experiences abroad. They represent a range of ways in which students perceived their experiences. The presentation of the student cases in vignettes allows for understanding their individual experiences in their totality and in context. Each individual learned about the culture of the place in which he or she studied abroad in different ways and to different degrees, but what became most interesting in the course of the research was how each individual established a different understanding of the experience. In each of the six student cases there is a defining element of the students' experience.

In the first vignette, Tara establishes that students can indeed learn a great deal about culture in a direct enroll group semester program in an English-speaking country; however, what is more important is that the meaning of the experience for her is founded in an event that was happenstance. She forms a relationship with an older Irish couple with whom she ends up spending a significant amount of time. This relationship frames

the meaning of the entire experience for Tara. In the second case vignette, Allen's experience is defined and placed in the context of the course of his life. His experience abroad is interpreted by him as a step between life before and life in the future. The meaning of his experience abroad is shaped by his desire to help others, a desire that grew out of his earlier experiences coping with a serious medical condition. During his time in Uganda he formed a bond with a fellow Ugandan university student that now channels his desire to help others. In the third case vignette, Johnny's understanding of his experience abroad is interpreted in accord with his self-identity. He identifies himself as Asian and Filipino and as such has an affinity with Pacific Island culture that may be responsible for a special invitation that is extended to him by Fijians. His experience in Australia is, for him, a return to the ocean and the scene of fond childhood memories. Alivia's multiple experiences abroad, presented in the fourth case vignette, are generally understood as "difficult." She then interprets the meaning of these experiences based on this assessment and concludes that studying abroad has allowed her a means of realizing her own strength in overcoming personal challenge. For Diana, in the fifth case vignette, the experience was highly emotional. The experience was shaped by an event that evolved out of her service-learning project but that was unforeseeable at the start. She participated in a dance for an indigenous celebration with women from a village in Peru through which she developed a strong bond with the women. Erica participated in the same study abroad program as Diana, and her experience was similarly centered around the dance, but Erica's perspective is defined by an intellectual struggle that she finds herself engaged in.

In each student case vignette, relatively large excerpts of interview material are presented so that the students are allowed, to some extent, to speak for themselves. This was a purposeful attempt to provide the material in the students' own words and to let the voices of these students be heard. Patton asserts that "the skilled analyst is able to get out

of the way of the data to let the data tell their own story” (2002, p. 457). The case vignettes present an analysis of the student cases in their totality and in context so that for each student an understanding of their perspectives regarding what they learned from the study abroad experience, what they learned about culture in the experience, and their perspectives on the meaning of their study abroad experience is able to be understood as the unique interaction of these aspects of their experiences. The case vignettes provide a fascinating window on students’ study abroad experiences.

Tara

Tara’s study abroad experience was in a semester group program in Ireland. She was directly enrolled as a study abroad student at University College Cork. She lived in the residence hall and shared a flat with three other young women, one from Germany and two from Ireland. Another student from Iowa State University lived near her in the same residence with four young women from Ireland. Tara’s vignette includes much of her discussion of what she learned about Irish culture in order to show the incredible breadth of what she learned. This is particularly relevant because the type of program that she participated in, English speaking, direct enroll, and accommodations in a residence hall can have the potential to limit student’s interactions with the local culture. Tara learned far more about the culture of Ireland than I anticipated.

When our first interview began, Tara was asked what the highlights of the program were for her. Her initial response was “all the new stuff, like every single day, I mean, that year I made this New Year’s resolution that, you know, I would do something new every day, and it wasn’t even hard, because there was something new every day.” She talked about her favorite places in Ireland to visit, particularly a small town on the coast. She described how “it was just beautiful, and all the, like, and the houses in Ireland are painted really bright colors, and I liked that... I mean, like I just bought ice cream and sat on the coast...it was really pretty.” Some of the details that she highlighted were “just

the stupid things I did but ended up being so fun, like biking for seven hours straight one day in Killarney National Park when I hadn't biked in like six years. That was really dumb. And then, um, and I hurt so bad." She also mentioned her archaeology class: "my archaeology class was so fun. We took, like, trips to... a stone circle we went to, and castles. I loved the castles... and my archaeology professor was really nice, too." She said taking this class was "accidental," but it is interesting that learning everything that she could about Ireland became central. She introduced the topic of her great sense of independence in doing things on her own in Ireland. This became a large part of her overall learning as she reflected on the experience. Finally, she told what she called "*the* story." What Tara considered her most amazing experience abroad began her first day in Ireland:

So, this is like, like *the* story I tell people. So when I got into Cork City, I couldn't get into my apartment until about 6:00, but it was like 1:30, and um, just really dumb on my part, but I had all my luggage, and I'm going to wait for like 36 hours, and it was a Sunday, so I told the cab driver, okay, take me to church because they can't kick you out of church, and it was, like, a warm place to just sit. So I sat in church with all of my luggage, and I was kind of just trying not to fall asleep and just relax for a while, and then I was nodding off, and two people came up to me, a man and woman, and said are you okay? And I said, oh, I'm fine. I just can't get into my apartment and, you know, whatever. And they're like, well, do you want to come over for some tea or sandwiches? And I thought for a second, I thought, if they kill me, maybe it'll be somewhere warm. So I agreed, and I went to their house, and they fed me and let me stay the night, actually, because my apartment was just barren, and there was no one there, and they gave me clothes, they took me grocery shopping the next day, and then I'm still wonderful friends with them and keep in touch, and they would, they'd just

do little nice things like have me over for dinner, like she bought me like an Easter egg and, like a chocolate Easter egg kind of thing, just little, I don't know, and like when I was back and visited I stayed with them, and they...they were like, let's have a picnic day. They were just wonderful people, really nice....About my parents' age, like, so not really old, but they didn't have, they don't have kids of their own but they have lots of nieces and nephews and they were really....It just made it, it made my experience really like not just the student experience, like I had a home life, too, in Ireland, which was nice.

Because she met the couple on her first day in Ireland, she admitted "so I try and call them around that time every year." She often stated of the couple "they're wonderful, they're great people." When Tara returned to Ireland for a visit one year following her semester abroad, she stayed with the couple. It is clear that Tara's relationship with this couple was the defining experience of her study abroad experience. What is remarkable is that it was completely happenstance. Tara qualified, "I never tell students that story. It's really dangerous...it's really risky, and I'm glad it worked out, but I wouldn't recommend it to anyone."

Because of who Tara was and the characteristics she brought with her into her experience abroad, she happened to be in the church where the people found her on that first day. Tara is Catholic. She went to private Catholic schools in elementary and high school. She obviously felt comfortable and safe in a Catholic church and knew that it could serve as a safe haven.

The church I was found in, ended up becoming like my church that I would, yeah, like my home parish in Ireland sort of...I would go usually on my own every weekend....that's where they [the couple], they belong to that church, and so sometimes I'd see them there, but usually I'd just go on my own, and there was

like a student chapel on campus, but I didn't, I went there once or twice, and I just, it was really crowded, not much space, you know.

The church would end up taking some place of prominence throughout her time in Ireland. She was keen to observe much about Catholicism in Ireland and this comprised part of the cultural knowledge that she acquired.

I am Catholic, so I expected everyone to be a little more devout, I guess. They were kind of, they are practicing Catholics, but they were kind of lackadaisical about it, and it's kind of a, like, well, we'll, you know, they just didn't take all the rules extremely seriously, where I feel like in the U.S. it's kind of a, like, well, a lot of Catholics I know either are just not doing anything at all or they're really, like, hard-core, like my grandma is hard-core, watches UWTN. I don't know if that is the case, she's just, she, she's like the kind of woman that, you know, reads all the books and all of that, but they were just kind of more of a, like, if I miss Mass here it'd be like, oh my gosh, but there they're like, oh, just go light a candle, no big deal. And I actually kind of liked it better.

She explained that she thought the difference between the United States and Ireland was "just kind of the intensity of their attitude, I guess I would say." She explained that in the United States once her classmates came to college they did not attend church any longer, but in Ireland "that doesn't happen as much, like, I don't think as many students fall away when they're in college." She delved further and learned about the role of Catholicism in the school system in Ireland.

They didn't separate church and state really in their schools...but they all have religion, I think in school you can opt not to have...your child take religion, otherwise they'll get put in automatically...in sort of what would be public schools, it's like that's woven in there.

Even though she was Catholic, the prominence of the church in public schools was not necessarily something that she agreed with.

The fact that they have like religion in their schools, I don't really like that, which is strange, I guess, because I am Catholic, but, I don't know, I, maybe because it was mostly really weird for me that it was so, every kid is learning Catholicism in the schools? What?

Tara would return to mention the couple she met several times during the interview. She would refer to them as the people "that found me." During our long discussion of what she had learned about culture in her time abroad, she also talked about all the people who she learned from; however, the couple she met proved to be her greatest resource.

Probably mostly through Mary, the woman that found me, or mostly through her I'd say, because she was very, I mean, she had like an adult perspective on everything, and she kept very knowledgeable about Irish...and her husband, too, James. Her and her husband, very knowledgeable about Irish history and past, but then she has a lot of young nieces and nephews, and she was just a very fashionable woman herself anyway, she kind of knew all the trends and...college-aged culture I mostly learned from my roommates and Ella's roommates, you know, but she was, I really liked Mary because she understood that, like, young people need to be young...I'd say mostly from Mary and James...and I had thousands of questions. I mean, every little thing. What is this? I don't understand, and little questions like, they had signs called off-licenses, and I was like what's an on-license? And then they just laughed. An off-license is like a liquor store. What's an on-license? It's not really anything.

It was obvious that Tara felt very comfortable with the couple; she could ask them anything, and she felt free to express a good deal of humor with them. She talked about

some of the little things they taught her that clarified misconceptions she had about the Irish. “They taught me that like Irish people don’t really like leprechauns, that they’re just dumb.” She was not shy to admit to them things that she didn’t understand about Ireland.

Ireland has kind of a different accent for almost every county, and there’s like 32 counties, so even though it’s a really small country, nobody talks the same, which is crazy in itself, um, and I thought that I couldn’t understand everyone because I was from America and just wasn’t used to them, but I guess I asked eventually one time, I was like, well, can you understand them? Some of these men in like the south of Ireland have the thickest accents, and they’re like, oh, absolutely not, no, and I felt better.

It was comforting for Tara to take solace in their shared perspective and to extend her process of learning with people who were Irish.

The couple influenced her life in another unanticipated way. Tara learned a great deal about local politics because she would go to City Council meetings in Cork with the woman who found her. Tara admits that prior to being in Ireland, “I was not into politics at all or even really interested in them,” but what she witnessed made an impression on her. She described many differences between the United States system and the Irish system, particularly that “their city council was a little more formal than, like, my hometown city council.” She was impressed with some of the people she witnessed. “There was actually a woman there...and she was great. Like I loved listening to her speak and just the way she presented herself as a politician.” Tara ended up running for student government when she returned to Iowa State University, and she served as a senator. She commented, “I really liked it, and I would like model myself after her and how she behaved.”

A large part of the study abroad experience for Tara rested in the ability to apply what she learned. “I don’t know, I just liked learning how, I liked learning how that

government system worked and then seeing how ours did, and I really didn't understand ours at all, but being able to apply all that knowledge.” Other comments that she made about what she learned support this idea, such as “I just loved knowing more, like knowing more about another culture and being able to apply that to like my own life” and “I just loved learning about another culture, I just, I loved it. I loved knowing all of that information and being able to bring it back and saying this is why they do things or this is what it's like or, I don't know, I just really liked it.”

It was apparent that Tara sought to learn as much as possible about Ireland. She really felt that she had been successful in this regard and that she had learned “a lot.”

Like, I don't want to use the word “expert,” but I feel, I feel like I come pretty close, not really, because of course I'm not like a scholar of Irish, but like I worked really hard, because I loved knowing as much as possible of the country, so when I would travel places I'd try and go to like museums or learn the history of something, like in my guidebook or on line or whatever, and in the Irish archaeology class I learned a ton about Ireland through that class because it was just all about the archaeology of Ireland, and then my friend and I, Ella, the one I became close with while I was there, she and I went up to Dublin and like actually went and saw all the artifacts that he would show on the slides in class and, um, we'd go to museums.

She admitted, “I love all those, like, little history things.” This was all part of her goal in learning as much about Ireland as she could.

Tara learned more about language than the average study abroad student because one of her classes at the university was Irish Language, “which really actually did help a lot with, like, why Irish people speak the way they do... it helped me figure out what they were saying, so, yeah, I tried really hard to learn a lot, and I did, I felt like.” When she and her friends traveled, Tara was able to take the lead because of her new familiarity

with the language. “It was helpful when we traveled...I think they found it helpful that I would know, like, what that word meant or that one.” They also had a means for another level of interaction with the Irish students because of Tara’s class.

I think it was really fun for my roommates, because like all Irish students have to take Irish, and so they would help me study, and they would quiz me on my flashcards, and you know, give me more like a sounded-out version of the word, and I think they liked....And I’d say, this is what I learned today, and then I’d say the word, and they’d, like, very good. I’d count like a child.

The class not only gave the students some common ground on which to interact but also provided a way for the Irish students to share part of their culture.

To Tara, the most significant thing she learned abroad was how to be independent.

Oh, that’s a lot of things. I definitely learned to be independent, not only in like buying my own groceries and cooking my own food and, you know, buying my own bed sheet or like opening a bank account by myself. I mean, my parents before if I had a problem like in Ames or something, they’ve opened bank accounts somewhere, they know how it works, but they didn’t know how it works in Ireland, and I couldn’t just call them at the drop of a hat. Even though I’m not, I wasn’t very dependent on them before, I was even less dependent on them when I was abroad. Um, and then being independent in like, I can do things on my own now, like I could go shopping by myself or go eat by myself, or like I want to go to the art museum, I can go alone and I don’t have to find a friend to go with, and that was like, I’m really am a people-person and I always have people around. I’m someone who would, like I would rather be with people I don’t even like necessarily than be with myself, and you know, like I study in the like the Food Court because there’s people around, but yeah, that was kind of a big thing for me

to learn how to do things on my own and travel on my own, and it was fine...one major time. I mean, like I went shopping by myself or whatever, but I went to Germany. I had like a month-long Spring Break, so I went to Germany for about a week with my roommate, who was from Germany, and then I went to Berlin on my own for like four days, and that was really amazing. I loved Berlin so much. It's like one of my favorite cities ever, because I think I got to do it all on my own, and it's like just my special experience and no one else can really share it.

Her own independence was contrasted with Irish college students who she concluded were far more dependent than individuals of that age in the United States. But she also recognized that her evaluation of them was from the perspective of her own culture. "College kids in Ireland are, I mean I would call them heavily dependent by my, like, American viewpoint." Part of her assumption about their dependence rested in her observation that they returned home every weekend, but she qualified her interpretation of their dependency with "I think family is just really, really important to Irish people, and I don't know, I think Americans just place more emphasis on independence kind of, and just pushing yourself and getting out there, I don't know."

Tara believed that her experience abroad had resulted in several changes in herself. First, she said, "it helped me learn a lot about myself and what I liked and what I didn't like and why I did things that I did." Second, she felt that she was more "open-minded." Third, she felt that she was more "critical and thinking." Specifically in regard to Irish culture, she felt that she had developed the ability to be discerning and admit when there were things that she did not like or disagreed with and that this was different from trying to understand.

Well, I really don't have to agree with everything every culture does, and so there were definitely things in Ireland that I didn't necessarily agree with, and it's okay to not agree with that... I think, I just, to realize that everything, like, was okay to

see new things, but I didn't necessarily to have to like them, but to just try and understand them. Definitely I would try and understand things more, like, not just take it at face value, like, this is what they do. Well, why do they do it or how or how long has this been going on, things like that.

She offered a number of examples of things that she liked and did not like or did not agree with regarding Irish people. Some daily practices she noticed as different from life in the United States, but where they seemed good ideas, she liked them. She noticed "at the grocery store, people in the checkout line, the people who checked you out, they actually sat. I did like that. They sat in chairs. After I saw that, I was like, well, what's the point of them standing?"

Tara genuinely liked Irish people. In describing them she said, "Gosh, they were fun, friendly, happy." She was impressed with how positive they seemed to be.

They're a very happy people. I mean, they always just look, I always marveled at how upbeat they could be, because the weather is just terrible, I mean, like it rains constantly, and at first I was so excited, like I got to Ireland and I was like, yes, I cannot wait for rain, like, it will be so soft and beautiful, and after about two days I was like, well, I'm done with this, it's just disgusting, but they were always so upbeat and positive and very friendly.

Tara was not reticent to share what she did not like about the Irish or what she did not agree with. This was particularly so in what she saw as and termed "racist" attitudes and behavior. Her harshest comments were rendered of Irish attitudes toward "travelers."

A little...kind of racist, actually, well I mean, they have a lot of, not a lot of different, being politically correct was probably not a huge priority for Irish people at all...and it wasn't really like the people that found me or, I mean it would be like cab drivers who would say things. Okay, so there's this ethnic group in Ireland. This is actually kind of hard to explain to people, because no one

knows about, but there's this ethnic group in Ireland called Travelers, and they're basically gypsies, but they're of Irish descent...and to absolutely everyone on the face of the earth, they just look like other Irish people, but Irish people can spot them, like, a mile away... and they are really just discriminated against kind of by non-Travelers. Just kind of, there's like, well I'll use the words because they're not derogatory here, but I would never use them in Ireland, like nacker or tinker...well, they kind of just have a bad reputation...they don't really have jobs, so they kind of get a reputation for stealing and fighting a lot, and they're a rowdy bunch, like, that's not, they are kind of a rowdy bunch, so...cities would have a problem with them because they would park places but they don't have running water or, you know, and the people are like filthy or they leave their trash everywhere...so Irish people are discriminatory against them...I hated the attitude towards the Travelers, really hated that, um, because that was so, like, I never found a good reason for it. I mean, granted, yes, there were a few people that would get rowdy, but way more Irish people themselves that would get rowdy and I really didn't like that...I just didn't like it at all.

There were a number of behaviors that she did not like among the Irish. "They do drink an awful lot, and they sit. Like, they can handle their alcohol, I guess, but really they would drink an awful, awful lot." She was not comfortable with the fact that "they don't make eye contact when you pass them on the sidewalk." This seemed like a rude behavior to her and in contrast to their otherwise friendliness. She contrasted the behavior with what she was used to as polite back in Iowa

because in Iowa, you pass someone on the sidewalk, even if you don't know them, you smile and say 'Hi' or make eye contact and smile or whatever...I always call it like the "farmer wave" when my dad drives on the country roads, he like waves to every car...but in Ireland you wouldn't do that.

Another characteristic that she did not like was that it appeared to her that Irish people were “not very hard working...they take all these long vacations, like weeks, weeks of vacation, and it’s normal for everyone...nobody goes to work.”

She did not like the fact that the Irish did not seem to be energy efficient, “like doors aren’t sealed up and, um, buildings aren’t insulated very well” and by what she saw as a litter problem.

Dogs would go to the bathroom on the sidewalk, and people would just leave it and never pick it up, which is disgusting, and litter in Ireland is really, really bad, which I don’t understand at, like, because it just seems like a very environmental country, but it’s really not, they have a lot of litter...it was in little towns... we went to like a city park to just walk around, and just cans and trash everywhere, but they have...something called ‘Tidy Towns’ every year where they clean up Irish communities, and I was like, you should just do that all year.

Finally, she was disturbed by anti-Americanism and relates the event in which this was expressed. She does admit that this was not prevalent, and the one episode was the only indication of anti-Americanism that she experienced. The interview was the first time that she had talked about this issue.

I’ve actually never told anyone this story before, but it was a really strange moment for me. As I was leaving Ireland the second time I was there, and I was in Shannon airport, and a lot of servicemen and women came through, and there’s a whole mix of Irish and American people in the airport, and all the Americans stood up and clapped and the Irish people just sat there, and I hated that moment.

Tara did not believe that Irish people had animosity toward Americans. She said, “Actually I think they liked Americans.” She understood that “they didn’t necessarily like American foreign policy.”

For Tara, all of these examples of what she liked and disliked expressed her ability to think critically. Further, she commented on how this kind of knowledge that she had obtained, this manner of understanding and making comparisons between cultures, was helpful. “It definitely gives me a better idea of like world relations and how people perceive things...like little differences that might seem big...and like the reason behind that and why it’s okay for both things.”

Equally, her critical thinking extended into her experience of returning to the United States and caused her to suddenly see things at home differently.

I was second-guessing everything. Like, if I learned about something in Ireland, I would try to compare it to something in the U.S. to...like figure out what it was in my mind, and then I would analyze why we did it that way in the U.S.

Tara was hopeful that her experience abroad would help her in future career. “I hope I could use it in like a future job.” Though she felt that her program “wasn’t very extreme” but was, rather, “a good starter country,” she feels that her accomplishments were significant. She emphasized that

I lived in another place on my own for six months, and that’s really kind of a big thing, and it is, is different even though it might not seem that way as much to me, even when I talk about it to other people. It appears that they think it’s very different, and I guess I hope, like, future employers could see that and see, oh, she can tackle that kind of huge undertaking... just to have that set me apart from other people, and then I would really, like, I would love to go live abroad again at some point in time or just be abroad working or I don’t know, I’d just like to go abroad again. Maybe not forever, like, I live Iowa and would like to end up here, but, um, I would like to go abroad again for a little bit.

In the course of the interview we talked about why she believed that students should study abroad. This is usually a question that all of the students who work in the

Study Abroad Center at Iowa State University have responded to at one time or another in preparation for presentations they are involved in giving as part of the promotional effort of the university. In what is a response often heard from study abroad students, Tara stated,

because it's the best time of your life ever. It's really, like, that's such a dumb answer, but it was the best semester of all of college, and I really had an amazing college experience and loved almost every semester here, but that was easily the best one.

One of her reasons for the importance of the experience rests in overcoming challenges. In a rather long but comical passage she remembers

The challenges that are associated with traveling, like, oh your bus doesn't come on time and you miss the train, or your bag doesn't fit somewhere or you put two Euros in at the turnstile to go to the bathroom and then your bag gets caught and you have to crawl underneath the turnstile because you don't have another two Euros and the woman yells at you in German, like little things like that where you're just, the world is crashing down around me and I don't know how to fix it, but then you get out of it and it kind of makes for a fun story here. It's a real story. I got yelled at, and I was so mad...I said I'm sorry I don't speak German, and then she kept yelling at me, and I said I just have to go to the bathroom, I said to her in English, because I just didn't have patience for cultural appreciation at that moment, I just really needed a bathroom.

The contrast between what seemed like impossible problems abroad and problems back at home helped put problems back at home in a different light.

Now everything seems so minor here because someone is there to help me, you know, like my car tire is flat. Well, I have friends in town that have like a pump or whatever and things like that...like at home your mom has an extra blanket and

hydrogen peroxide and things like that, your dad has a screwdriver, well I don't have these things in Ireland, so you have to figure it out, and like the little challenges I guess, yeah, so that's why I think students should study abroad, because I definitely grew more then. I asked, I asked people when I came back if I seemed different, and they said yes, and that I was a little more mature, yeah.

Tara put all of her observations and beliefs about herself into perspective when she talked about what she was like prior to her study abroad experience. She referred to the experience as a major transition in her life. "So it was kind of a big, like, a big college transition time." She specifically compares herself after the program to the time she was a freshman.

Like the person that I was as a freshman and then the person I was when I came back really, I mean, like on a basic level, like, oh, I was still outgoing or whatever but really different internally, I feel...I mean I think back to when I was a freshman now, and I'm just like, who was the person? Why, like, I was boring! Because she credits her experiences abroad with what she sees as positive personal change, she often comments of the time "I loved it, yeah. I *really* liked it."

Even in the face of all that Tara learned about culture in Ireland, her sense of culture learning seemed to be better defined by greater difference than what she found in Ireland. She had the opportunity to travel to Germany with her roommate from Ireland and to stay with her roommate's family for a few weeks. Of learning about culture she stated, "probably more in Germany than I did in Ireland because it was, like, I don't like the word "culture shock" because I feel like it's very extreme, but it was definitely, like, in my face right away because it wasn't a tourist place at all." She was also in a location where English was not spoken commonly nor readily displayed on signage. She did say of this part of her experience "I loved Germany actually. It was not as bright of a place, not as green." Overall, it was the difference of the place that made this seem like more of

a different culture. As the researcher, I concluded that students did not necessarily share in the same definition of culture that I held. In a program where I would not have anticipated a high level of culture learning, I contend that Tara learned a great deal about culture in Ireland, and all that she was able to share was the testament to this.

The full impact of Tara's experience of studying abroad was seen in her discussion of her return trip to Ireland just one year after the study abroad program. She expressed, "I was so glad I went back and saw everyone, because I won't be able to go back for quite a few years." However, this second visit "was kind of a bittersweet type trip."

I missed Ireland a lot. I missed my experiences, and kind of, it felt, it felt so good and happy to be there all the time...and then I come back to Iowa State, which was wonderful, like, Iowa State was great, but it was like...I just missed Ireland a lot.

She recognized her feelings were "like homesickness almost, Irish sickness." Her return trip had been driven by her desire to recapture her experience the year before. Ultimately she realized "it wasn't the same, and like I should have expected that." She said that if she returns to Ireland again, it would be to see the couple. "Mostly them, now, and just Ireland, but mostly them...the girls and my roommates I would see probably a little bit, but, um, mostly the couple that found me."

Allen

Allen participated in a short-term service-learning program in Uganda. The program had seven student participants from Iowa State University who were accompanied by a faculty member from Iowa State who served as program director. Once on site in rural Uganda, they participated jointly in the activities of the program with students from a Ugandan university. The duration of the program was five weeks. Allen had participated in a short-term program with about 20 Iowa State University students to

Panama the previous year. Both programs were offered through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Iowa State University and were academically focused on disciplines within the college.

The most significant aspects of studying abroad for Allen were not evident until the end of the interview. Allen was reserved when the interview began. Because he was not a student worker in the Study Abroad Center, when he arrived for the first interview it was the first time that we had met. By the end of the interview, Allen appeared to be comfortable in talking with me, and it was at that point that he revealed the deep meaning that his experience abroad had for him as he situated that experience in the greater context of his life. Additionally, when the interview was over and I was just about to switch off the tape recorder, he talked about an incident in Uganda. It was evident that this incident had the most significant impact on Allen.

In response to the initial interview question regarding highlights of the program, he talked about the basic activities associated with the objectives of the program.

Our main focus, which was a great highlight, was actually trying to get into the classrooms and be able to teach the students, um, that aspect there. We taught from P-5, excuse me, P-4 to P-7, which is primary levels. Uh, age of students ranged from 10 in P-4 to about 16, 17 in P-7....It was teaching and school gardens, actually, and develop the gardens to be able to, uh, pass that on to the students, which in turn would take that home to their families, in hopes to, uh, grow more diversity of grains, actually just participate in more agriculture activities in general...I mean, it was a great opportunity to get in there and try to spread some education...um, garden, I mean, a garden there was basically a field plot here. I mean, it wasn't just a little backyard garden.

It appeared that Allen took this job seriously and really felt that he was entrusted to do something important and something that would make a real difference. He felt welcomed by the Ugandan community and felt they were appreciative of their group's work.

The people are so grateful and so kind, and the community setting there is so great...okay, um, well a lot of teaching, actually, and then after school we'd, or if it was every other day, we'd go out to different parts of the community, I mean, it could be a couple mile walk, and actually visit with local residents and ... do the best that we could to kind of help them, if there was anything we could, or at least, I mean, try to get a sense of some of the problems that challenges them...I mean, get on the personal one-on-one with local residents and just see what was facing them and try to overcome them.

Allen often compared the experiences in Uganda with his previous experience in Panama. In the Panama program, he felt they were just "taking in the culture" and it "was more the bus window," but in Uganda there was interaction and a sharing of knowledge back and forth between individuals of the two cultures. "It was more spreading out what we knew and taking back what they had."

Allen learned a great deal about the local culture in Uganda and could speak on a number of topics. He talked about the Nile river, clinics, clans, markets, and corruption in the government. Most of what he learned was from the Ugandan university students who they worked and lived with. He said of their entire group that they were "one, big happy family, a big table, dining table, where we would, I mean, always eat, um, tell stories, and, I mean, work on our teachings for the classroom." He had great respect for the Ugandan students, referring to them as "phenomenal" and "bright people." He relayed how they had developed plant varieties resistant to problems which "to have them, I mean, master stuff like that, I mean, they have to be a lot of intelligence." He thought that "they're willing to learn" and "it's just a work ethics that's just unbelievable." He had

learned so much about Uganda from the students because “they had a great knowledge of the area.”

Of other Ugandan people, Allen remained a bit more skeptical and harbored mixed feelings. Although people in the communities were generally happy to see their group arrive, he said “well, they, they were always happy, I mean, it was hard to actual figure at first if they were, I mean, happy to see us or happy to see our wallets type of thing.” The students had a bad experience one day when they tried to rent bicycles because the salesman quoted them a very high price. Allen commented, “figuring that we’re white automatically they assume that, oh, the rich people.”

Allen was able to put this less savory side of his experience into perspective as he also witnessed what he interpreted as true acts of hospitality and generosity. He told of how, out in the small communities that they would visit, the people would make a special effort to be welcoming.

They’re the types of people that no matter what their status is or how, I mean, or how, how well off they are, they’re the ones that’ll welcome you to their house, uh, countless times. I mean, about every, every place we were in the community, their place, I mean, little rinky shacks type of thing, mud huts, and they’re everything from between the road and their house was swept off. Every morning, they would sweep off the dirt in front of them, I mean, not nice green lawns like here or anything, but, uh, they would sweep it off, never knowing when to expect a, a visitor or guest.

He told of how in one of the villages

there were some...some older ladies passing by, and they actually gave us, uh, ears of roasted corn, and I mean, of course, I mean, better off, we were so much better off than what they were, I mean, walking, hardly had shoes to wear or anything like that, rags, but it, it was the fact that if they offered it to you.

This seemed to be particularly amazing and perplexing to Allen. He felt that Ugandans were people who were “very grateful for, for everything they do have.” He found it gratifying that in the course of their work they had developed relationships with the people of the community and

I mean, it was the fact of, of, of companionship, I mean, that they felt, that we were safe in the community, and I mean, they trusted us with their kids, uh, and we were there to help, it was that grasp, I mean, infinitely just phenomenal.

Allen had a more difficult time dealing with requests for items or money that came from the young elementary school students they were teaching in the community schools. The requests were made in writing and came in the context of the relationship that the university students had established with the elementary students. Allen said that they dealt with this in their reflective sessions that were part of the program. These discussions provided a means for the students to talk through their reactions to the requests and to determine what they were, as a whole, going to do about them.

I mean, we talked about in our reflections as far as, um, what that meant to the students and how, um, how we felt, I mean, upon receiving the letters and being asked, um, for different things, whether it was new shoes, clothes off our back, or, or the tuition, I mean, tuition assistance.

A decision was made to let the local non-governmental organization handle the issue of tuition assistance because they would know the students' different aptitudes and “we felt that they were a much better route to take than us.” It was apparent from Allen’s travelogue paper that the students did leave certain items, particularly clothing items, behind when they packed for departure. What was problematic for Allen was dealing with the conflicting emotions surrounding the letters. He said

they didn’t write them, I mean, ‘please send money’ or ‘I need money’ or ‘you’re rich, I need money’, I mean, it was in such a tone in essence that, uh, it was

basically they were asking one friend to help another, which, I mean, which made it harder not to just pull out the cash that I don't have anyways but to help them in that sense.

Allen now displays a strong ethic of helping the people of the area.

Allen extends his thoughts on wanting to contribute to the Ugandan community that he worked in to the greater issue of supporting others in the world less fortunate than he is. He stated

I always was a penny-pincher but even more so today. Uh, I mean, we're just, I mean, it just seems like a lot of people are just too materialistic in what they do and have all the lavish goods, I mean, and not just the necessities, I mean, and trying to be able to save some of that, and if, if it's money that you don't need to spend, maybe send it to somewhere where it can actually be help wholeheartedly for someone else.

Allen agreed that he came home "definitely" more critical of American culture than before he participated in this program. He said his experience in Uganda

had taught me so much...it doesn't matter what you have, material-wise, and that's one thing we lost in America today, you could see, just be happy with what you got, and, and try to make the best of it. I'm going to definitely value the lesson there.

Allen said that as a result of his experience abroad that he was "definitely not as naïve as I was before." One of the most important things for him was learning different perspectives. "It gives you a whole new sense of, of realism" and "I hope to continue to...learn more perspectives growing up and getting older myself." Further, he stated "it makes you look more into yourself." For Allen, there was a particular difference in "being there," "conversing with them," and "visiting with each other." To him the most

powerful part of the learning experience was “getting on the same level of understanding...being able to understand each other.”

Allen said that he also learned “of the U.S. impact on the rest of the world and how other countries basically respond to it.” Following his return from the program, he looked for and was accepted into an internship in Washington D.C. where he was looking forward to working on policy issues and building upon what he had learned. He said that he would now “just try to be more conscious of how my particular actions do affect others.” His other future goals were to “be involved on campus” or do something on a local level that would “hopefully benefit others.” Allen admitted, “always, growing up, uh, I thought ...I wanted to help other people.”

Allen’s drive to help others grew out of serious medical problems in his late childhood and high school years. He had developed a rare bone condition that resulted in fifteen surgeries over the course of five years. It was a hardship on his family and, since he could not attend school regularly, his parents would drive him to various schools at a great distance from his home. After his recovery, he went to a community college and became a trained emergency medical technician. He knew, however, that he would stay in agriculture in some manner. Allen grew up on a family farm and said that, although he first had intentions of going back to the family farm, he realized he was not in the best physical condition to run the farm after his father retired. So he asked himself, “where could I be the most good or be the most help and grow from that, so that’s, I mean, easily why I’m going, ultimately coming to college, and then participating in like this.” Allen saw the program, and studying abroad in general, as connected to his past and growing out of it, and as a necessary step toward his future.

At the end of the interview, Allen shared a story about an incident in Uganda. It turned out to be his most emotional experience in Uganda.

With the comrades that we had from Makerere University, uh, we were walking actually to...school, which was about a mile, mile and a half walk, uh, I mean, nice and short there, but it was just as we were walking along, actually one of the students reached up and held my hand, which, in America, I mean, we're so isolated, I mean, isolated to our personal bubble... and I mean, just walking, didn't think of it, I mean, and then I just, I mean, 'why do you want to hold my hand' type of thing? But it's, and, uh, afterwards, once we got to school, Rob Bender actually pulled me aside and said, do you know what he just did? And I, I go, uh, yeah, I mean, if it was a sense of safety or security? He goes, well, I mean, that's definitely a sign of, of friendship right there, I mean, of trust.

Rob Bender was a staff member of Iowa State University who was with the group in order to film the activities of the program. Allen shared how he made sense of what had happened and how he realized

you did see that a whole lot in Uganda, of hand-holding...I mean, a lot more in guys than maybe you see ladies here or young gals, and it's, it's just a different sense of that, too, uh, I mean, whether, it doesn't mean which background you come from, I mean, and, and when you trust each other, that's, I guess that's just one of the ways to show it there, yeah.

After a long pause he said, "yeah, who would have thought." It was apparent that Allen was quite humbled and moved by the experience. Although he did not specifically state such, he may still communicate with the Ugandan university student. Allen had previously said "I feel always I'm going to have a connection with Uganda," and I think that he will.

Unlike any other form of learning, Allen said of study abroad "it sticks with you so much." The experience definitely stuck with Allen and became a major part of his life

story. That's probably because of, as Allen would say, "the awesome opportunity that it is."

Johnny

Johnny's study abroad experience was in a semester group program in Australia. He was directly enrolled as a study abroad student at the University of Newcastle and lived in an off-campus apartment with three other Iowa State University students. Another student from Iowa State University lived in the same apartment building as did other Americans plus Swedish and German students.

Because Johnny worked in the Study Abroad Center, I was aware prior to the interview that in Australia he lived right next to the beach, had learned how to surf, and spent a great deal of time surfing during his time there. Through the process of my discussions with Johnny, which were some of the longest in the interviews I conducted, I learned that the experience had greater and more complex meanings for Johnny and that living next to the beach and surfing, which had been his initial goals prior to studying abroad, were embedded in childhood memories. In making sense of his study abroad experience, Johnny situated the experience within the greater context of his life and within the context of his own self-identity.

Johnny described how his apartment in Newcastle was by the beach, and he explained the important this had for him.

I lived probably in the most optimal spot in my point of view in Australia, which was right across the street from a beach, and for me one of my highlights was definitely being able to just wake up in the morning and look out my balcony and see the ocean, being able to surf whenever I wanted to.

Johnny said about surfing that "I've always wanted to learn how to do it, so that was one of my main goals, so being able to surf was definitely, definitely a highlight." He was so determined to live by the beach and learn to surf that he specifically opted for off-campus

housing when he was applying to the program, which is not only a bit more difficult to arrange than on-campus housing but also students do not know where they are going to live until they arrive in Newcastle and search for an apartment. He explained how he then learned to surf.

I just kind of picked up a board and just kind of went. The first few times, it was rough because, uh, I was just getting thrashed and I got to the point of almost quitting, but luckily I didn't because once you pick it up, it gets better and better, so it was a good time.

Surfing had significance for Johnny beyond the mere fun of the activity. His discussion regarding the fun of it rested in a comparison of lifestyles between Australians and Americans and the role that surfing played as a "release" or as a necessary attention to wellness.

Yeah, to just live by the beach and have some of, you know, the best surf in the world in Australia. I think, I guess from watching movies and just having the surfing lifestyle, the laid-back lifestyle, and you know, to me it's just not so, uh, hectic as the American lifestyle where you get a job, work so many hours a week overtime, and all that stuff and, you know, figuring out healthcare plans, 401Ks, all that stuff, and it seems to me that these surfer guys are just laying on the beach and surfing every day. I envied it, and, um, I just, they're lucky to be, to just do that, I mean, to be able to just wake up and surf as well as live the lifestyle, you know. I mean, I've met some Australians over there who also have, you know, full-time jobs, but then they get to go, right after work, go to the beach and, you know, surf, and it's a release for them I think, and it's, for me, that would be my ultimate release from all the tension of work and, you know, the worries that come, the responsibilities of working, to just be able to go out there and just...

Johnny revealed why this idea was particularly appealing to him. He boldly stated “I’ve always been fond of the ocean. I’m an ocean person.” This struck me as a little odd since I knew that Johnny was from Iowa, so I questioned how this was the case. Johnny explained that although he was from Iowa, he was actually born and raised for his first eight years of life in the Philippines on an island. Johnny went on to talk about how his mother had begun to date his stepdad when Johnny was really young, and they would go to the ocean with him. He said, “I loved it as a kid, so coming to Iowa was, like, oh.... so then I’ve always been itching to live by the beach again.” He talked about surfing as a family activity in Australia. “I saw students who were supposed to be in school, and they were on the beach with their families.” He found that he could relate to this, and he had admiration for the Australians. “I was just imagining, I mean, it’s probably because it’s such a beautiful day, and they’re probably just more laid back and said, well, let’s go to the beach today as a family.” Johnny said that surfing was one of the main reasons he chose this particular program over others. Additionally, he discovered that the University of Newcastle was strong in engineering and offered a wide selection of courses in his major, so this program was a good fit for him academically.

Johnny made other comparisons between Australian and American lifestyles, and for the most part these comments were centered around a contrast between “laid back” and “hectic.” He also felt that Australian students were very friendly and outgoing. He said, “I found that they’re more talkative than, than some Americans...they came up to me in class and started talking to me about, you know, hey, do you want to join our group.” He said the students “were just generally really nice” and that “they just wanted to know everything about American culture...they were interested in me and in asking questions.” Also, in the shops that he went to in town, “the people were always friendly.” Through Johnny’s conversations with Australian students and other international students, he said he learned “the way other nations view us.” He said the Australian

students “automatically think you’re rich because you’re American.” He assured them that this was not the case. Johnny also said “they talk about how Americans are cocky and how they’re, they don’t think about other people.” He commented further on this:

some people do view us as Ugly Americans, which is crazy to me because I didn’t think we were before I had left the United States. You know, I didn’t think about how we’re cocky and, I guess, well, confident.

In contrast, he said, “when the Australians have a conversation with you, it’s a very soft conversation.” He explained

when, like the tone-wise, it’s not yelling, it’s not screaming. When I thought about it, I go, I go to my friends, you know, I go talk to my friends, we go to a bar or something, it’s yelling and yelling and yelling. We go to a bar in Australian, it’s small conversation, it’s quiet, it’s outside, you know, it’s not screaming, it’s not as loud, I’d say.

Johnny also spent some time in New Zealand and Fiji on his way to Australia, and of these two other cultures he emphasized that they were even more laid back: “they’re on ‘island time,’ they’re on their own time.”

Johnny was conflicted in his thoughts about these cultural differences. On the one hand, he admired that Australians were more laid back. He “envied it” and he had, in part, sought to live that lifestyle when he chose to live by the beach and spend time surfing. On the other hand, he surmised, “it didn’t seem to me that they were as motivated as we are to get out there in the real world, get a career going.” Of Fijians he similarly commented, “I admired them for it, for being able to live a happy lifestyle living with, you know, with what they had, which was nothing much” and “I could definitely survive living like this.” Yet for Johnny there seemed to be a tradeoff with what he valued in his American lifestyle. He concluded

I think it's got both pros and cons. You know, they've got, they never, I don't see them being as stressed as we are, or as Americans are, in terms of like the professional world and having responsibilities and all that stuff, but I don't see them having that, but also, you know, as far as having money and all that stuff, being wealthy, I don't, I perceive that we would advance in that regard over them. For Johnny, the ability to experience a different lifestyle was, in the end, only temporary. "I don't know if I would want to stay, but I can do it for a little bit."

A part of the study abroad experience that was important for Johnny was travel. In addition to visits to New Zealand and Fiji, he traveled the east coast of Australia and went to Whitsunday Islands, Frazier Island, and the Great Barrier Reef. Equally important were the activities associated with travel. He was proud that he had surfed, gone scuba diving, and camped. Johnny talked a great deal about his experience in Fiji and about how he was invited to drink kava with some local Fijians. This is apparently an invitation that is not usually extended to tourists, though Fijians will typically perform traditional ceremonies for tourist crowds. Johnny may have been asked to sit and join them because he is dark-skinned, he might pass as a local, and they may have thought that he was not a tourist. Having been invited to do this had really made an impression on Johnny, and he felt fortunate to have such an experience. He thought that what was important in learning another culture was "being there."

To actually be in a group of people and talking to them, you know, and to me that's hands-on and, you know, being there, that's what it means to be, you know, experiencing other cultures, not, not reading it from a book or watching a video on Fiji or something like that.

Another part of the experience that had a significant impact on Johnny was a course he took on Australian Aborigines.

Educationally, um, getting away from Iowa State's rigorous curriculum in engineering was amazing. I got to take a course, the aboriginal studies course, which is completely different from what I was used to. Um, the course was about the aboriginal people of Australia, and we got to go outside, and he would tell us stories about the, the culture of the aboriginal people, and I thought that was just amazing to me, being outside and, uh, you know, learning about different plants and...we went outside on campus. The actual aboriginal building, actually, is unique in that they had artifacts and all that sort of study and just the landscape of it was amazing, and they had a huge lawn for it, and then that was where, the classroom was outside basically... so it was interesting, very interesting.

Johnny went on to talk extensively about Aborigines, their traditions and history, perspectives that white Australians had of them, and the current problems with discrimination against them. He talked about how he was able to then apply this knowledge during his time in Australia as he began to notice Aborigines, and he began to see many of the things that had been discussed in class.

Johnny's experience was not just filled with fond memories. He also had some bad memories. He had been very upset when his best friend was seriously assaulted one night:

There's one story that does stick out in my mind that is, I wouldn't say, it's a highlight, but it's not a good highlight. Um, we actually, a few friends of mine got into a scuffle with some Australian guys. It was a Wednesday night, and I remember because Wednesday nights are pretty popular to go out for college students over there, and I was at home. I had just got into reading all the Harry Potter books, so I decided to stay in one night and just finish this one book, because one person had a copy, and we were borrowing it, and it was my turn to give it up in a few days, so I wanted to finish it, so I stayed in Wednesday night,

and then I get a phone call from one of my good friends who's Swedish, and he says, uh, a couple of our friends were getting jumped down the street from us coming home from the bar. A couple guys were coming home from the bars, and must have recognized my friend who was American, who was actually walking down with a girl. And the guys, I believe the story was, I wasn't there for when it began, but the story was that the guys started, you know, trying to talk to the girl, they were trying to walk away, and the guy is like, leave her alone, all this stuff, and the guys just hit my friend, and so that started it all. And so I got a phone call, I go down there, and when I get there my friends are all beat up, like they were bleeding, some of them were knocked out, and it was, you know, I had someone call the police, all that stuff. The most frustrating part about it is, the guys took off, and nobody knew exactly what they looked like because it happened so fast, and the guys were gone. Nothing every happened with it except my friends went to the hospital and all that stuff. But that's one of the things just stuck out in my mind that I just remember...he's one of my good friends. He's actually a guy I went to Puerto Rico with and who I'm going to Europe for two months with. One of my really closest friends, so I was really upset when I saw that he, when I, I was running to the scene, and I could see from a long way these guys just, you know, punching my friends and kicking them and all. The worst part was, it was two guys and, I believe, two girls, and these two guys were just absolutely massive, they were huge.

Johnny spent a great deal of time in telling the story, and he provided a great deal of detail. It was obvious that this incident had made its impression on him, since he continued to remember it in such vivid detail nearly three years later.

To Johnny's credit, he was willing and able to put this incident into perspective. In a discussion on the topic of what he thought about Australians he referred back to the incident adding

the one thing I didn't like is obviously the one incident with my friends...getting in a fight. I didn't like the fact that that happened, but I mean, that can happen anywhere, I think, in the world, so I wouldn't say that's just Australians, so... I don't know, I don't, I really didn't find much that I didn't like about Australians, I thought they were awesome.

Overall, Johnny was positive in describing his encounters with people in all of the cultures he visited, and he asserted the importance of learning about others who are different from oneself.

Johnny repeated numerous times during the interview that his experience studying abroad made him more "open" or that it "opened me up." He also discussed this in the context of his family, who he saw displaying attitudes that did not make sense to him based on his family's own ethnic background.

Oh, it definitely got me more open-minded about a lot of things, you know. Um, it was crazy, because I know that I lived in a different culture when I was younger, but then once I came to America I got so, so into the American culture that I think it kind of closed up a little bit on other cultures. In my, you know, family, we're pretty diverse, but I would hear my parents, you know, talk about how they didn't want my sister dating an African-American or something like that, and I was like, it's just ridiculous, Dad, I mean, my mom's Filipino and all that stuff, but it seemed to me like there were a few racist jokes going around toward African-Americans in my family, and just kind of like, I wouldn't say that it closed, you know, closed my mind on a few things, but it definitely got me thinking things that I shouldn't have been thinking, and once I got out of the United States it just

opened me back up, you know, thinking it's, it's so stupid to compare people and to judge people for, uh, the color of their skin or a different culture or different lifestyle, and so I definitely, studying abroad definitely opened me back up in terms of other cultures and, you know, letting in other cultures, so that's the way I thought.

Johnny may well have had a non-prejudiced perspective before studying abroad, but the experience seemed to have really instilled in him a commitment to it. Now, also, people and attitudes that he witnessed around him could be reinterpreted with new meaning based on the real experiences and encounters with people that he had. His perspective on his own identity and the shaping of his own identity were molded further by the experiences abroad. This becomes particularly clear in his description of his relationship with his roommates and the attitudes that they demonstrated.

So, yeah, so studying abroad definitely, I would say, opened me up more, more willing to talk to, you know, other people. My roommates, they're, they're always talking about Asian people and how, which just baffles me because I'm, like, what do you think I am? You know, they're like, Asians are so weird, they all stick to their groups, and stereotyping them, and I'm like, you guys, why are you talking like that in front of me, you know? I'm Asian, too. So, definitely being here and thinking about it, you hear that stuff, and you kind of... The group that I hang out with, you know, they stereotype and all that stuff, so here you hear it, you start to close your mind around a few things, and just going abroad definitely, you know, meeting new people, opening up to new things, it was amazing.

Because Johnny feels that he has experienced a world with great diversity and because he now more clearly sees how that great diversity is often misunderstood and misinterpreted, he finds these incidents not only displays of prejudice but also nonsensical, almost comically, in their basis in profound misunderstandings of diversity.

Johnny not only developed a renewed understanding of his own identity but also emphasized other areas of his personal development that resulted from his experiences abroad:

Personally I definitely gained a lot more independence, more than I was when I was at Iowa State. Before I went, I would always call my parents asking, you know, for money because of, well, I never really managed it well here because I was, I was kind of taking life for granted when I was at Iowa State. My first time being away from home, I was, I was, um, to say the least, I partied a lot my freshman and sophomore year, because just the new freedom was just amazing to me, and then once I, you know, when I went to study abroad I realized, you know, I'm growing up here, I don't, you know, I need to actually focus on the things that are important, and so I, I, time management was a huge thing over there. The courses were set up where the grades are heavily dependent on the final and, um, I didn't have very many assignments, and so I had to set time to actually study, you know, and so that way, in that way I did some, I was a little bit better at managing my time, but also, um, independence was just a huge thing and self-reliance, a huge, huge part because of the fact that I had to find my own housing over there, not having a place to live for a couple of weeks and, you know, trying to find a place to live for six months and all that stuff and trying to achieve my goal of living next to the beach. Once, once I did that, I just, you know, I knew that I could pretty much handle, you know, anything. If I can live thousands of miles away, away from my parents, and find housing and, you know, be able, you know, the ending result, you know, living where I wanted to live and getting to experience all that, now that I think about it, you know, I definitely grew up a little bit over there, so, um, some things I learned, I guess, I just kind of got more independent when I was there.

His statements present wonderfully detailed rationales for his personal transformation. None are, however, more powerful than when he made a contrast between who he considers himself to be now and who he would have been if he had not studied abroad.

My life would be completely different, I think, if I did not study abroad. I would, I would have already graduated. I would be in the professional world. I would be stressed out. I would, you know, I would not, I would definitely be not as open as I am in terms of really talking to people and stuff like that, and I definitely, I would be independent, yes, but I think I would be less, I wouldn't be as close to my family as I am, because I realized while I was abroad, you know, how much my parents and my family meant to me. Being away from my niece, not being able to see her more because I was abroad, and stuff like that, it just made me realize how important my family is to me. I think if I would have not been abroad, I definitely wouldn't be as close as I am with my family, so, or I wouldn't care as much about, you know, seeing my nieces or seeing my brothers and sister, if I would have not studied abroad. I think I would have been a different person, definitely, um, and I just, I just think I wouldn't have all this wealth and all this stuff that I attribute to my personality. I wouldn't be as outgoing as I would be, I would probably be a rigid person, I would say.

The contrast brings into relief the impact of his experiences. For Johnny, the value in the experience strikes at a very personal level. He sees the experience as defining who he is as a person.

When taken in its totality, the study abroad experience for Johnny was a learning experience on many different levels. He was so passionate about its value that he almost could not find words to express his feelings and thoughts, with the exception of the following regarding how it is “so much more”:

I think the benefits you gain from studying abroad, personally, professionally, academically, it just outweighs anything else, cost, you know even if it delays your graduation for a semester, being away from your family and friends, stepping out of your comfort zone, it just, it just outweighs what you gain from all that...what you gain from going abroad is just so much more.

Alivia

Alivia participated in five different study abroad programs during her time at Iowa State University. Her first program was a short-term program to Nigeria. Three programs were exchange programs in which she was directly enrolled at a foreign university. In these three cases, the programs required more independence since no other students from Iowa State University were in the programs. These programs were in Sweden, Germany, and Turkey. Her final study abroad experience was an internship program in Germany. Each experience was different, and all added to her perspectives on study abroad in different ways.

One of the strongest themes that emerged from interviews with Alivia was that these experiences were “difficult.” Even after the first challenging experience in Nigeria, however, Alivia continued to choose programs that tended to present more difficult situations than other programs she might have chosen. Another theme in Alivia’s interviews was her great satisfaction and sense of accomplishment in meeting challenges. The two themes are directly related and seem to account for her continued quest to choose programs that both required more independence and had the potential to present more difficulties.

In Nigeria, difficulties stemmed in part from the greater culture difference. Alivia admits, “I was lucky to have my friend with me, so I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't been with someone, but I knew I was not prepared at all for the culture shock of it.” This big step into a different culture was all the more dramatic because it was her

first program abroad, with the exception of a two-week trip to Spain in high school; she had just completed her first year at Iowa State University, and she was just 18 years old. Adding to the problem was that she did not know much about the culture and did not know the language. This resulted in her often not understanding what was happening around her. “I was like, okay, like I had no idea what was going on. And that happened a lot. That was like a recurring thing, me not having any idea what was going on.” There was also the sheer intensity of the experience at times even though it was short-lived. Alivia remembered two weeks spent in a school dormitory.

I stayed with them, and that was actually very intense because, I mean, there was no escaping and getting any alone-time at all. People were constantly coming up, asking me questions, and they thought it was so cool that I was staying with them, but they were so confused, like, ‘why does she have to sleep under the mosquito net?’ ‘Why does she drink so much water?’ They would all be, like, whispering and stuff, and then I’d be, like, ‘you can ask me questions,’ and then they’d be, like, ‘ah’, and they’d like ask me all sorts of things, and um, yeah, I got to know them really well. And that was fun, but it was also very stressful.

During this time, only Alivia and one other American student were there, so they had become the focus of attention. This greatly added to the level of stress and the intensity of this time that Alivia commented on.

Alivia felt somewhat limited in the ability to really learn about Nigerian culture because she and her friend were not integrated into the culture and were singled out for special treatment.

We actually got a lot of like special treatment and stuff there, so that was actually kind of more difficult to learn about that culture than you would think it was, because, you know, they put you in the nicest hotel, they gave you nice dinners, you were invited to special events, we were like at this event where the president

of Nigeria and like went to a presidential dinner. Like, that doesn't happen to normal people on like a normal experience, like normal study abroad things. Even though the special treatment probably helped in terms of dealing with the cultural difference, it also actually added to Alivia's sense of anxiety and therefore contributed to the difficulties of the experience. She recalled how "every morning they would deliver me a bucket of hot water, which was actually very special, too, because normally no one got hot water, you know, but they'd give me a bucket of hot water to shower with." Although grateful, it made her feel uncomfortable. She went on to explain

Well, you know, you feel bad about it at first, because you see that not everyone is getting this treatment, but then, if you refuse it, it's way worse. If you were like, no, no, I don't need that, they'd feel really offended, so it's much better to just take it and besides, I mean, you know, even a luxury to them is like, you know, still really the culture shock to you, and so, you know, you just kind of take what they give you.

Alivia did end up learning about Nigerians, but she and her friend had to make special effort to do so. She was able to have some open conversations with other local people who they would encounter.

So yeah, they had a lot of special treatment, but what we would actually do to kind of like get ourselves into the outside world of that was that we would have like breaks in the afternoon and sometimes just like walk around in the different areas, see where people lived, see what people were doing all the time, and so, um, there were some people, I remember I met a girl in the hotel we were staying at, because everyone has to do like civil service in Nigeria, and a lot of the people end up serving at like hotels and stuff, I'm not really sure how that's a civil service, but apparently it is, and so there was this one girl, and she worked at the hotel. She was doing her year of civil service, and she would, she like took me

down to her like living quarters in her room and like told me all about her family and stuff like that, and we'd talk about, like, politics and like whatever else they had questions about, because there was a couple of young people that were working in the hotel like that, so at night sometimes we'd just go and talk with them about it.

In the final analysis, Alivia probably did learn more about the culture than may have been expected in a program of this type and within the limited four weeks spent in the country.

Alivia described what she learned about the lifestyle of some of the Nigerian people they met. She made comparisons to an American lifestyle that now appeared negative in contrast. Alivia's general assessment of Nigerians and her feelings about them were revealed in the contrast.

In Nigeria, I thought the people were absolutely wonderful and amazing because, um, lots of these people hardly had anything in comparison, like, here we have our, you know, our TVs, piles of food, you know, every luxury you can imagine, and we take it all for granted, and like, then I'm in Nigeria, and like we would visit some of the houses of our students sometimes, like a couple times we got to go see where they lived and stuff, and like, and like first of all, like, they have, you know, next to nothing of what we have, you know. Like one house I remember they had dirt floors, there was 12 kids, and like, you know, the girl, the student, she was the oldest one, so she was practically like a mother to a lot of these, like, kids, and just like very like what we would think of as horrible living conditions, but at the same time, like, like I think they were really happy, like more happy than a lot of the people that have all this stuff that we have here. And like they would, they were so generous, too. They would try to give us things, like we one time helped out with this like local reading group in this like little neighborhood. They were like, oh, we'd love to have you come to our little

reading group, and like we read, the kids read books, and they're doing this like little play right now that they're reading. We're, like, okay. So we go there and just like all these kids, and um, you know, they really don't have a lot of things at all, and here we're like at the reading group, and we're getting ready to leave, and they tried to give us two of their copies of this book that they're reading, and we're like, we can't accept this, you know. You can't give us your books, you know. This is your, you know, you only have like five copies, you know?...Just the fact that people are so generous and they have so little, and like here people have so much but are so not generous like that. So, I had a very good impression of the Nigerian people. I, everyone, everyone was very, very, very welcoming and very generous and friendly, and like I said I never felt uncomfortable in any of the situations, and I think that says a lot, because it's by far the poorest country I've ever been to.

Alivia was left with positive feelings toward the Nigerian people. Learning this from her experiences in Nigeria made this short-term program a very meaningful study abroad experience.

The difficulties of her exchange program in Germany resulted from the fact that she was by herself, and the nature of the program was such that there was no support network of any kind. She concluded, "I think the summer I was in Germany was when I really learned how to be independent." This was compounded, again, by not knowing the language. "When I was in Germany the first time, I didn't speak any of the language, I was in a town that wasn't touristy at all." Alivia described why she felt the experience was so difficult.

I had a lot of problems trying to get acclimated. I had to do things like open a bank account and, um, what else, I had to go to these, like, all this bureaucratic stuff I had to go to, this foreigners' office thing that we had to, like, register and

stuff, but like none of the people there spoke English even though it was the foreigners' office, and so it was very confusing. I never knew what I was doing. I would have my mentor, my Ph.D. student, like, write down what I needed to, like, have at these places, and I would, like, point to things on this piece of paper, and they tried to tell me what I needed. It was just very, very, very complicated, and like, there were many times the first couple weeks where I was, like, near tears because I, like, didn't really have many friends. Like, my mentor was great, though, but like she was really busy with her research and stuff, and like there was only one other student in the RISE program that was in my town, but he didn't arrive until a month after I got there, so I was like pretty much on my own for a month, and like, you know, it was just, you know, dive right in, and, um, try to survive and find fun stuff to do. So it was pretty difficult that first month.

The end of the first month in Germany seemed to mark a turning point for Alivia, and she developed a great sense of confidence.

I felt a lot better after I got done with that first month. I was, like, oh, well I can do anything now, because I just survived this month without really knowing anyone, and I don't need any German, and I found some fun stuff to do.

Alivia interpreted the experience in terms of fulfilling her quest to challenge herself. She said "sometimes it is really fun, but like other times it's more difficult, and I guess I really enjoy that challenge."

The most challenging program for Alivia was the program in Turkey. This was her fourth study abroad program in a new country before she returned to Germany for her final internship program. She describes that one of her biggest problems was "getting used to sticking out." Alivia is blonde, blue-eyed, very fair skinned, and tall, making blending in impossible. She contrasts her sense of sticking out in Turkey with sticking out in Nigeria. "Like in Nigeria, I stuck out, but it wasn't, I never felt threatened by

sticking out. I never, never really felt uncomfortable with it. In Turkey, I really felt uncomfortable with it, and so that was a difference.” She explains further: “people would say things to me, and you could tell that they were only, you know, you never knew what their intentions were pretty much, so it was very, it was very, um, it was very stressful a lot of times.” Describing the contrast, she said, “But like when I was in Africa, I always felt like, yeah, people stared at me because I was foreign, but like they were more like in awe of me. A lot of people had never seen a white person before.” Whereas, in Turkey, “like in Turkey people would refuse to help me...they would just kind of like ignore you...everyday things were very, very difficult in Turkey.”

Alivia found encounters with men in Turkey to be the most stressful interactions that she had with people.

Guys would follow you around and all you could understand were words like “marriage” or, you know, try to be your boyfriend when you don’t even know who they are, like the busboy at the grocery store, you know, followed me home, tried to like hold my hand, just all these awful things.

In trying to deal with these situations, Alivia spoke with a fellow student who was from Australia but who was of Turkish descent. Alivia describes how she understood this behavior.

As far as like the harassment and stuff went, she just kind of told me that, that, that’s like the Turkish men’s perception is that, you know, foreign women are much more, you know, open to stuff like this. They can’t act like this toward Turkish women, but they think it’s okay to act like that to foreigners because they see things on TV, you know, they have the general stereotypes, I mean, about Americans especially, you know, the women are fast and easy or whatever, but they didn’t necessarily know I was American, they just had the general feeling

about foreigners in general and what they think is appropriate for foreigners versus Turkish women.

The explanation did not seem to really help Alivia to deal with what she described as continued harassment. She relayed several other instances.

I remember I was sitting on a bus on the way to the airport in Ankara, and like we had to pull into this bus station...I was just looking out the window, and then I like realized that there's a group of like ten men like staring at me, and as soon as they saw me look at them, they started making all these like vulgar gestures and stuff, and I was like, you know, what did I do, you know? I'm just sitting here, I'm looking around like everyone else on this bus, and stuff like that would happen all the time.

She also described an incident when she traveled to Cyprus in which teenage boys were mocking her. She comments, "northern Cyprus was actually even worse than being in Turkey in terms of treatment of women." These kinds of incidents became so overwhelming that at one point she said, "I just like snapped, and I started like screaming at him and stuff, and I was just why are you doing this, leave me alone." Alivia was never able to find a strategy to successfully deal with these situations or to make sense of them. In the end she was left with "very, very negative, like extremely negative impressions of Turkish men."

The only study abroad experience that Alivia did not refer to as difficult was her program in Sweden. She was in Sweden for six months, a time she said was "the most amazing experience of my college career." She described how she had a lot of friends in Sweden. "It was really satisfying for me to have all these friends from all these different countries." But what really was different about Sweden was that her best friend was a student from Sweden. Alivia described all the kinds of things that she did with her.

She showed me all sorts of stuff. She would take me to her favorite places in the city. We'd meet up with her friends, you know. She took me to her parents' apartment in the city. She also took all of us, all of our exchange student friends, it was like, you know, all these exchange students, and she took all of us to her parents' like summer house. They had like a little house outside of Stockholm a couple hours. She took us all there, and they fed us traditional Swedish food, and yeah, just like...so she was my main source of Swedish culture, I would say.

Yeah, and she would just take me to all these things that I never even like thought about doing, like we'd go like second-hand shopping, and I never would have done that on my own. I would have no idea where to go, and, um, she'd show me like cool movies in English. I would have no idea where any of that stuff was without her, so that was my main source of culture there.

The importance of having this connection with someone in the culture and country became clear in Alivia's following explanation: "I think the people, just the people that you meet, and I, I think it's really like being pulled into the culture, almost, like you have to find that way in." Of her Swedish friend she said, "she was, like, 'come on,' you know, 'let's go learn about,' you know, 'let me show you this and this,' and she really, like, pulled me into the whole, the whole culture I felt like." As a result, Alivia concluded, "I feel like when I was in Sweden I was much more part of the culture than a lot of other places I've been to."

Alivia provided an example of some of the "Swedish stuff" that she would do with her Swedish friend that helped her to develop her understanding of the culture:

I know it's not too unnatural like to sit at a café, but I mean in Sweden there's all these, like, outdoor cafés, and I'd always wonder why are these people sitting outside? It's so cold outside. And it's so cold that they'll put blankets outside, like, I'm just like, how crazy, when it's this cold we just stay inside. What are

they doing? And then with my friend, we'd like end up, and I'd be sitting there with my blanket on, and I'd be like, oh, I'm doing it! But why am I doing this, though? And I'm like, oh, because it's such a great atmosphere out here, that's why I'm doing it, because you can have these drinks here that you can't have at home, like this yummy chocolatey drink, not really hot chocolate, you know, something different, and you'd be, like, oh, I'm having this, and these little, you know, Swedish little treats, and all these good friends out here, and that's why we're all sitting outside, because everyone does it, and it's just a good time when you sit outside.

Even though Alivia was more limited in learning the culture of many of the other countries she studied in other than Sweden, she strongly felt that she had learned a great deal in general by studying abroad. She discussed the major things that she learned.

Tons of things, you know, all the typical things, you know, how to be independent and how to survive. I mean, I learned about different cultures, different languages, you know, how to work with other people from different countries, you know, just tons of stuff, all the normal stuff that people can learn, but I don't know, I think working together with other, with people from different cultures was something really important that I learned. Like, I've been put on group projects with people from all different countries, or like when I was in Turkey I was in, um, I took some engineering classes, and I was the only exchange student in the classes, and they were all Turkish students, and you had to do group projects. You have to, you know... Here when I'm doing my engineering classes, I have a group of people I do my homework with, you know, we work together, we do labs together, you know, we just work together a lot. There, you know, they do that together with themselves, but like I was always on the outside so I had to learn

kind of how to, how to you know, help, get help from other people, how to work with them, and sometimes that worked better than other times.

Personal development was at the center of Alivia's learning, and the two aspects that she specifically lists, "how to be independent" and "how to survive," are directly connected to how she interprets the entirety of her experiences abroad in terms of challenging herself and succeeding in overcoming challenges.

Alivia talked about why this kind of learning can not occur in other ways. "You never really like, it's not even possible to get the real feeling about a culture without actually going there." She talked about the importance of "being there" and living in another culture.

I think to learn another culture you have to like submerge yourself in it, and you know, eat the food, talk to the people, try to speak the language, you know, try to live your life like the people around you are living their lives, and I think sometimes I've been successful and then I think sometimes I haven't.

Alivia acknowledged that to learn about culture, one had to "submerge" oneself. Further, she was completely aware of when this was absent from her experiences abroad. By seeing both manners of being in another culture, one in which one was submerged and one in which one was not, she had a clearer understanding of culture learning than if she had only had one or the other of these experiences.

When Alivia explained why she thought other university students should study abroad, most of the rationale was, again, on personal development.

Because college is a time to figure out who you really are, and I think when you stay in the bubble of your comfort zone you can't really figure out who you are. Like for me to do that I had to go places that I was outside my comfort zone, because then, that's when you spend the most time with yourself, that's when you really start to figure out who you are as a person, at least for me, that's what really

helped, and I guess maybe that's why I was so addicted to it. I just loved, you know, like going and being on my own, you know, and it's just me out there helping me to survive.

She related her reasons why other students should study abroad to her own experiences. Her reason for the value of study abroad rests in personal development, specifically independence and accomplishment. Alivia explained why these aspects of personal development were so important to her.

I don't know, it's hard to explain. It's just a really satisfying feeling, that even, even though it's, I don't want to say painful but it's very uncomfortable sometimes...but it's just so satisfying when you're done with it, and just the thought, to think about all the things that I've done and that, how like, you know, lots of people could never do that. It's so satisfying for me to know that I've gone and done stuff like this, and I, I don't know exactly what it is...I just love being challenged.

The interpretation of overcoming challenge continued to form the major means that Alivia developed for making sense of her experiences. This interpretation allowed Alivia to feel enormous pride in having studied abroad.

Diana

Diana participated in a short-term service-learning program in Peru. The program had 15 student participants from Iowa State University accompanied by a faculty member from Iowa State who served as program director. The academic part of the program was focused on Spanish language learning, and the duration of the program was eight weeks. Students were enrolled in a Peruvian academic institution in Arequipa and then they participated in a service-learning project. For their service-learning project placements, students were divided into groups of two or three. This program was Diana's first study abroad experience; however, she went directly from this program to Costa Rica where

she was an exchange student at a Costa Rican university for a semester, but it was the program in Peru that received the focus of attention in our interview.

Diana's experiences in Peru proved to be particularly emotional for her. Through a happenstance event in their service-learning project, she developed a connection to a group of Peruvian indigenous women who had a profound impact on her. Throughout the interview, Diana struggled with finding words that could convey her thoughts. She presents a unique perspective on how meaning is derived from the experience of studying abroad. Diana was accompanied by two other students in her encounters with the women since the three of them were placed in the same service-learning project. I also had the opportunity to interview Erica, and her vignette follows.

Diana shared her experience with the women by first describing the initial plan for their service-learning project. The placement was in a small indigenous community on the outskirts of Arequipa.

The service-learning aspect was huge, because we got to, I mean...we ended up going into, like, this poor community...we sat and talked to these ladies who were knitters who kind of make, well they knit for their living pretty much...so, our, our goal, I mean, we ended up going and just kind of being with these women and like trying to learn about their history and stuff like that and in hope of helping them be able to sell their, their work, to like the United States or we wanted to help them create a better website, um, for their program so that people would be able to able to order on-line.

Since the Spanish language abilities of the students were limited and since the women's native language was Quechua, Diana commented that the project was difficult: "they'd talk, and we'd have no idea." So, she said, "we pretty much ended up, like, sitting with them and knitting and stuff like that."

After the students had been among the women for a few weeks, the women extended an unusual invitation to the students. This was completely unanticipated and had not been planned into the project or the program.

Eventually, after like sitting with them maybe for a week or two, they invited us to participate in, like, a celebration with them for the priest who had gotten the whole community together, and it was a huge community celebration that people had prepared, like, each of the knitters, like, the card-makers, all these different groups, prepared like a dance for this huge celebration, and they invited us even dance with them, so this ended up taking, like, maybe three weeks of, like, practice that we'd end up practicing for an hour and a half, two hours every day, and that, and this is actually when we really started getting to know the women and, like, bonded a lot more, and, like, that was the most, like, amazing thing ever.

Diana said one of things that was so unusual about the relationship was that they ended up being close to the women even when there was a language barrier because "like the dancing was really cool because, like, we were acting, like could show them stuff, we were, like, communicating just not through language, which was nice."

For Diana the most amazing part of the experience with the women was the day of the celebration. That day they performed the dance they had worked on for weeks with the women. Diana said "that celebration day was just like, it just felt like an enlightenment." She tried to explain what this meant and what it was that had happened that day. "Because we'd all worked so hard, and we were all nervous together." She explained how

it really just felt like, so amazing, like, afterwards, it was so much more of a connection between us, I thought, I mean, when you go through something with someone, and you're nervous, but not really nervous, but you're like a team or

whatever, and we really felt like a team then, and that really helped us, I think, later on, like the next week or two, when we were trying to, like, really talk to the ladies, like they would open up so much more, and like, um, it was like more of a conversation afterwards, it felt like, and that day we, like, blossomed and all, I guess.

Dancing together had forged a unique relationship between the students and the women. Diana concluded that “this dancing really progressed more that way than sitting and knitting would ever would.” She tried to reason why this was the case. “That day, like, you just feel like a team, like we’re helping each other” and “we’re all working together.” As a result of the connection that was forged with the women that day, Diana reported that one of the women had invited them to her house.

Although in Diana’s document she did not write about the dance, the photo she submitted showed her and one of the women at the dance in full indigenous costume. She mentioned this photo in the interview, and she appeared to be proud that this is the photo that represents her and her experiences abroad in promotional material.

She compared her experience to other students' experiences in the program.

I have a good friend that went down there, I think she would have wished she would have gotten more of the interaction with people, because she was working on a construction project, so it was kind of like, with like a couple of other guys, but they didn’t really talk that much.

She talked about the fact that she knew this was an unusual and unique experience. She considers herself fortunate to have had the opportunity to develop a connection with the women.

Diana also talked about the differing attitudes that she found among the other Americans who they encountered in Peru and also other students in the program. She said, “some people got it, some people didn’t.” She described how she felt about the

behavior of some of the other students in the program saying, “it just kind of frustrated me.” She said they “didn’t adapt to the culture as much, you know, or just didn’t adapt to the way of living...it’s just kind of stupid stuff, like...worrying about their hair...stuff that I just thought was meaningless at the time.” She said, “sometimes, it’s like, you have to really learn just to, like, get along and just be really flexible, and if you were going to be successful you’d just have to be, I guess...and work with people and make connections.”

Diana went on to discuss what she learned by studying abroad and what was involved in learning another culture. “To like learn another culture you have to be with that and experience, like, the daily life of someone in that culture.” She said of her experience abroad, “I guess it just opened up my eyes to, you know, other things going on in the world, other peoples’ lives, and getting, I mean, that’s really what it did for me, and like made me a lot more aware and wanting to work with those people from, you know, other places, I guess.” She said that the things she learned abroad “you can’t learn about it, like, in a magazine, you really have to, like, be there and experience it and talk with people, and I really just think it’s a lot about the people and, you know, their complexity and stuff.” Over a month after both of the interviews with Diana, she wrote to me wanting to add some further thoughts to her responses in the interviews. She commented again on what she learned studying abroad. Among her comments were “I learned a much simpler, slower paced way of life,” “I learned to be patient,” and “the style of living focuses more on being social and talking to friend and family...we are so much more fast paced and working toward objectives in the US and I think sometimes the social relaxation setting is compromised.”

It was apparent that Diana learned a great deal about culture in her program in Peru. In fact, she questioned the notion of Peruvian culture. “Peruvian. What does that mean?” Through her experiences in two different communities there, in Arequipa and in

the indigenous community, she recognized that it is “very diverse even in Peru...there are so many different aspects...and like where people are from.” She admits that much of her culture learning happened in the context of her host family. She said, “I guess I did spend a lot of time with them.” She said her host father “every day during lunch he would come, he’d come eat lunch with me...he’d tell me about stories of, I always wanted to know about the history.” Diana said “you hear a different perspective.” She also felt that in Peru “everyone seemed like, so, like, and just probably just so aware of everything going on in the world, and...some other places are so into our politics and everything going on.” She said, “It makes me feel, like, more ignorant...like I don’t know stuff about other peoples’ countries, like, I don’t know stuff...and you know, they know all this stuff about me.” When talking about her host family, Diana said,

they’re a lot more family oriented, um, lot, just generally know their neighbors, I mean, they knew everyone in their apartment building and were, like, friends with a lot of them, um, um, it’s, it, it just seems a lot more friendly, and...it just seems more, like, a community, a community friendliness, I guess, I don’t know, just to anyone.

She said “like how welcoming they are, really, I mean, and, I don’t know, and wish I was more like that.”

Diana thought that the most important things she learned abroad were to “get to know and relate to people in completely different worlds...seeing this whole other aspect of humanity, kind of, I guess, that was absolutely incredible, but I mean, so much to learn...and just how different lives can be.”

I had asked Diana in the first interview how she felt about the people she had met in Peru. Her reply was genuine. “I, I loved them.”

Erica

Erica participated in the same short-term service-learning program in Peru as Diana. The year before she had also participated in another short-term service-learning program in India. One year following the Peru program, Erica returned to Peru independently. She stayed with her host family from the program and volunteered in the community with the indigenous women who she had known the year before. Her perspectives are similar to Diana's, and both young women share the experience of the dance and the connection with the indigenous women. Where Diana's perspectives were more emotional, Erica's were more intellectual. Erica's perspectives add very thoughtful and eloquent comment on understanding the impact of a profound study abroad experience.

The key experience abroad for Erica, as for Diana, was the relationship with the indigenous women she developed through her participation in the dance. Erica stated, "the service-learning, the people we met, were certainly one of the highlights. They were just amazing people to get to know." She said that the service-learning project changed, and the focus became practicing and performing the dance. "We ended up not at all what we thought we'd be doing, but we got to know them through the process of learning a dance." She talked about how the relationship with the women developed through several weeks of practice with the women, "and then doing that with them, it just created a relationship that I hadn't expected at that point with my little bit of Spanish, and they were just amazing at getting to know the culture through them." Erica explained how their program director helped them to make sense of the shift in the service-learning project.

I think all of us were really struggling at first, not really feeling like we were doing anything, and you know, service-learning, you feel like you're going to go in and help people, and so, I mean, Naomi really put an emphasis on learning to

just be with people and that there's more than one way to serve, it's more than just building a house, it's also learning about people and, you know, like, recognizing their dignity as people.

Erica came to understand her participation in the dance with the indigenous women as her way to serve and to learn.

Erica described what transpired through several weeks as they practiced with the indigenous women for the dance performance.

It was such a process, it was great, but yeah, I mean, slowly through that, laughing together and everybody kind of messing up with certain things, and always when you make yourself vulnerable to people to tend to then make friendships, and so, I mean, but still at that point we didn't really feel like we were making that much progress, but then, um, it really did happen fairly suddenly, you know, just right before the dance...then the day of the dance we just felt such a sense of, you know, like we could take pride in what we'd done and just going out there and presenting to someone else. I think always when you find yourself on the same side, you know, trying to get something accomplished, it creates a bond that's different than trying to do something for someone or, you know, when you're doing something with someone it's just a really different relationship.

For Erica, the meaning of the experience rested in the transformation of their relationship with the women. They were doing something *with* the women and not *for* the women.

This change in the relationship became clearer in an incident following the dance performance.

I think one of my favorite parts is when we, um, we decided to do sort of a going-away party and, um, but there were other visitors that had come in, and we ended up cooking with the ladies and serving these other people together, and it was

really just such a neat experience after we'd gotten into sort of the idea of serving these women, we ended up with the women serving other people.

Again, it is her sense of being *with* the women that makes the experience profound.

The notion of "being with" is key to Erica because what is of importance rests in the experience. She explained, "I think just being completely, being absorbed in this experience, and completely immersed in it." Other ways to learn about another culture, even talking with people about their culture, is not like being there because "it doesn't challenge you the way it challenges you to actually live it and live in it and try to function." Erica contemplated what it was about experiences that made them a different way to learn. She concluded,

you're depending on people, um, I think that maybe that's part of it as well, um, because it's not just isolated, you know, I'm here and you're here and we're just kind of living, yeah, you need people there that are of a very different background, so I think that that's also part of the reason.

For Erica, the process of culture learning clearly takes place within the relationships and the connections with people of other cultures.

Erica talked about what she learned as a result of studying abroad.

I mean, always it does remove me further, you know, gives me more distance from my own perspective to be able to see how I'm seeing these things, um, and to try to take on a little bit more of what it feels like to not be an American in this heavily American-dominated world.

She described how "I think it's just helped me to, bit by bit, take on a perspective that's not the one I was born with and to be able to see things a little bit more in the way that they see them." For Erica, the scope of the world had changed. She stated,

it always seems smaller, you know you hear news about Peru, everyone is e-mailing me and calling to see if everything was okay when that earthquake

happened, and it just makes the world a smaller place. And I love that other people, that it's also affecting them because they know that I was there, and so it matters to them now.

Erica was able to articulate the complexities and the difficulties of culture learning:

I think that being down there a longer period I struggled more, I don't know, I kind of, I like to think of myself as someone who can just, you know, like take on this other mentality and, you know, I'm open to other cultures, but there are definite conflicts. One thing that's huge that I hadn't talked about is they talk about Peruvian time, which is, my host family missed an entire wedding because we were running so late. We didn't even make it to the wedding, we just went to the reception. It was incredible. Like I, I can't even fathom that happening in my family, like, it just would not happen. And so, at first I like to think, "Yeah, I'm open to this little bit more laid-back way of doing things" but then doing work with the women it was really hard for me not to think, you know, this is how things should be done. When I was talking about efficiency, I was thinking this. You know, we're so about efficiency, and that's the better way to do things, you know? And you start unearthing all these prejudices that have been built up over so much time, and it's really hard to see those, because I want to think of myself as a world traveler, open-minded, you know, and who doesn't isn't set in her own ways, but I mean, there's so much of that within you still.

For Erica, the process of learning another culture presents an internal intellectual struggle. She sees that there is great value in this process because this is what leads to self-evaluation, and it is in the midst of this that real change in perspectives take place, even though the process remains always incomplete.

The first time, like in the first few weeks, it was fine, you know, no big deal, but once you actually need to get something done, it was frustrating. And I suddenly was like, this is Peruvian culture, you know, like, and I think it's important to go through that whole process instead of just glossing over, you know, and then coming to terms and starting to examine your own values and, um, yeah, I think that it's, there's still a very much United States mentality built into me, but slowly chipping away at it, I guess.

She also acknowledged how difficult it was to maintain the transformation in perspective once she was back in her own culture. "It's hard coming back again, like I really value that, but it's so hard to put that into practice here, because so much is demanded of everyone."

Erica's perspectives depicted her position as a learner of culture engaged in a process that is ongoing. Through this realization, she was capable of recognizing her limitations.

I'm just learning...it's strange realizing that I will probably never really fully integrate into another culture, and that realization sort of, I don't know, maybe after a certain amount of time if I lived there long enough I could, but, um, it's, it's also just really hard, I don't even know what it would be to learn Peruvian culture, Indian culture even more.

For Erica, language learning plays a central role "because it's a different way of thinking." She came to understand that learning a culture took place on a more intellectual level than she thought before she studied abroad. "You know, I thought you could just start eating the food, getting to know the food and the dances and stuff, and you know, you got their culture down." But after her experiences abroad she realized "I think it's understanding, yeah, a mentality, because it is, it's just such a different [*sic*], and that's what I started to realize."

Erica is very explicit about the ways in which the process of culture learning is difficult.

I mean, your mind just starts unfolding. I remember in India it felt like we were just being, like my brain just crumbled, because so many things were being challenged that I'd always believed in, and it was so painful, but it also gives you the opportunity to begin to reconstruct, kind of...I think that it does just make me question things more, to see them in a different light, um, and opening your mind...it did make me begin to look at issues of faith and issues of, um, national identity.

For Erica, what was difficult were not situations or incidents but rather the mental struggle. Her values and convictions came into play and were turned over in this intellectual inspection. What was "painful" for Erica was a certain mental torment that she found herself in the midst of and that she had to come to grips with.

Erica offered a glimpse into the mental process that takes place in understanding a different cultural perspective. She removed herself from her own perspective and examined what holding a different one might be like.

This is something else that I thought of. I mean, I never really thought of what it would be to not grow up in the country that is dominating everything. You know, like, I'd never, I clearly am aware that that's happening, but I never thought of what, like, what that would do to your mentality as a person to not be on top your whole life. And even if you're not on top of this country, you know, like your country is on top, and these other countries receiving, and just muse about that one, and your country not mattering in the world, you know, not seeing your country on world news, and, you know, not belonging to this dominating power, it's clearly, you develop a different way of seeing things, I think. Um, and I don't know to what extent I could ever fully absorb or fully learn another culture

because of that. Um, and again, um, those are, I don't know, for me those are really hard things to admit, because I like to believe that, you know, you can understand people fully and stuff if you just put yourself in their shoes, but to what extent can we put ourselves in someone else's shoes?

In her own analysis, she brought the issue back to her own perspective but this time with the realization that it has shaped her perception. She locates herself within her own culture and understands the reality of the barriers to culture learning that this places around her. Finally, she resigns herself to the process and that there is value in the effort.

You know, there's a certain point where it is just sort of a mystery, you don't know what's happening, um, but I think, yeah, just continuing to have some sort of dialogue with people and learning about them and sharing, sharing their traditions with them is a really important thing, and experiencing them with them and not just kind of as like a tourist or something like that, you know, like doing it next to them and hearing what they say about it and different people just clearly, it varies from person to person so much, but just getting different peoples' perspectives and, um, listening is clearly something that's important to that in, you know, you get so used to just telling everything and talking all the time, but just listening to what people say and not just going in with your own preconceived notions, which is also difficult to do, I think.

Again, the words that Erica chose are important. She made a point of stressing "with them." This places her on the same level as another individual. This is the same way she described the dance with the women.

Erica was serious and thoughtful. It was apparent that she felt compelled to continue to engage in the mental wrestling she described. She also believed that all that she had learned invested her with a certain obligation.

I think it definitely gives me a certain responsibility, um, to be behaving as someone who has begun to realize some of these things and, um, who has had the opportunity to kind of take myself out of this and to see what's, what's hard for us to see if you haven't ever stepped outside of it.

Erica listed the following as important reasons why university students should study abroad:

Basically I think it's so important to begin questioning the things that you've just grown up your entire life assuming because, you know, I think we need more creative solutions for our world and they clearly don't all come from America, and I think that being exposed to all these other ways of thinking and doing things is going to really help people to start looking at, you know, the way that we do things and that there are other possibilities that you just had never considered and ways of living like slowing down and living in community, I think that's incredibly important, and I think, um, you know, all the things that we always talk about, you know, learning to be more responsible and independent and taking care of yourself and learning to be more flexible because things just don't go how you expect them to go and you don't have as much control when you're not on your own turf, so to speak, um, and I think that you, well, I personally gained a different sense of empathy, you know, like learning more about these people so you can begin to put yourself in their shoes. Um, and I think you develop the ability to ask more questions and to ask for help and to challenge your curiosity because you don't have someone that's always looking over your shoulder telling you to do these things, and so you kind of have to motivate yourself to be... Because you can learn every second while you're there. That's what I love about it, is that no matter who you're talking to you're learning something, and it's just

a matter of doing it, you know. There's absolutely nothing keeping you from learning those things.

I asked Erica how she envisioned that people who do study abroad then take this knowledge and these perspectives gained forward into the rest of their lives. She responded

I think it, it's going to manifest itself in a variety of ways, I think, and I think that certain effects are stronger in some people, and that other effects are stronger in the next person. Um, but, I would think that they'd be more productive citizens and more, um, better learners, I think, um, from having had a different experience of how you learn, um, not necessarily clearly, but I think that it helps to, yeah, to motivate you to learn more and just your curiosity, I think, is increased. And I think it will be, I think the effect will be a more global community, people feeling those connections that they never felt before. I mean, my sister is going to Cameroon now, and suddenly Chad becomes more important in my life that it was before, and things like that. It just, it's a completely different way of looking at the world, and I think that people will live with that perspective instead of a more isolated perspective.

For Erica, it was Peru that remained important in her life. She felt a particularly strong connection with the indigenous women. Erica shared an incident that occurred more recently and that followed her return trip to Peru: an unexpected telephone call from one of the indigenous women she knows. Erica's thoughtfulness and her sincere compassion for the woman were evident as she described the call and her reaction to it.

I got a phone call from one of the women, and it was a really hard experience, because she called and she was wanting me to help her immigrate to the United States, and this is one of the knitters, you know, who has no resources, is not, I don't, I don't know how she would even do it, and I don't know, there's no way

that she'd be granted it, the commission, and even if she got here I did not know what she would do, and it was just realizing that I go there and I'm welcomed with open arms and I'm so able to get by, and people are so helpful, and, like, if she were to come here, she'd be completely alone, and just what a stark contrast that was, um, and struggling to get by, you know, and she had that community there, and here she'd be without community, and it was just really staggering to think of it that way. I had never switched places with one of them to that extent, because I just don't even know where to begin to compare this, so that was really startling to think of it in that way...and if it was even a good move for her do that, because she had a family there, you know, kids...and just not knowing what, what her experience would be here, you know, that she probably would not have the experience she expected, and she couldn't speak any English and, you know, and just, I mean clearly there are people that have done that and have gotten by but, you know, away from her children all the way down in Peru, like, I just do not see how that could work out, and it was just so, so sad...I think come here to work and then...and then go back, I don't know what she, she clearly had not really been thinking the whole thing through, but she knew that my experience here had been so good and that I came from a wonderful country, but just realizing that her experience here would not be like my experience here, and so it was just really, really sad.

Summary of the Case Vignettes

The meaning that the students in the case vignettes made of their study abroad experiences derives from the unique characteristics each of the experiences embodies. Each student incorporated the meaning of the experience into his or her life in a different way. Unique characteristics of experiences were often presented by situations that were unplanned or unpredictable. That experiences are unique because of unplanned and

unpredictable events, in and of itself, is not surprising, but what is surprising in these cases is that it was often these unplanned and unpredictable events that ultimately defined the context for the entire experience abroad.

For Tara, meeting the couple that “found” her occurred by happenstance. Further, she was in the right place at the right time for this event because she was Catholic and sought refuge in a church in her time of need. The relationship with the couple shaped her study abroad experience and also shaped how she incorporated the experience into her life back home. Because she had attended meetings of the city council in Cork, Ireland with the women who found her, she sought a student leadership position when she returned to her home campus. Tara also now states that her primary objective in returning to Ireland in the future is to see the couple.

Allen understands his experience in Uganda as a step in the linear progression of his life. For Allen, his life is cast and governed by his desire to help others. This desire was shaped through relationships with medical professionals during his early battle with a serious medical condition. He was on the receiving end of help and now feels gratitude and a compulsion to, in turn, help others. Allen perceives Ugandans as particularly worthy of his help because he not only sees a great need in their communities but also sees in them personal characteristics that he admires. His connection with a Ugandan student provided a tie that binds him to Uganda.

Johnny perceives his study abroad experience as a return to the ocean. He defines himself as an “ocean person” with fond childhood memories of times at the beach. His self-identification as Filipino and Asian encompasses his study abroad experience. It also shapes his perceptions on culture learning. His focus is on an understanding of diversity, a diversity of perspectives and a diversity of ethnicity. His experience of being “open” allows for critique of those who are not, and he credits his study abroad experience for making him “open.” His culture learning is focused on Australian aborigines and native

Fijians, and he feels a particular connection to Fijians because he was invited to drink kava with them. Because of his own ethnic identity, he becomes an equivalent representative of diversity when he is back at home among the prejudices of friends and family.

Alivia's perceptions of her study abroad experiences are centered on the difficulties of being abroad and the personal challenge to overcome them. She derives great satisfaction from the ability to "survive" a difficult experience. The only study abroad experience she did not perceive as difficult was her experience in Sweden. This was her only program in which she established a strong relationship with a local Swedish student who was able to help her "find that way in."

For Diana, the interview was difficult not because she does not have the ability to express herself but because she could not easily find the words to describe what was an emotional experience for her. The dance became the cornerstone of her experience in Peru. The invitation from the indigenous women to participate in the dance for their community celebration could not have been planned or anticipated in her study abroad program. The experience affected her deeply and continues to shape her life. She wrote in her promotional document, "I realized the importance of focusing my future and career to helping those who are underrepresented."

Erica's experiences in Peru were also molded by the dance. Her perspectives on her experiences abroad and on culture learning are represented in terms of an intellectual struggle. As she learns more about other cultures, or more specifically about other perspectives in the world, she is forced to reevaluate her own perspectives, beliefs, and values. Equally, the limitations that she acknowledges exist for complete cultural knowledge make the quest for culture learning always incomplete. She continues in the struggle.

The case vignettes demonstrate the individuality of each study abroad experience. Characteristics that students brought to the experiences often played a large role in the unique course of each experience: Tara was Catholic, Johnny's memories motivated him to live by the ocean, and Alivia continued to choose study abroad programs that presented a challenge. Further, what students brought to bear in the experiences shaped the way that each student made sense of the experience and incorporated it into the greater context of his or her life: Allen's determination to help others, Johnny's self identity, and Alivia's satisfaction in overcoming a challenge. Each experience presented a unique configuration of elements. Yet, there are also themes that cut across the case vignettes in various ways. These themes are also evident in the other seven interviews that were not presented as case vignettes. Some themes are not shared equally by all students, and the patterns that the themes display in a comparative view presents some interesting distinctions between types of experiences and types of study abroad programs.

Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis is drawn from all 13 student interviews. In addition to the six student cases presented as case vignettes, the comparisons relied equally in the other seven student participants in this study. The additional seven students participants, by pseudonyms, and the programs they represent are

Abby: Semester group program, English language, direct enroll, Australia

David: Semester, language, direct enroll, Germany

Kathryn: Short-term program, language, faculty-led, Spain

Kent: Short-term program, service-learning, faculty-led, Uganda

Mandy: Semester group program, English language, direct enroll, Greece

Scott: Semester group program, English language, direct enroll, New Zealand

Shelley: Semester group program, English language, direct enroll, U. K.

(direct enroll means enrolled in regular courses at the host institution)

The comparative analysis allows for a look across all of the student cases and is based in the process of data analysis that sought to find common themes and overall patterns in the data. Many of the themes are based on “indigenous concepts and practices” (Patton, 2002, p. 454) and retain the original terms used by the student participants. Nine main themes that emerged from the student cases are

- Personal development
- Fulfillment of expectations
- Impact of the U. S.
- Travel
- People
- Open
- Limitations
- Being there
- Connection

In some cases the presence of a theme seems to be related to the type of study abroad program. For example, while personal development and travel were strong themes among students in programs other than service-learning programs, people are the focus of the experience for students who participated in service-learning programs. “Being open” and “being there” are themes that emerged across most of the student cases and do not appear to be related to program type.

Perhaps the most compelling theme is connection. When students were able to form a personal connection to an individual or individuals of the host culture, it transformed the entire experience. These students perceived culture learning differently than students who did not form a connection. Where a strong relationship with people was evident, the students derived deep meaning from their experiences abroad and the study abroad experience was particularly powerful for them.

Personal Development

Of the 13 students interviewed in this study, nine thought that personal development was a major result of their study abroad experience. In most cases, some aspect of personal development was one of the first things they mentioned in response to the question of what they learned by studying abroad. This category includes such general personal internal changes as becoming more independent, patient, confident, adaptable, and outgoing. The nine students who emphasized personal development were in types of programs that were not service-learning programs. The four students who were in service-learning programs did not refer to personal development. Kent, who had been in the service-learning program in Uganda, stated he “definitely learned a lot about myself,” but he explained that this was primarily in reference to his realization that he did not feel that he could live away from his family and friends for a significant amount of time, rather than in reference to a more internal personal characteristic.

Mandy, who participated in a semester group program in Greece, emphasized “I gained a lot of independence. I learned how to navigate in foreign countries without speaking the language. I, you know, drop me off at any airport, I could find my way around the city.” Comparing herself to who she was before going into her program she said, “I don’t think I would have the confidence to do that even in the United States before I studied abroad.” She had also learned to “relax and go with it...I learned just to slow down and ...also just being patient.” Johnny had similarly compared himself to whom he felt he would have been had he not studied abroad, and in his list of characteristics mentioned and as presented in his case vignette, he said he would not have been as independent or as outgoing. Shelley, who participated in a semester group program to Wales, said, “I learned, the biggest thing is how to be really independent and autonomous and, um, I really learned how to kind of think on my feet and think for myself and take care of myself completely.” She added, “and I think I just learned how to

be more confident in situations and kind of be able to take on some things I wasn't sure I'd be able to do. It kind of helps to prove that you can do more than you think, and I learned that.”

The theme of personal development also includes instances when students interpreted their experiences abroad as overcoming a challenge. Two students talked about challenging themselves by studying abroad. Alivia's entire experience was framed in these terms as was presented in her case vignette. David, who had participated in a semester program with direct enrollment at a German institution where German language skills were required, also talked about the challenge of his experience. He said, “I just wanted to go out there and just completely challenge myself...like use another language.” Further he stated, “I was pretty prepared for it, but I, I've never really tested myself to actually, like, survive in an environment strictly German.” He thought that he had met the challenge well and that he had “learned language better than I thought.” For many of the students who felt that personal development was a central part of their experience, they recalled this being part of their original objectives in studying abroad.

Abby represents, perhaps, the ultimate example of personal development. She participated in a semester group program to Australia. Abby was most emphatic that her experience “was really, really a life-changer for me.” Abby said

I didn't anticipate how much it would change my life, and it would, I tell, that's, yeah, that's the one thing I tell everyone whenever I talk to them, it's a life-changing experience, and I wouldn't be the person I am today without it. And I know a lot of people say that, but I truly would not be the person I am right now.

For Abby, a major part of this change was her greater independence. She stated how

I learned so much about my experience, you know, learned how I can handle different situations on my own, because I'm, you know, half-way around the world away from home, I have to deal with things on my own, have to deal with

situations, and I thought, I mean, everything ended up fine. I'm here, and I had an amazing trip, and I wouldn't change anything, even the bad things, just because you learn from them.

Abby is proud of having planned for her program and having made all of her travel arrangements by herself. She said, "my parents didn't help me with anything. I did this all on my own, completely by myself." Because of this, she felt that her experience was "definitely a confidence-booster." She said

if you looked at me before, I would have run. You look at me now, I'm two totally different people, in a good way, but, I'm much more outgoing. I'm much more, you know, spunky I guess you could say, not as shy.

Although several of the students interviewed stated that studying abroad had influenced their futures, in most of these cases students remained within the disciplines they were already majoring in prior to the experience. None of the student participants in this study demonstrated a more complete change of career direction than Abby. Upon returning from study abroad, she changed her major. She was very excited to talk about what this would mean for her future.

Another thing I learned about myself was what I wanted to do with my life. Um, you may already know, but, um, I want, now because of my study abroad experience, I learned that I want to, you know, work in a study abroad center. From my experience being a Global Ambassador and working in the office I learned, I fell in love with the job, and, um, I love to travel now, and I want, I want to somehow impact lives of people or students, you know, anyone, and this is one way I can do that, by encouraging them to go abroad and sharing with them my stories and experiences and then telling them how they're going to have, like, a life-changing experience and it's going to be, you know, it's going to just change their lives forever and they're never going to forget the experience, and so

I want, you know, either be an adviser or like a director of a study abroad center just so I can, um, impact, you know, peoples' lives and so that's, I'm just really excited because I, I finally found what I'm going to do for the rest of my life.

Abby's excitement is evident in her manner. It surely played a large role in her successfully competing for and obtaining a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship through which she will continue her experiences abroad.

Fulfillment of Expectations

Many of the student participants in this study talked about how their experiences abroad accomplished a fulfillment of expectations that they had prior to studying abroad. Johnny wanted to live by the ocean and learn to surf. Abby had a list of places she wanted to see in Australia. Tara set out on a quest to learn as much about Ireland as she could. Scott planned on participating in outdoor activities, and this objective drove his decision to choose a semester group program in New Zealand for his study abroad experience. Shelley and David wanted to return to countries that they visited on short-term travel programs in high school in order to live in these places for a longer period of time and to learn more about what life was like there.

Most of the comments that reflect this theme came from students who were not in service-learning programs. It is likely that the students in service-learning programs also had certain objectives for studying abroad that were ultimately fulfilled, but these issues seemed to have been overshadowed by other aspects of the experience. For Kent, his prior expectations were actually brought under scrutiny. He chose service-learning programs, in two instances, because he wanted to do something to help local communities, but in the Uganda program he questioned whether or not this objective could be obtained in the long term.

I guess my main concern with the program is that we're only there for five weeks, and there's basically an 11-month period when nobody from this program is there,

and so my main concern, and I have no way to evaluate this with the kids, like, is if us being there and then being pulled away, if that's better for the kids or is actually detrimental to them. I really don't know. Um, because especially with, I mean, with the Makerere students, we stayed in contact with them, and we're getting to develop relationships with them, but as far as the students go, it's basically impossible been impossible for us to stay in contact with them, so I think the program is very beneficial, but I would, I would be interested to see, you know, four or five years down the road, if they could do a study on the impact that has on the community and us being there and then being pulled out.

However, although he certainly feels unable to conclude whether or not he fulfilled his expectations, the situation that he questions is beyond his ability to alter and remains more a questioning of the objectives of the program rather than of his expectations.

Impact of the U.S.

Several students talked about the impact of the U. S. on the countries in which they studied abroad in terms of either what they witnessed of popular culture and goods or what they learned through their conversations with people about different perspectives on the U. S. and its policies. A couple of the students reflected on their own role as an individual from the U.S. and the impact of this on the people around them.

Tara talked about how reliant the people of Ireland were on the U. S. for their popular culture.

I feel like they're kind of in a bind though, because they might not like American foreign policy, but they definitely need America for things like TV and movies...tons of movies, and they had Irish movies and TV and music, too, but they wouldn't have enough without American culture, which is almost a little sad.

Scott was surprised by how many U. S. products he saw in New Zealand.

I guess what surprised me was how, how much New Zealand is influenced by U.S. culture. Like, right where we lived, right where I lived in my flat, within two blocks of each other we had a McDonald's, a Burger King, a KFC, a Pizza Hut, and a Domino's restaurant right, right within walking distance of our flat, and at the grocery stores, American brands of cereal and pop.

Allen noticed that in Uganda, although popular culture was much more limited, U. S television and Hollywood movies were present in the capital.

The students in service-learning programs focused more on the issue of the impact of U. S. policy and on varying perspectives of this impact; however, Scott, who had participated in a semester group program in New Zealand, learned a great deal about policy issues in the classes that he took in New Zealand. Scott said

the big picture isn't as easily, isn't as visible as it is when you're in a country where you see trade going through or that have to work to get countries to trade with them and have to, that are struggling to develop their own infrastructure, their own technical, uh, technical industry to keep up with countries like China or Japan or even the U.S....there are countries out there that don't, that have to work to get, to get to the level of the economic status of the U.S. or other countries. I think you see that better and see actual policy, first-hand policy that's, that influences a country on a, on a visible scale in a smaller country like New Zealand, and so you kind of, I don't know, that's what you learn, I guess. That's what I took away from it.

Scott thought that his experiences in New Zealand of learning in class, and then seeing what he was learning in the real world as he lived in New Zealand, made him more aware of the impact of the U. S. He said "it makes you think about well, what impact does that policy have on people who depend on us for other stuff, for example, New Zealand." He

felt that the ability to do this was very important to develop, and he sees a lack of this kind of broader thinking in our U.S. society.

What we do to make ourselves successful here in the U.S., um, people complain about it and want it to be fixed right now for them here in the U.S., at least that's my opinion, but I don't think we tend to look at how on an international community-wise that it affects all the people that we trade with or, um, all the people who can't literally build up an industry like that on their own, who even if they wanted to try to do it have no way of doing it. It's not that they don't have the money to do it, it's not that they don't have the intelligence to do it, it's just that they don't have the physical space or the, or just the ability to do it. I don't know, it definitely opens your mind, and it makes you more, gives you a kind of an eye for seeing through some of the policy and examining it further than just how it's going to impact somebody in the U.S. here.

The issue of the impact of the U.S. became particularly important for Scott following his study abroad experience in New Zealand.

Kent was similarly critical of the impact of the U.S. in developing countries based on his experience in the service-learning program in Uganda. He questioned his own role and the role of the program in helping the people of Uganda. Because of his realization of what it takes to learn another culture, he was critical of instances in which policy is made in the face of a lack of cultural knowledge. He said

from what I can see with programs like, um, USAID and some of those programs, I think they're good programs in theory, but I think the trouble we get into is when we go in there and try to, to do it without understanding their culture, without using the local people.

Even when he felt that a program was more locally based and locally run, as was the case with the Uganda program that he participated in, he questioned whether in the long run the program had a positive impact.

For Diana, the lack of understanding how U.S. policies impact local areas like the Peruvian community of her service-learning project, made her angry.

Well, it makes me, I don't know, it makes me mad, like, when we were there, I don't remember what they called that in Peru, but it was like the free trade act, they were having huge, like, demonstrations against it and stuff, and a lot of people don't want it, but I think the government was trying to get it...it would affect the country so much...and, just, where the U.S. would probably be fine without it, you know, and how it, just see how much it's going to affect the people in Peru, and people that I know, um, it just made me angry, I guess...because it's just like nothing to us, it's just like, you know? You know, you can have, you know, cheaper vegetables or whatever, and it's just going to completely change their economy and their agriculture and everything, their lives, and so, I don't know, I guess things like that upset me.

In part, Diana's frustration grew out of her emotional attachment to the people she knows in Peru and, in part, grew out of what she saw as her lack of exposure to and knowledge about these issues. She said, "I don't hear about that stuff here." She talked about how "everyone seemed like...just so aware of everything going on in the world." This made her feel "ignorant" because "I don't know stuff about other peoples' countries, like, I don't know stuff...and you know, they know all this stuff about me." She said it's "embarrassing."

Erica perceived the impact of the U.S. in more personal terms. She felt that her presence had an impact on both the women from the service-learning project and on her host family in Peru. These two groups of individuals were from different classes in Peru,

and Erica's movement between the two by means of living in the city with her host family and then working each day with the women in the rural community drew the two groups together through this personal connection. Erica said of her host family that

they cared for me a great deal, and they also started to care more about the women because they were exposed to it, which is another really interesting element because they really didn't know what was happening out there, and then this American girl comes in and is working in there, and asking questions, and it was really interesting...they have no reason to go up there, and don't even really know. Like, they had never even been to the area where I was working and didn't know what was happening up there and, like, you know, they heard stories of these people that were squatting and taking other peoples' land but they didn't really understand the actual stories of the people living there, so it was interesting being sort of a bridge between the two.

The impact of Erica's presence was not only personal but also was positive. She was encouraged in the way her efforts appeared to be facilitating constructive change if only in one small way.

Travel

For nearly all of the students who were interviewed as part of this study and who were in programs other than service-learning programs, travel figured prominently in their discussions and was usually mentioned as one of the first highlights of their experiences abroad. For several of the students, travel or travel-related activities formed part of their prior expectations for their time abroad.

Abby had a very specific list of places she wanted to visit in Australia, and fulfilling those expectations was extremely satisfying to her. She said that prior to her semester abroad she had planned "I wanted an easier semester. That way I could travel and see different things, so that's why I took Gen Eds." So, when she talked about the

highlights of her study abroad experience she said, “I’ll tell you a little bit about, um, what I did I guess.” She went on to list a number of places she went and what she did.

So, I took a ten-day travel through Fiji, and so I went island-hopping there... Then we went down to Australia... highlights of Australia would have to definitely be the, um, the mainland would be Sydney, I mean, it’s absolutely amazing, the Harbour Bridge, I mean it’s breathtaking. Um, I went through the outback by the train, that was one of the best experiences I had just because who, how many people can say that they’ve seen the outback, you know?... I flew out to Perth in western Australia and then took it from, took the train from Perth to Adelaide and then stopped in Adelaide... and then flew to Sydney.... Another highlight was scuba diving on the Great Barrier Reef, you know, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, so that was breathtaking in itself just because you could see all of the, the fish, the different coral, you know, just everything, so I went on a cruise when I was in Cairns and just went out on the Great Barrier Reef.... My first time ever scuba diving, and I got to see the Great Barrier Reef, so... not a lot of people can say they did that, either, and then, um, I traveled a lot when I was in Australia, but then also during Easter Break I went to, um, New Zealand, and so I flew into Christchurch, New Zealand, which is on the South Island, and we went sky diving there... just traveling in Tasmania, as well. My favorite place in all of Australia was in Tasmania on Wineglass Bay. Um, just blue water, white sand, I mean, amazing views.

These travel experiences formed a major part of her most memorable moments abroad, and she stated, “I love to travel now.”

Johnny also thought that travel was a big part of his overall study abroad experience. He said, “study abroad, what I love about it, is it opens up your availability to travel.” He spent a good deal of time explaining all of his travel adventures. He travelled

to Fiji and visited the small surrounding islands. This was where he received the invitation to drink with the locals as presented in his case vignette. He also went to New Zealand, about which he stated

New Zealand is one of the most beautiful countries in the world. Traveling there was probably the best time of my life that I've ever had, being able to just drive on the South Island and doing all sort of hiking, sea kayaking, seeing nature basically right in front in you. It's just amazing.

Johnny was proud of his travel accomplishments and the activities he was able to participate in because of them. He added

the traveling up and down the east coast during Spring Break, those are stories I always tell in my family, being able to go to Whitsunday Islands, go sailing, and then I went, um, to Frazier Island and got to do a 4-by-4 excursion where we camped out for three nights over on an island, yeah, and they gave us all the equipment and everything, and then also scuba diving at the Great Barrier. My dad is a huge scuba diver. He, he loves diving, so he's never been to the Great Barrier, so that's one thing I've gotten on him. He's done way more dives than I have, but I've been to the Great Barrier and he hasn't, so those are generally the stories that come up the most.

Scott chose the program in New Zealand because of the opportunity for outdoor activities. He said, "I didn't go for the city life or the nightlife kind of stuff, I went more for the traveling every weekend, seeing as much as I could." He exclaimed, "the backpacking I did was amazing." He thought that in New Zealand "they have some of the best, they cater to some of the best outdoor experiences ever." Mandy said that one of the highlights of her semester in Greece was "I got the opportunity to travel all throughout Europe, Eastern and Western Europe." Kathryn participated in a short-term summer language program in Spain, and she said her favorite aspect of the program was "touring"

and that “Rome was probably my favorite place I’ve ever been so far,” which she visited following the program.

It is evident that travel figures prominently when students talk about their experiences abroad. Travel is an aspect of participating in study abroad, and additional travel activities above and beyond those directly associated with a program are generally highly encouraged by both the Study Abroad Center and by faculty program directors. Travel experiences also seem to have the ability to produce stories that are easily shared with individuals back at home in the United States, whereas the more complex aspects of the study abroad experience may likely be not only more difficult for the study abroad students to discuss but also may be too difficult for those back at home to understand or offer a response to. Many of the study abroad students interviewed as part of this study who were in programs other than the service-learning programs were often most comfortable and content when sharing their travel experiences.

People

While travel figured prominently among the students who participated in programs other than service-learning programs, people figured prominently among students who participated in service-learning programs. Not only were people mentioned first by all four of these students, Allen, Kent, Erica, and Diana, but with rare exception there was a complete lack of any reference to travel or travel-related activities.

For Allen, “a great highlight was actually trying to get into the classrooms and be able to teach the students” in Uganda. Kent, who was in the Uganda program, also participated in a similar service-learning program in Costa Rica prior to Uganda. Of both of his experiences he claimed, “definitely for both of them, the experience that I had working with the children in the schools, was absolutely fantastic.” Both Allen and Kent also talked about getting to know the university students in Uganda that they were teaching with and living with. For Allen, the relationship with a fellow university student

became a strong connection to Uganda for him as discussed in his case vignette. Kent also talked about the relationships that developed with the Ugandan university students. He noted that the program was structured in a way that allowed for the interaction. “They were more focused on us building relationships with Makerere students and having that interaction, and I think that that was a much more effective way for us to learn about Ugandan culture and experience it.” He describes more about the daily interaction as just talking to each other, because we always have all meals together, and then usually at night, like sometimes we would go and tutor the students up at the school, but then a lot of the time we would just be there all, you know, hanging out and talking, and so we learned a lot about Ugandan culture through the four Makerere students.

Kent said that they stayed in contact with the Ugandan university students and “we’re getting to develop relationships with them,” but that it was impossible to stay in contact with the elementary students that they taught.

Diana and Erica both frame their entire study abroad experience around the relationship developed with the indigenous women with whom they performed the dance. Erica’s first response in the initial interview was “the people we met, were certainly one of the highlights. They were just amazing people to get to know.” She then proceeded to talk about the dance and the indigenous women. Similarly, Diana first discussed in the initial interview the service-learning project, the women, and the dance. Her first response to the question of what she learned studying abroad was also “just really get to know and relate to people in completely different worlds.” She was awed by the opportunity to experience “this whole other aspect of humanity.”

Diana and Erica both spoke about the host families they lived with in the Peru program. Diana said, “I lived with a family, and I had an awesome family.” Diana had also lived with a family in the program in Costa Rica that she participated in following

the Peru program and she commented, “I just feel like all my families were just great.”

She recalled that while in Peru

I had two sisters who were my age, and so they pretty much, like, well I had one sister that would tell me about the history of, like, Peru and the culture, and my family was really good at like, I don’t know, really showing me around

everywhere and stuff so I could get a better glimpse of it, get to experience more.

Erica stayed with her host family from the program when she returned to Peru on her own a year following the program. She said, “I actually went back the Spring after just to volunteer and live with them, and so I got to know them a lot better that time, and they just, they were wonderful.” It is apparent that both Erica and Diana developed close relationships with these individuals with whom they had initially stayed.

People also figured prominently in Tara’s experience studying abroad in a semester group program. Her study abroad experience was significantly shaped by the relationship with the couple who found her, and in this way people are prominent in her story. In some sense, the couple served as a host family for Tara since she spent so much time with them and spent time with them at their home. She also lived with them when she returned to Ireland one year following her study abroad semester.

Open

Most of the students interviewed commented that they were more “open” or “open-minded” as a result of studying abroad. They were more accepting of the diversity of people and more accepting of the diversity of culture. Johnny used the terms “open,” “openness,” “open-minded,” “opened me up,” and “opened me back up” ten different times throughout his initial interview. As presented in his case vignette, Johnny’s self-identity as Filipino and Asian was coupled with his notion that he was more open-minded than his family and friends. He talked about the process of developing a greater general acceptance of other cultures.

It definitely opened me up to, to the differences in the world. Just because they don't look like you or they don't dress like you or they don't have the same lifestyle as you, you can't judge them or you can't automatically exclude them because they're different and they're from a different country or their leader is, um, different from yours or something like that. It definitely, yeah, it ... it really opened me to some, to just be able to have that, you know, openness.

Johnny credits his experience abroad with his ability to now be "open."

Scott said that studying abroad "definitely opens your mind." When describing the value of study abroad for university students he came back to this notion of being "open," which for him meant being informed and not prematurely judgmental. He said that university students should study abroad "so that they're a little bit more open before judging back here." David said that his experience abroad had "totally made me more accepting. I've always been very accepting of other cultures...it's just raised that more."

Abby spoke of her life-changing experience abroad as a "mind-opener" and as an "eye-opener." She described how the experience affected the way that she thinks about other cultures

Much more open to it. I mean, I was open to it before, but it really, just being there experiencing it first-hand for, you know, a long period of time, five months, um, I'm much more open to it now. I can't get enough of like, I would love to, you know, learn about the African culture, you know, go there, you know, for like a few months, you know, during the summer and just learn about that. I'm much more open to that, and that's why I'm going abroad again, two more times, just, you know, to Spain and Sweden, I'm hoping to go abroad when I'm in grad school, you know, to like even Korea or, you know, just anywhere in Asia and, um, so I'm much more open and, and interested in learning about the way people are and cultures are.

Mandy had similar comments about becoming more interested in other cultures. She said that, as a result of studying abroad for a semester in Greece, “I just think I’m open to more cultures and curious about them and, and interested in learning more about them.”

Kathryn said that study abroad “opens your mind to see what, how different our cultures are.” Further, she professed that her experience in a short-term summer program had made her more accepting of difference in general.

Studying abroad has opened me up to being more accepting and open-minded and everything, not, not just even the cultures but...people, too...It definitely made me more open, um, just to accepting new things from like not even, not even just accepting cultures, but I mean even in day to day life just accepting more things about other people. Sometimes you may, I don't know really how to explain this, but sometimes we look down on people because they're different...but you just have to be more open and accepting, and that's one thing that I definitely did learn more about, um, just, I mean, I feel like I am an open, accepting person but just to a different level I feel you can't really judge people.

To Kathryn, being more open also meant being more open to eating different foods. She said, “I did learn to just be more open to food now.” This carried into her life back home, and she is much more willing now to try different foods.

Diana said that studying abroad taught her “just to be open.” She was so impressed with how different lives could be in a different culture, and particularly in a developing nation, that this perspective now guides the direction of her future career.

I guess it just opened up my eyes to, you know, other things going on in the world, other peoples' lives, and getting, I mean, that's really what it did for me, and like maybe a lot more aware and wanting to work with those people from, you know, other places.

For Diana, opening one's eyes means that the world of possibilities and opportunities is suddenly perceived in much broader terms.

Limitations

While most of the students in this study strongly believed that they had learned something significant about culture because they were more "open," they also recognized that this transformation rested in the realm of perspectives. In terms of the specifics of learning culture or learning about what might be considered the nuts and bolts of culture, many of the students recognized their limitations.

Shelley realized that learning about culture was limited because she did not have the kind of exposure that would be necessary to really learn the culture. She commented, "I think since we weren't living with Welsh students we kind of didn't really get that really strong cultural kind of experience." She also revealed her desire to obtain more knowledge about culture if she were to study abroad again in the future. She said,

I know for sure it made me kind of want to experience other cultures and kind of see what else is, you know, different about them. Next time, if I had a chance to do this twice, I would definitely kind of go a little bit more outside my comfort zone and maybe try something else and kind of see what the culture was there.

Kent had questioned his own role and the role of the program in helping the people of Uganda. He also realized his own limitations in learning another culture. He said,

to be honest, I still don't feel like I really know the cultures of Costa Rica, Uganda, the other countries I've visited...I still feel like I really don't have the grasp on that I would like to... I'd have to spend more time there to be able to say, like, you know, as a whole the society values this, this, and this.

He had participated in two study abroad programs and had continued to travel abroad for other reasons, but he acknowledged that culture learning was a process that took a great deal of time within the context of a different culture.

Diana had admitted how she felt “ignorant” because she felt that the people of Peru knew more about her country than she knew. She said, “like I don’t know stuff about other peoples’ countries.” She also recognized that, even in the face of the strong bond with the women in the indigenous community, in terms of knowing specifics about the culture she was limited. Throughout the interview she often said “I don’t know.” It was more than just an incidental part of her speech. She often used it to qualify what she was saying. She struggled finding words to express her thoughts and her strong feelings. In sharing her perspectives on learning culture she admitted, “it’s so hard to generalize” and

I guess it makes me less likely to judge or make generalizations about other places or cultures, because I don’t know and there’s no way I ever could until I was pretty much there, like being there or living with it? Um, because I think, I mean, everything is so situational, and like depending on the history or whatever.

She realized that there was indeed an immense amount to know about other cultures in the world and further thought that people in the United States generally do not know enough about other people in the world and what their lives are like. “I just think there’s so much out there to learn, so much different, like, lifestyles and everything about, like, just incredible, I don’t know, there’s so much out there, and we don’t know really that much about it.”

Scott believed that by studying abroad an individual could certainly be “knowledgeable” and “accepting of cultures,” but he felt that limitations would always place barriers around what an individual could ultimately know about another culture. He

said, “you can see the culture, you can try to touch the surface of it and live among it, but I don’t think you actually ever get a full view of what’s going on.”

Similarly, Erica felt limits to the idea of thorough cultural knowledge. Although she had already begun to acquire a fairly significant amount of experience abroad, she lamented

I’m just learning...It’s strange realizing that I will probably never really fully integrate into another culture, and that realization sort of, I don’t know, maybe after a certain amount of time if I lived there long enough I could, but, um, it’s, it’s also just really hard, I don’t even know what it would be to learn Peruvian culture, Indian culture even more, because it’s just so varied.

While she struggles with her understanding of learning culture at the level of perspectives, she concedes that really knowing another culture is almost entirely unobtainable.

Being There

Nearly every student interviewed was emphatic regarding the importance of “being there” or having a first-hand experience in another culture or country. When students described what they thought in this regard, the passages of the interviews were filled with action verbs: “being,” “seeing,” “observing,” “visiting,” “talking,” “conversing,” “sitting down,” “drinking,” “experiencing,” and “living.” Several students stressed the importance of the experience being *theirs*. Mandy said, “I actually experienced it.” Kent was proud that “I got to see first-hand.” Alivia liked being able to reflect on all of her experiences and proclaim “I’ve experienced that.”

For many of the students what was most relevant about another place and another culture in the world rested in the everyday, the daily activities of the local people. Shelley chose the semester program in Wales because she wanted to live where she had only been able to visit briefly on a high school trip. She said, “I guess I just wanted to know after

that little ten-day thing, I kind of wanted to, like, live, kind of, in the British sort of area.”

For her the experience of living was

being in the marketplace-like area and just being surrounded by Welsh people, to kind of see how they talk to each other and how they talk to, like, clerks and the bus driver...being in everyday situations...being out at a pub or restaurant or just sitting on the bus and seeing how people interact.

Scott said

it makes you want to go, go somewhere else and go see how other people do stuff and see how other, other cultures, whether it be the food they eat or the politics or just how they go about everyday routines in their life.

The mundane daily activities of a culture were what Alivia felt were important to know to learn a culture.

I think to learn another culture you have to like submerge yourself in it, and you know, eat the food, talk to the people, try to speak the language, you know, try to live your life like the people around you are living their lives.

Shelley felt that it was in the everyday activities that culture learning took place and that this kind of learning could not take place without being there. She said, “I don’t think I could have ever learned just staying here...like it’s mainly the culture thing, experiencing what culture is like, what it’s like to live everyday activities there, how that’s different from here.”

For these students, it is the act of personally experiencing that facilitated what they learned about culture. Allen admits, “I’ve always, I mean, have been one who learned a lot of hands-on thing more outside the classroom.” Alivia said, “until you have first-hand experience, you can only like imagine what else is going on out there.” Scott was convinced that “you have to travel and go see it.” Abby stressed, “you need to go out and experience stuff first-hand” and that “it’s kind of like the same way when it comes to

learning about another culture.” Alivia was even more ardent: “it’s not even possible to get the real feeling about a culture without actually going there.”

Mandy offered an explanation of why having direct personal experience is a different way to learn culture.

You learn that by that happening to you instead of by someone telling you about it...like I actually experienced it, I was actually a part of it. Um, I think that’s really the big difference...I think just being immersed in it and, like I said, being a part of it, it becomes a part of your culture, too.

Abby said

you have to, you know, go there, experience it yourself and kind of take it in and learn about it, you know, first-hand to kind of know what it’s like. I mean, there are certain things that words can’t describe, you know, a lot of things that words just can’t describe, and just by experiencing something I think you, um, kind of, you know, kind of get the whole picture and the whole story, I guess, of what a culture or a country is really like.

Johnny felt that he was a part of a different culture for the time that he drank kava with a group of Fijian people. He remembered

To me, that is what it’s like to experience a new culture, to actually be in a group of people and talking to them, you know, and to me that’s hands-on and, you know, being there, that’s what it means to be, you know, experiencing other cultures, not, not reading it from a book or watching a video on Fiji or something like that, so that’s one thing that I felt, that I was lucky to find, that I got the experiences, like sitting down and drinking... actually being there and being in, you know, in an intimate setting like that.

Johnny also clarified in his second interview that the reason he had learned so much in his course on Australian Aborigines was that the style of teaching and learning in the course was based on “experiencing.”

David talked in particular about the sensory experiences of sight and smell.

I really feel like I learned so much from that experience, and like just being able to be there and to see these people...I mean like, the way things look or the way people interact with each other, you, you can't teach that really.

He talked about the unique smells he had associated with his experience in Germany.

Everything down to like the way things smelled. I mean, you just take everything in, and like you just remember it, and I think like, in a class you just can't, you can't replicate that, you know what I mean?...it's something that you almost forget, but I remember when I got off the plane when I went to Germany for my study abroad, I hadn't been there since 2004, so that was about, you know, 3 years prior but I remember as soon as I got off the plane I took a breath, and the smell came right back to me. It just has a smell about it that I just, just completely forgot about, but going back there I was just like, oh my god, I remember this now, so I mean, I don't know, it's, it's just something that you kind of just have to, you know, experience for yourself, you can't really teach someone about that.

David's memories of Germany included his sensory memory, and all of these sensations of “being there” comprise his experience.

For the students who placed people as prominent in their study abroad experiences, the importance they placed on “being there” was focused on the interaction with people. Diana said “you can't learn about it, like, in a magazine, you really have to, like, be there and experience it and talk with people, and I really just think it's a lot about the people and, you know, their complexity and stuff.” Further, she added “and you learn how to communicate in other ways other than talking.” Erica, who had a similar

experience to Diana with the indigenous women explained how “being there” went beyond just the act of talking with people.

I think just being completely being absorbed in this experience, and completely immersed in it, it’s just, you, I learned so much from...talking to people about their cultures, but it never quite reaches the point of being there, and living this, living it and dealing with the issues that arise when you have to confront different, differences between the two, but you don’t really have to deal with it if you’re just talking with someone every once in a while, “Oh, that’s neat, your culture,” like that. It doesn’t challenge you the way it challenges you to actually live it and live in it and try to function.

In this sense, experiencing included talking with people, but it also included other ways to communicate, other experiences, and other ways of perceiving differences.

For the students who placed the focus on people, it was in the context of the interaction with people that they felt most of their culture learning took place. When Allen discussed how he learned culture and from who, he responded “being there and conversing with them...visiting with each other.” Kent said that he learned most about culture from “living in the community and seeing their lifestyle as well as talking to the Makerere students.” Diana expressed that learning culture happened in this context because “I mean, and that was the whole part of it, like, they’re helping you.” Similarly, Erica clarified

also you’re depending on people, um, I think that maybe that’s part of it as well, um, because it’s not just isolated, you know, I’m here and you’re here and we’re just kind of living, yeah, you need people there that are of a very different background, so I think that that’s also part of the reason.

In Johnny’s experience abroad, as well, he felt that where he really learned about another culture was in Fiji when he was invited to drink kava. He said, “being there, having a

conversation with them, drinking kava, and just reflecting on, you know, how different their lifestyle is from mine, from where I'm from." In this way, all of these students were learning culture by being in the culture. Erica had emphasized that what was significant about the dance with the indigenous women, as presented in her case vignette, was that the students were participating *with* the women.

Connection

The students in this study who expressed that learning about another culture was a particularly important result of their experience studying abroad were those who had developed a connection with people of the culture they were visiting. Erica and Diana had strong relationships with their host families but developed a particularly strong bond with the indigenous women they performed the dance with. Tara maintained a strong connection with the couple who found her. Allen felt a unique bond with the Ugandan university student who he lived and worked with. Johnny felt a connection with the Fijians with whom he drank kava. Alivia developed a strong friendship with the fellow Swedish student.

Where students developed a strong connection with someone from the host culture, there was an entrance into the culture that would otherwise not have been available. Alivia had stated of her Swedish friend "she really, like, pulled me into the whole, the whole culture." She recognized that this had only happened in her study abroad experience in Sweden and not elsewhere because "like you have to find that way in." Tara learned a great deal about Irish culture through her association with the couple who found her and through her many discussions with them.

Sometimes the connection developed because the study abroad program was structured in such a way as to allow for the potential for greater interaction with people of the host culture. In the program in Peru, students were placed with host families who they lived with for the duration of their stay. In Uganda, the students were housed with the

Ugandan university students they also worked with at the school. However, sometimes the connection grew out of happenstance events. Tara met the couple who found her quite by accident, and Erica and Diana just happened to be working in the indigenous community at the time when the village was preparing for a major community celebration. Johnny happened to have been invited to join the Fijians, and Alivia happened to have been placed in accommodations with a local Swedish student as a roommate.

A connection with people did not occur in every experience abroad. Allen had been in a study abroad program in Panama prior to the program in Uganda, and he had not established a connection. Erica had participated in a program in India prior to the program in Peru and had not established a connection. Alivia had participated in four other study abroad programs besides the program in Sweden, and she did not establish a connection in these four programs. Scott did not develop a connection with a New Zealander. He explained why this was the case.

Where our living situation was, I lived with all U.S. students in my flat, but there was international students all around, so you got to meet them and hear about them, but really you didn't get to live on hand with any native New Zealanders. He recognized the loss and, offering a critique of his program, suggested looking at another program model.

Other universities [*sic*] you may be put in housing with people from your host country, um, so you develop a closer, a closer understanding of that culture on a day-to-day basis and have somebody who's lived in that culture giving you different perspectives than you can see from outside...who you meet and what, under what situation you meet them in I think also has a great impact on the, on how you view their culture, on what you learn about their culture.

He realized that his experience had the potential to be different. “If you use somebody that lived there, I mean, you might go do some completely different things than you did, like I did.” Although Scott learned a great deal about culture and was extremely pleased with his experience in a number of other ways, he was aware of a missed opportunity. His experience did not have the impact of some of the other student experiences that were shared in the interviews.

Building into study abroad programs opportunities that increase interaction between study abroad students and people of the host culture apparently can only foster the potential for students to establish a connection to people. Program structure may allow for situations of contact between students and locals, such as the programs providing host family stays, giving the opportunity for interaction, but whether or not that interaction results in strong bonds as evidenced in the case vignettes remains subject to individual characteristics, personalities, and even happenstance. Kathryn was placed with a host mother in her short-term summer program in Spain, and although Kathryn stated that her host mother “cared for us so much” and that “she was a very nice lady,” she did not develop a connection with her.

In student cases in which there was a connection with people, the study abroad experience was particularly meaningful to that student. The case vignettes attest to this. Each of the student cases selected for vignettes was one in which the student defined the study abroad experience in terms of some specific meaningful aspect of the experience. In all of the case vignettes the students had a connection of some kind with people. Alivia described her study abroad experiences as “difficult” but the only instance in which the experience was not difficult, was the one in which she had a close friend from the local culture. Alivia concluded that her experience in Sweden was “the most amazing experience of my college career.”

Summary of Interpretations

The results of this study present a remarkable collection of students' experiences abroad. The interpretations of these experiences were best presented through a combination of six student case vignettes and comparative analysis across all 13 student cases. While the case vignettes offer insight into the deeper meaning of the study abroad experience for students because the students' unique experiences can be understood in the context of the entire experience abroad, they are complemented by comparative analysis that identified themes that cut across the student cases and detected patterns associated with differing types of experiences. Although the interpretations derived from student experiences are ultimately interconnected and multifaceted, the results of the study can be summarized in accord with the research questions that drove the study.

The first research question for this study asked the following:

1. What do undergraduate students perceive that they learned by studying abroad?

The study revealed that although the study abroad experience is individualized, students' perceptions of what they learned cluster around several themes. For many of the students interviewed in this study, personal development was a key result of their experience. In many cases, personal development was associated with a fulfillment of expectations. Several students reported that travel was a highlight of their time abroad, and much of their personal development was accomplished in the context of travel-related activities. For other students, learning about people of another culture was prominent. These students felt that their experiences were focused on learning about culture. There were several students who felt that they learned about the impact of the U.S. on the country they were in and that this taught them not only about the local culture but also about their own culture.

The second research question for this study asked:

2. How do undergraduate students who studied abroad perceive culture learning?

The students in this study perceived their learning, and culture learning in particular, as taking place predominately through direct experience or “being there.” When students’ learning was focused on culture learning, the students perceived their culture learning as taking place through interactions with people of the host culture. Nearly all students who participated in this study believed that what they learned about culture resulted in their being more open or open-minded. Even when students’ learning was focused on culture learning, they placed the importance of learning not on the nuts and bolts of culture or specific cultural facts but rather on perspectives or on being open. Several students recognized their own limitations in learning culture and admitted that they had just begun the process or just barely tapped the surface of learning about the culture that they lived in while abroad.

Based on models and best practices from the field of experiential education, it was anticipated that culture learning would be affected by structured reflection activities. Four of the students interviewed had participated in service-learning programs with structured reflection; however, these students did not indicate in their responses that the structured reflection was of key importance. None of the students offered comments on the role that structured reflection played in the program and, when directly questioned about it, the results were somewhat varied. Although Erica and Diana felt that their program director helped them process their experiences, Kent did not feel that his program accomplished much in group reflection sessions; instead, the interaction with the Ugandan students was more important for him. Allen only talked about one issue being discussed in reflection sessions, although outside of them he also received valuable input from another Iowa State University staff member who helped him to interpret his interactions with the Ugandan university student.

Based on how the students talked about their perspectives, it appears that far more relevant to all four of the students in programs with structured reflection was the

connection established with people of the host culture. If reflection is considered more broadly, then essentially the process of reflecting was taking place for other students (who were not in service-learning programs) with the individuals they had a connection with. Certainly Tara, Alivia, and, to some extent, Johnny, were also participating in reflective activities with the individuals with whom they were interacting. So, reflection seemed to be most relevant for the students when it was happening with people from the host culture. This type of activity occurred in a multitude of ways not limited to service-learning programs or structured reflection sessions with program staff. Living arrangements and other opportunities provided the potential for this kind of interaction because they placed students in close contact with individuals of the host culture.

The final research question for this study posed:

3. What are student's perspectives on the meaning of their study abroad experience?

Students' perspectives on the meaning of their study abroad experience were shaped by their perspectives on what they learned studying abroad. The meaning of studying abroad was also tied to the unique ways that students incorporated their study abroad experience into their lives. This study shows that students' study abroad experiences can be significantly shaped by happenstance, and these accidental factors, especially when they contribute to the development of a connection with people, moved to the center of how students construct the meaning of their entire experience. When students made a connection with people, their experiences abroad were most meaningful.

The meaning that the experience of studying abroad had for students and the way that they incorporated the experience into their lives were best understood through the case vignettes. The case vignettes allowed for an understanding of the context of the study abroad experience and for an understanding of how individuals made sense of their experiences within the course of their own life. The students' stories are compelling.

They present a window onto amazing experiences and onto the very personal ways that

those experiences are understood. The case vignettes show that sometimes the study abroad experience can be more than another experience abroad. It can be profound.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of culture learning in study abroad through the perceptions of undergraduate students who studied abroad. The research design allowed for situating what students reported about culture learning within the context of their overall learning experience abroad. The study sought to understand how undergraduate students who studied abroad understood the meaning of their experiences. Because the research focused on students' perceptions and on the meaning of students' experiences, a qualitative interpretive approach was appropriate.

In the course of research for this study, as can be typical of qualitative approaches, the focus of the research shifted. Students began to reveal fascinating ways in which culture learning was deeply rooted in their perspectives on the overall experience and reflected on the ways in which they made meaning out of their experiences. The meanings that students constructed of their experiences were embedded in the ways in which they incorporated the experiences into the context of their lives. Students incorporated these experiences into their lives in ways that were unique and in ways that often grew out of interactions between characteristics and perspectives they brought to the experience and events that came to impact the experience. Thus, the interpretations derived from the research in many ways speak more to the meaning of the study abroad experience for students than to what was learned about culture.

At the same time, this study does provide an in-depth understanding of culture learning in study abroad from the students' perspective. While it was initially envisioned that the context of meaning would provide important background information, the context of meaning ended up moving to the foreground of the study. It is simply that, from the students' perspective, understanding culture learning was derived from, and took place in

conjunction with, the meaning of the experience and thus cannot be well understood outside of this greater context.

This summary of findings is considered in accord with the three research questions of the study, but rather than presented in their original order they are discussed here in the order of presentation in Chapter 4, Findings and Interpretations.

The research question addressing the meaning of the experience was:

- What are students' perspectives on the meaning of their study abroad experience?

The case vignettes were chosen as a means of sharing the prominent examples derived from this part of the research analysis and interpretation because each student's case vignette had an element that formed a core meaning for the student. Through the student case vignettes, each unique case could be presented and understood in its totality and in context. Tara became friends with the Irish couple, Allen wanted to help others as he was helped in earlier years, Johnny returned to his roots, Alivia's experiences were difficult, Diana had a strong emotional response to her experience, and Erica entered into an internal intellectual struggle. In many cases the students experienced a unique event that profoundly impacted the meaning the experience had for them: Tara was found, Allen had a fellow university student hold his hand, Johnny was invited to drink kava with locals, Alivia had a local roommate, and Diana and Erica were invited to perform a dance in an indigenous community celebration.

The research question that provided a means to gather information on the entire student learning experience abroad was:

- What do undergraduate students perceive that they learned from studying abroad?

Comparative analysis considering all 13 students' cases speaks to this research question.

Nine themes emerged from the data:

- Personal development
- Fulfillment of expectations

- Impact of the U.S.
- Travel
- People
- Open
- Limitations
- Being there
- Connection

The themes provide a depth of insight on students' perceptions of what they learned studying abroad.

The themes are not present in all student cases, and where they are evident they occur to varying degrees. The themes identify what the students thought was important about their learning abroad. They also highlight the meaning that students assign to their experiences. Since most of the terms used to label the themes maintain the language and words of the student participants in the study, the themes are well-grounded in what students actually described about their experiences and in this manner are direct expressions of student perspectives since they remain close to the data.

The research question that was central to the purpose of the study was focused on culture learning and asked:

- How do undergraduate students who studied abroad perceive culture learning?

The study found that students perceived culture learning in terms of perspectives. The students in this study focused their comments on their being "open." They shared how they had developed recognition of a world of diverse perspectives. Even when specifically asked in the interview such questions as "what did you learn about culture?" the students' responses often reverted to a discussion of perspectives. For the students in this study, the theme of "being there" was interwoven with culture learning, and they perceived this aspect of the experience as the way in which their culture learning

occurred. Culture learning was more prominent in students who had developed a personal connection with people of the host culture. When a connection to people was established, the entire study abroad experience of the student was enhanced.

Conclusions

The student participants in the study revealed how in many ways the experience of studying abroad is an individualized experience. Students' experiences could be significantly shaped by unusual and happenstance events, by past life experiences, or by their own identities and self-perceptions. Individual student characteristics or unusual events often played a dominant role in the meaning students constructed of their experiences. The case vignettes provide an illustration of this individualized and highly contextualized process.

In previous studies, when there has been recognition that the individual characteristics of students may play a role in the differences seen in research findings regarding study abroad students, researchers generally have asserted the need to filter out the potential effects of the characteristic. Usually this is accomplished by quantitatively measuring for the characteristic. Chapter 2, Literature Review, included review of one of the first comprehensive research studies in the field of study abroad that found higher levels of "cultural interest" among study abroad students prior to studying abroad compared to students who did not participate in study abroad (Carlson et al., 1990, p. 33-34). Another study measured for levels of ethnocentrism and prejudice and found that students who studied abroad showed less ethnocentrism and prejudice prior to electing to participate in study abroad (Goldstein & Kim, 2006).

In the present study, the individual student characteristics that played a role in their experiences were not attitudinal but were aspects of the students' identity: Tara's self-identity as Catholic and Johnny's self-identity as Asian and Filipino. More importantly, in this study there was no attempt to filter out these individual characteristics

that the students brought with them abroad. Rather, when students indicated that these factors played a role in their experiences, the research focused on understanding *how* these characteristics shaped the meaning of the experience for these students.

Another study reviewed earlier that is relevant to this discussion is one that measured sensation seeking among study abroad students (Schroth & McCormack, 2000). The authors found that study abroad students were not “sensation seekers in search of dangerous activities, parties, and so forth” but rather “serious young scholars who sought experiences not available at home” (Schroth & McCormack, p. 533). Comparatively, in this study some of the students participated in risky behavior. The students represented in the case vignettes participated in activities or ventured into situations that were further removed from the study abroad program and involved a higher level of personal risk. Tara recognized the danger she might have encountered in going home with the Irish couple that found her. Johnny took a risk in accepting an invitation to drink kava with local Fijians. These students also had some of the most meaningful experiences abroad. Similar to the findings regarding sensation seeking, the risky behaviors were not self-detrimental, but were behaviors that involved a more calculated risk in which the potential for a positive outcome was high. What is most extraordinary is that it was these very experiences that resulted in the greatest gains for the students in terms of their overall learning experience abroad.

The case vignettes reveal how answers to the original research questions guiding this study (students’ perspectives regarding what they learned from the study abroad experience, what they learned about culture in the experience, and their perspectives on the meaning of their study abroad experience) are interconnected and positioned within the unique ways students incorporated their study abroad experiences into their lives. When a core element of the experience shaped the entire study abroad experience, the students understood their learning and their culture learning occurring in this context. At

the same time, the unique events that sometimes defined the students' experience greatly impacted the learning process, in particular culture learning. The meaning of the study abroad experience shaped how the students understood culture learning. Study abroad experiences were particularly meaningful when students felt that they had established a connection with people of the host culture.

A prior small-scale qualitative study came to similar conclusions regarding connections with local people (Bond et al., 2005). The study analyzed the journals of students who participated in a short-term program to Cuba. As was shared in the literature review, the authors concluded that "nothing had a more profound impact on how students understood Cuba, its people and, for that matter, themselves than the personal relationships the students established with Cubans" (Bond et al., p. 114). This study supports this finding, but it also goes further in establishing that the results of a personal connection go beyond impact and instead seem to be the very means by which students learn culture.

Considering all 13 students' cases through comparative analysis revealed themes and patterns that would not necessarily be detected through case study analysis alone. The themes and patterns thus provide an important complement to the case vignettes. The identification of themes across the student cases also indicated patterns corresponding to specific types of experiences or study abroad program features.

In English language programs in which students were directly enrolled in courses at a host institution abroad and lived with other international students, the students tended to focus on personal development and travel; however, in many instances students learned a great deal more about the host culture than might be anticipated in this type of program where exposure to and integration with the host culture can often be limited or at least more difficult. Tara learned a great deal about Irish culture in her English-speaking

direct enroll program in Ireland, and Alivia learned a great deal about Swedish culture during her time in her English-speaking direct enroll program in Sweden.

For students in this study who participated in service-learning programs, their statements were almost entirely devoid of references to personal development or travel. The students who participated in these types of experiences positioned their focus on the people of the host culture. These students were also more concerned with culture learning and perceived their learning as occurring through interactions with local people. Many of these students developed strong connections to people of the host culture. Although in this study the service-learning programs were short-term programs, they all provided a context for a high level of interaction with people of the host culture. All four of the students interviewed who participated in these types of programs lived with local people for the duration of the program.

Regardless of the type of experience or the type of program, or whether students were focused on culture and people or on personal development and travel, students perceived culture learning in terms of perspectives, not specific cultural facts or cultural knowledge. The students in this study talked about their perspectives in terms of being “open” or open-minded. They recognized a world of differing perspectives, they questioned their own perspectives or perspectives of their own culture, and they felt that their perspectives changed as a result of their experiences abroad. All students in the study believed strongly in the importance of “being there” or having direct personal experience abroad to effect this kind of learning. The importance of “being there” concurs with previous research cited in the literature review regarding the importance of immersion. In a small-scale qualitative study analyzed student journals and reflective papers to assess cultural awareness (Gray et al., 2002), the authors concluded that students identified the benefits “from cultural immersion as the single most important

aspect of study abroad” (Gray et al., p. 49). In this study, students were often emphatic that there is simply no other way to learn what they learned from studying abroad.

Relationship with Extant Literature

Although it is evident that in regard to the themes identified in this study there are some precedents in the study abroad literature, this study differs from previous research in a number of important ways. First, this study asked a different set of research questions. The study focused on students’ perspectives and students’ constructions of meaning. Where this study goes well beyond prior research is in the interconnectedness of these two aspects and in situating the analysis of culture learning within this greater context. Second, the findings and interpretations in this study are presented in thick descriptive detail replete with large segments of raw data, allowing the students who have studied abroad to present their own stories of their experiences as they understand them. Although previous qualitative research may well have collected this kind of extensive data, findings and results of those studies have not been presented in this level of detail. This study is unique in the presentation of case vignettes that portray students’ experiences in their entirety and in context. Third, culture learning is defined here as all that can be learned regarding culture with no distinction made in terms of cognitive, affective, or behavioral learning dimensions. Fourth, student learning in study abroad is defined in this study as both academic or knowledge-based learning and personal development. With this view, learning encompassed everything the students experienced abroad. This positioned the study within the framework of the theory of student involvement (Astin, 1985) and allows for a more complete understanding of how and why the experience of studying abroad can be so powerful. Finally, the interpretations derived from the data in this study cast a different light on culture learning in study abroad. The study found that culture learning is focused on recognition of the multiplicity of perspectives and on the shifting of individual perspectives in response. The study also

identified that the most important factor in enhancing culture learning is establishing a personal bond with people of the host culture. The interpretations of the student case vignettes show how the meaning of study abroad experiences is constructed in individual and unique ways that are tied to how students incorporated the experience into their lives.

Implications of the Study

Implications for Theory

The emphasis that the students in this study placed on “being there” acknowledges their level of involvement in their study abroad experiences. “Being there” embodies the completeness of the immersion into the experience. As the students in this study showed, the experiences of “being there” reach to all the senses. Students experienced new sights, new tastes, and new smells. Since location or place is central to “being there,” where the student is located matters. While in the context of the study abroad experience, the option of withdrawal is not as available as it is in an educational activity back home. When abroad, students may temporarily withdraw through time spent alone, perhaps in the confines of their residence, but they cannot completely escape “being there” unless or until they return home. Astin’s (1985) theory of student involvement provides a means of understanding why studying abroad can be such a powerful learning experience.

Involvement theory considers within the bounds of student learning not only academic learning or acquiring knowledge but also learning that is non-academic. This study showed that personal development was an important result of students’ experiences abroad. Personal development is not simply a side-effect of learning in study abroad but rather is part of the entire learning process and fosters learning along other dimensions. Students in this study also learned in the context of travel. Travel is connected to the location or place and the experiences of “being there.”

It is clear from this study that a great deal of the learning that takes place during study abroad occurs outside of the parameters of the academic realm or the structured elements of the study abroad program. Albeit that certain types of study abroad programs can impact learning (for instance, programs that can provide a context that fosters interaction with locals), the prominence of happenstance and accidental events in the student cases presented in this study suggests that these outside factors play an immense role in learning during study abroad.

This study indicates that the more students moved outside of the study abroad program and the more they participated in independent activities, the more learning took place. Simultaneously, the more risks students took in their activities outside of the program, the more learning occurred. While university personnel are generally supportive and encouraging of the peripheral travel that students undertake while studying abroad, acknowledging a direct positive relationship between greater risk-taking and greater learning is a notion that may make university personnel uncomfortable.

One of Astin's (1985) key educational postulates is that "the amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of students' involvement in that program" (p. 136). The experiences of the study abroad students in this study lend much support to the validity of this claim. It is typical for study abroad students to assert that their experiences abroad were the best experiences of their college careers. Many of the students in this study were able to affirm quite eloquently their sense that studying abroad resulted in an immense amount of learning and personal development.

Astin's other educational postulate that is of most relevance to educational institutions is "the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement" (1985, p. 136).

This study shows that studying abroad is extremely effective at increasing student

involvement. Therefore, one of the ways for educational institutions to increase student involvement is to increase student participation in study abroad.

This study also points to consideration of the role of interpersonal interaction in student learning and in involvement theory. In this study, student learning was significantly enhanced when students made a connection with people of the host culture. Many students believed that their learning took place through these connections. Recall that Alivia asserted that a connection to a local individual was necessary to find a way into the culture. Astin states, “the theory of involvement emphasizes the active participation of the students in the learning process” (1985, p. 142). Experiencing for themselves, “being there,” and learning from local individuals are all highly active endeavors that made a difference in the level of student learning for the study abroad students. Student involvement must be direct, genuine, and authentic. Involvement is experiential. Erica captured the essence of the notion of *active* within the connection to people when she explained the power of being *with* the indigenous women.

Implications for Additional Research

The lessons learned from this study can provide a springboard for future research. Research that further explores the application of the theory of student involvement may be fruitful for both the field of study abroad and for academic institutions concerned with increasing the potentials of student learning. Study abroad provides a high level of student involvement. It would be important to know more about what specific aspects of the study abroad experience are best at enabling student involvement. This knowledge could aid academic institutions in structuring study abroad programs to increase student learning. For academic institutions, an analysis of study abroad through the student involvement theory lens may provide good fodder in order to lobby for increased support of study abroad across the institution.

Future research can move beyond the limitations and delimitations noted for this study, which was focused on a relatively small group of study abroad students from one institution. Further, the student participants represented specific types of study abroad programs. While this interpretive research project was not aimed at providing generalizations or predictions outside of the realm of this study, it would be beneficial to understand the study abroad experiences of students in different types of programs and of students at different U.S. academic institutions.

Another limitation of this study is that it originated with a focus on culture learning. Although other types of learning were included as part of the overall context of learning, much of the conversation with the student participants focused on the cultural dimensions of their experiences. Personal development emerged as an important theme among the students in this study, and additional research concentrating on this theme could provide a much greater understanding of this kind of student learning. Likewise, some of the students in this study participated in programs in which language learning was one of the program objectives, but language learning was not the focus of the study. A body of literature is dedicated to the issue of language learning, but it was not reviewed prior to this study. The area of connection between language learning and other kinds of learning is ground in which to explore future research. Other discipline-specific learning seems particularly fertile ground for further research. Understanding how studying abroad in discipline-specific programs directly fosters enhanced learning within the discipline would be a most welcome addition to understanding student learning.

One of the delimiting factors of this study is that it concerns only U.S. students who study abroad. Academic institutions in other countries also send students into study abroad programs. Exploring the experiences of study abroad students from other home countries would potentially add important perspectives into the discussion of student

learning in study abroad. It would be equally important to note what aspects of the student experience abroad are unique to U.S. students.

Further research regarding the impact of structured reflection on student learning in study abroad programs is needed. This study found that in the service-learning programs the role of structured reflection with program staff was not an important learning element for the students, or at least was not as important as other factors affecting learning. This particular finding thus does not support findings from other previous research noted in Chapter 2, Literature Review; however, in this study only four students participated in service-learning programs, and they were from two short-term summer programs. Research on students' experiences in longer-term programs or in programs in which the frequency or effectiveness of reflective activity is increased may result in a different finding.

Related to the issue of structured reflection, research on the role of the Program Director in study abroad programs is equally needed. The students in this study did not offer indications that the Program Director was important to their experiences abroad; however, the interview questions focused on how students learned culture and from whom, so it is possible that, while students perceive their culture learning as not occurring along these lines, their discipline-specific or knowledge-based learning was impacted by the Program Director. In contrast, both Tara and Johnny offered their high regards for a host institution faculty member and spoke to the importance these individuals played in learning culture. Perhaps, faculty or staff members from students' home institution simply can not fulfill the apparent need for culture learning to be direct, authentic, and take place through contact with a member of the host country and culture.

It is hoped that this study will spawn interest in further qualitative interpretive research on the study abroad experience of university students. Much of the previous research in the field of study abroad is quantitative. As was clearly demonstrated through

a discussion of the quantitative research review in Chapter 2, Literature Review, quantitative research is limited in providing an in-depth understanding of the study abroad experiences of students. As this study shows, students' experiences abroad can be fascinating portrayals of student learning and personal development. Students have much to share about their experiences, and this is often best captured through their own stories which can best be understood and shared through qualitative research.

Implications for Practice

This study points to directions where the practitioners in the field of study abroad, both study abroad offices and study abroad professionals, may look to increase the learning potential of study abroad programs. This study showed that interaction with individuals from the host culture is vital to students in the study abroad experience. Structural elements of study abroad programs can affect opportunity for interaction. Programming activities that take place prior to studying abroad and following students' reentry back home could also bolster learning for study abroad students.

In this study, living arrangements appeared to be one area that can affect interaction between study abroad students and individuals from the host culture. Living arrangements seem to be effective in a number of different models. Students in this study who experienced more integration in their living arrangements lived in host families, lived as a group with local university students, and lived in university accommodations where they were mixed with local students.

Other aspects of a study abroad program that place students in close interaction with locals have the potential to be just as effective. Service-learning programs were also shown, in this study, to be programs that create situations of interaction by virtue of the service projects. It is envisioned that other types of innovative programming that place study abroad students in a local context may have great potential to facilitate interaction.

Providing study abroad students with local students who can serve as cultural guides may be a simple way to lay a foundation for interaction.

Looking back at all the experiences shared in the course of this research, one is struck by some of the unmet potential for student learning. Several of the students did not experience the kind of personal connection with the host culture that became so important to those students that did. Scott realized where his experience and his learning abroad had fallen short. A case such as Alivia's is particularly striking in the realization that with five experiences abroad it was only in one that she found her way into the culture. One gets the sense that Alivia could have learned so much more.

Programming activities that take place with faculty leading programs or with study abroad offices may have an impact on the students' study abroad experience. Students could benefit from preparation and orientation programming that asks them to identify their goals for their study abroad experience, think about their own self-identity, and evaluate their present knowledge of the host culture and country. Given the issue of (and the potential benefits of) risk-taking that emerged as prominent in this study, it may be beneficial to provide students with basic risk assessment skills so that they are better positioned to make decisions about what situations hold greater potential to enhance their experience and less potential for danger. Upon return, students could benefit from reentry programs that facilitate reflection on the experience, allowing them to successfully process their learning and develop awareness of the meaning the experience has for them. Several of the student participants in this study expressed their gratitude at participating in the study because it allowed them to talk about issues that they had not talked about and to think about issues that they had never raised to the level of conscious thought. Allowing students an opportunity for this kind of guided reflection has great potential for student learning in study abroad.

Implications for Assessment of Culture Learning

For the students in this study, culture learning was less about the nuts and bolts of culture or about learning specific cultural facts. What students learned about the specifics of culture appears to vary greatly. For nearly all of the students, however, the focus on culture learning was on becoming “open.” The students talked about perspectives and their own changing perspectives. Shelley talked about having “a different perspective on the world.” Erica had learned a great deal about Peruvian culture, but the specifics were not as important to her as her own shift in perspective: “always it does remove me further... from my own perspective.”

The perceived change in the students’ perspectives is a change in how they understand what a perspective is. Being more “open” or “open-minded” can be described in terms of moving from an understanding of perspective as natural, singular, right, and objective to an understanding of perspective as created, constructed, plural, and subjective. This is a move from seeing or knowing just one perspective to seeing or knowing the possibility of multiple perspectives. This is recognition that one perspective is one among many. In Bennett’s developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, this is a movement from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism (1993, p. 29-65). What is acknowledged by the present study is that this is an aspect of culture learning that students felt was most important to them. This is how the students perceived culture learning.

As the literature review showed, measurement of the nuts and bolts of what students learn about culture by studying abroad is usually undertaken through a quantitative approach, but this kind of measurement is not only difficult and problematic but bypasses students’ perceptions. Because it bypasses students’ perceptions, these measurements cannot assess how students interpret culture learning or how students view culture learning as affecting their lives and the lives of others. This study demonstrated

that an in-depth understanding of culture learning in study abroad can be achieved when the process of learning is viewed in its entire context and when an attempt is made to comprehend how students incorporate the meaning of what they learn into the context of their lives.

While interpretive qualitative research may be difficult, time-consuming, and does not yield results that can be presented, shared, or quoted as easily as quantitative data can be, it does have the ability to provide insight and understanding not able to be obtained in any other way. Many times, quantitative research is motivated by the increasing needs of accountability within academic institutions of higher education and the pressures of public accountability. Additionally, within many academic institutions the pressures of competition over ever-shrinking budgets demand that the case for positive outcomes assessment of study abroad be made in ways traditionally more readily digested by administrators, by numbers more easily quantified; however, culture learning belongs to a realm that is complex and that impacts cognitive, behavioral, and attitudinal dimensions. To do justice to this type of learning, assessment of culture learning warrants the effort of qualitative work.

Implications for a National Agenda

This study provides a means to assess the objectives of the proposed national agenda for study abroad. The question must be posed: Based on what is known about culture learning in study abroad from this study, can the national objectives be achieved? National legislation proposes a goal of 1,000,000 students studying abroad annually within a decade. It is based upon the tenet that studying abroad will build a national storehouse of culture knowledge. The federal Resolutions that are the basis of the national agenda, known as the *Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act of 2007*, state that the purposes of the act are “to significantly enhance the global competitiveness and international knowledge base of the United States . . . to enhance the

foreign policy capacity of the United States” (S.991, March, 2007; H.R.1469, Library of Congress, March, 2007). Specifically, the national agenda seeks language knowledge and knowledge of cultures in specific areas of the world. The Act expresses the hope that financial support can be lent to the cause so that the nation can greatly increase the numbers of students going to “nontraditional study abroad destinations such as the Peoples’ Republic of China, countries of the Middle East region, and developing countries” (S.991 and H.R.1469, Library of Congress, March, 2007).

The foundations of the act are found in an earlier document, released in 2003, by a blue-ribbon panel (NAFSA, Securing America’s Future: Global Education for a Global Age, 2003). It served as a call to arms for the case of study abroad as a national agenda. The authors asserted

We are unnecessarily putting ourselves at risk because of our stubborn monolingualism and ignorance of the world. As strong as our country and economy are, we cannot remain prosperous and secure if we do not understand the words and actions of our international neighbors. We need soldiers, diplomats, and business executives who speak Arabic, just as we need speakers of French, Spanish, Chinese, Swahili, Russian, Farsi, Hindi, and dozens of other languages... We can remain as ignorant of the outside world as we were on September 11, or do the work necessary to overcome this handicap. That grim morning took us by surprise, in part, because we had closed our eyes and ears to the world around us. We could not hear or understand what our enemies were saying. (NAFSA, Securing America’s Future, p. 2-3)

The document is clear that the gathering of cultural knowledge and building of a national storehouse of culture and language knowledge has the specific purpose of national security for the U.S.

The first problem with the national initiative is that of its purpose. The use to which the cultural knowledge gathered by study abroad students can be put raises concerns. The goal of the national agenda is one of protection and security, not one of fostering cultural understanding. Earlier national programs likewise raised concerns. Fulbright and later Boren programs each caused concerns about the government's connection to academia, and academics were particularly concerned that their work could be perceived as following federal or propagandist objectives (Dubois, 1995). The Boren program encountered far more skepticism "because of its unilateral approach to foreign policy objectives" (Dubois, p. 13). The Fulbright program was based on reciprocity, with not only American scholars going out from the United States but also scholars from other nations coming into the United States in an equal exchange. Within the new national security focused context, the Fulbright program continues to be seen as a positive one-to-one kind of diplomacy that holds as a central tenet the objective of promoting peace (Peterson, 2002). The Fulbright program was established in 1946 by the U.S. Congress to "enable the government of the United States to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries" (Fulbright, <http://us.fulbrightonline.org/about.html>). When compared to the current statements of the national agenda for study abroad, there has been a perceptible shift in objectives. One researcher noted that "there has emerged a powerful new narrative of security that appears to dwarf most other concerns about public policy and social welfare" (Rivzi, 2004, p. 162). The present study brings into focus the complete disjunction between the national agenda and study abroad students' perspectives. The students in this study offered no recognition of the discussion of national security and did not perceive their experiences in terms of this issue.

The second problem for the national agenda is that of locations. The national agenda calls for extensive cultural knowledge of primarily non-Western locations. The

Open Doors 2008 data continue to show that the top destinations for study abroad are Western locations (IIE, 2008). The top five destinations in order are the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, France, and China. China moved up to surpass Australia in the fifth position only in the last year. European countries account for over half of all United States students abroad annually. The majority, or 55%, of U.S. students were in programs of less than one semester, some of these as short as one week, even days, abroad (IIE). Only 5% of students studied abroad for a full academic year (IIE). There appears to be a long way to go in getting students to the targeted countries of the world in bigger numbers and for significant lengths of time. Based on present patterns, the kind of cultural knowledge that is called for in the national agenda probably cannot be obtained in most current study abroad programs. The program types and locations of students in this present study are fairly comparable to the current national range of programs, and therefore these students' experiences are illuminating of the potential array of experiences abroad.

A third problem for the national agenda is that of cultural knowledge. The national agenda is built on a notion of culture learning that is an acquisition of cultural facts and distinct pieces of cultural information. For the students in this study what they learned about culture was situated within the scope of broader perspectives. Further, what these students did learn about the nuts and bolts of culture was molded and governed by their overall perspectives on other cultures and their own. What was important to the students in this study was not specific cultural knowledge that could potentially add to a national storehouse of information, but rather learning different perspectives and learning of their own change in perspective. Dolby's research on students' American identity found a significant restructuring of that identity in response to their experiences abroad (2004). Similarly, the present study showed many instances in which students commented on looking inward at themselves, sensed that they had become more "open," or realized their own change in perspective.

The change in students' perspectives that were revealed in this study showed that students often became critical of U.S. impact and U.S. economic and foreign policy. Students' change in perspective resulted in an increased sensitivity to the perspectives of people in other countries. Where students developed a strong connection to people in another country, there was a particularly powerful motivation toward increased understanding through a bond that was intellectual and emotional. These kinds of perceptions will likely not aid in achieving the objectives of the national agenda and may, in fact, work counter to it.

This study provides a lens on the study abroad experiences of students that compels us to think more critically about what it means for students to study abroad. As United States students study and learn around the world, perhaps there is another great potential. Perhaps, rather than one million pieces of cultural knowledge accumulated, there may instead be one million personal connections to the rest of the world.

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