Comments on Developing Intercultural Sensitivity and Competence through Overseas Student Teaching:

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The internationalization of education in general, and teacher education more specifically, has witnessed increased attention and activity devoted to the attainment of global and/or intercultural competence. Students preparing to be teachers, often challenged by rigid program requirements determined by various state, university and professional accreditation bodies, often find it difficult to participate in the traditional semester and/or short-term faculty-led study abroad programs. Overseas student teaching is one option that an increasing number of institutions are pursuing as it offers students an international experience while satisfying program-related requirements. This is good, as teachers must become comfortable, knowledgeable and skilled at living and working in cultural contexts different from their own in order to better understand the experiences their students bring to the classroom and to better prepare their future students to understand and work with others to resolve the global problems they are certain to confront. But we must be careful that we do not simply make assumptions about the impact of such experiences without fully investigating what is, in fact, taking place.

Vande Berg, Paige and Lou, in their recent volume *Student Learning Abroad: What our Students are Learning, What they’re Not, and What we can do About It* (2012), raise important issues and questions concerning the assumptions often made about the impact of study abroad on student learning. Of special relevance here is what has been referred to as the “immersion hypothesis,” the assumptions that: 1) students learn effectively while abroad simply by being exposed to new and different cultures; 2) reports from returning students that they have been “transformed” provides evidence that being immersed in the experience is, in fact, effective; and then based on this 3) because most students say they are learning effectively while abroad, it makes sense to focus more on getting larger numbers of students abroad than on working to improve the teaching and learning that takes place. These assumptions appear to underlie the meteoric rise in the number of study abroad programs being offered (mostly short-term) and students studying abroad. Mind you, this can be good, as more teachers need to have significant international experiences. But we need to ask, “What are the outcomes we are most interested in, and how do we know if we are achieving them?”

Numerous studies report that as a result of overseas student teaching there is a positive impact on global knowledge, increased sensitivity to second language learners, enhanced instructional practice, as well as improved employment opportunities (see Cushner and Brennan, 2007, and Malewski, Sharma and Phillion, 2012 for comprehensive citations of supporting research). In addition to impact in the categories identified above, perceived growth in cultural competence is also reported in many of these studies. I say perceived growth because the studies referenced above are either
self-reports or qualitative analysis from interviews, journals, reflections or focus-group discussions, with little or no objective quantitative analysis of the impact beyond student report.

Although acquiring the cognitive elements of global competence is without a doubt important, I am most concerned with one particular aspect – the acquisition of intercultural competence. Intercultural competence refers to the knowledge and skills that enable people to make increasingly more complex perceptual distinctions about their experience with cultural differences and to behave and interact appropriately with others from backgrounds different from one’s own (Bennett, 1993). Characteristic of intercultural competence is its focus on the penetration that occurs between individuals at the interpersonal level. More specifically, interculturally competent individuals: are able to adapt their perspective and behavior to the time, the place and the circumstance in which they find themselves; understand the circumstances in which others experience their lives; have the ability to communicate effectively with others whose language, ways of thinking and interacting are different from their own; and are willing and able to work with others to solve common problems. The acquisition of intercultural skills serves multiple needs – they are fundamental for teachers who must develop rapport and build trust in order to reach students and families from a wide array of backgrounds and experiences, and they are essential for young people to acquire as it is they who will be required to collaborate with people different from themselves to better understand and solve the global problems they are certain to confront in the years ahead. Focusing on the intercultural dimension also enables us to cut across a wide-range of diversities allowing us to address both domestic as well as global concepts and concerns.

One of the most widely referenced conceptions of intercultural competence, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennett, 1993), proposes a continuum from a highly ethnocentric or monocultural mindset on one end to a more ethnorelative or intercultural mindset on the other. According to the DMIS, three stages lie on the ethnocentric side of the continuum – Denial, Defense and Minimization, and three stages reflect increasingly ethnorelative perspectives and skills – Acceptance, Adaptability and Integration. The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), the most widely used assessment tool designed to determine where on the DMIS continuum an individual or organization falls (Hammer & Bennett, 2003), places people along one of these five stages: Denial, Polarization (referred to as Defense in the DMIS), Minimization, Acceptance, and Adaptation.

The IDI has been used to assess the development of intercultural sensitivity as a result of study abroad. Among the larger of such studies, the Georgetown Consortium Study (Vande Berg, Connor-Linton & Paige, 2009) looked at 1,050 U. S. students studying on 61 different programs to determine the degree to which study abroad produced intercultural learning. In 60 of the 61 programs, the average gain on the IDI was minimal (1.32 pts.), statistically insignificant. In the one program that resulted in significant gain (8.08 pts. on the IDI) students were required to enroll in a course that had intercultural components before, during and after the experience, thus challenging the traditional “sink or swim,” or immersion hypothesis.
As director of COST, the Consortium for Overseas Student Teaching, a collaboration of 15 U.S. universities that have been sending student teachers overseas since 1972 (see www.costprogram.org), I was interested in knowing the degree to which students gained intercultural competence as a result of the experience. Each year, approximately 125 students from the COST sending institutions complete all or part of their student teaching through arrangements with a variety of universities, international schools and independent consultants in about 15 different countries (the number of receiving sites may vary from year to year). Students typically spend 8-15 weeks in a host school (length of time varies by institution and individual need) and live with host families where possible. While many of the studies referenced above imply a gain in intercultural competence, this specific aspect of the overseas student teaching experience has not been adequately investigated by any objective measure.

In the 2013 Academic Year, I investigated the impact of an overseas student teaching experience on the intercultural development, as measured by the IDI, of 60 student teachers (54 students taught overseas in two treatment groups and 8 served as a stay-at-home control group). I inquired into the following research questions:

- Is there a change in intercultural sensitivity as measured by the IDI as a result of an 8-15 week overseas student teaching experience?
- Is there a change in intercultural sensitivity as measured by the IDI as a result of an 8-15 week overseas student teaching experience when reflective questions are sent to student teachers every two weeks?
- Is there a change in the Control Group in intercultural sensitivity as measured by the IDI as a result of an 8-15 week domestic student teaching experience?

Without going into all the details of the study (a full research article is in preparation), the results indicate that there was no significant change in student teachers’ intercultural competence as measured by the IDI: as a result of an overseas student teaching experience of 8-15 weeks; as a result of an overseas student teaching experience of 8-15 weeks when provided with reflective questions every 2-3 weeks throughout the experience; nor as a result of student teaching in a local domestic setting.

These results appear consistent with the Georgetown Consortium Study, suggesting that simply sending students into an overseas student teaching experience results only in marginal gains in intercultural development. I might echo here what Vande Berg, et al, suggested (Vande Berg, et al, 2012). That is – most students, when left to their own devices, do not develop much in the intercultural sphere, even when they had been “immersed” in another culture. Being exposed to a different culture, it appears, does not, for the majority of students, prove to be sufficient for advancing their intercultural learning.
If one of our objectives is to increase the intercultural competence of tomorrow’s teachers, and I believe it should be, we cannot simply assume that good things will occur if we immerse our student teachers in an international context. Although experience is essential, it appears that this alone is insufficient. Those responsible for designing and delivering overseas student teaching programs need to actively intervene if they are to maximize student intercultural learning. We thus, need to think strategically and integrate what we are learning from the field of study abroad into the overseas student teaching experience. That is, overseas student teaching experiences should be intentionally focused and built on sound intercultural concepts that include attention to such content as cultural self-knowledge, cultural-other knowledge, as well as how to learn from others in an intercultural setting. These experiences should be guided by pre-determined learning outcomes and on-going assessment, accompanied by cultural mentoring across the experience that emphasizes the role culture plays in the classroom and host community, and require regular reflection and debriefing.


