

Theory Reflections: Contact Theory / Contact Hypothesis / Intergroup Contact

In the field of education abroad,¹ a good deal of research has been carried out in the past several years where findings support tenets of the “Contact Hypothesis”.² In the arenas of both language learning and intercultural learning, it has been shown that mere exposure to the target language or host culture does not automatically lead to learning. While exposure is essential to the process, what students choose to *do* with that exposure is paramount. With the exception of a few extremely motivated and self-sufficient learners, most students do not have the necessary skills and knowledge to create their own learning opportunities and reflect upon their progress independently. This adds another facet to our role as education abroad professionals; as Vande Berg suggests, we need to work “to give students the intercultural tools, conceptual and behavioral, that will allow them to focus on their learning in new and culturally challenging environments.”³ Based on my own doctoral research, I would extend this even further to suggest that language professionals have a complementary role: to provide students with the linguistic tools to communicate and learn in these new environments.

In education abroad and in language learning, the professional’s task continues *throughout* the experience; in the Georgetown Consortium study, facilitation at key points of the semester led to greater increases in students’ Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) scores.⁴ In contrast, students participating in unmediated direct enrollment programs showed no such increases, demonstrating that even learners who experience maximum “exposure” may be overwhelmed by the challenges of the environment and unable to progress at a similar rate.⁵ The pertinence of the challenge and support model⁶ becomes clear when considering such findings. The development of new resources in the field, such as the *Maximizing Study Abroad* series, answers the need for quality materials to both challenge and support students’ linguistic and intercultural learning, while unequivocally affirming that the question is not *if* we need to intervene but rather *how* can we do so most effectively to encourage active and reflective learning on the part of our students. As a practitioner in the field of education abroad who has worked with students on both sides of the Atlantic, I believe that continuous orientation and facilitation that takes advantage of “teachable moments” throughout all the phases of a study abroad experience is the only way to provide the majority of students with diverse learning opportunities, while challenging them to push far beyond any point they could reach without such support.

Higher education as a whole has been moving in this direction for more than ten years. The shift from a teacher-centered paradigm, where a student who doesn’t learn or progress is at fault, to a learner-centered paradigm, where student learning is facilitated by some form of “intervention,” recognizes the role of thoughtful curricular/program design in student learning and development. In study abroad this translates to a cycle of identifying learning outcomes for a program, designing the program to address those objectives, and then assessing the success of the initiative, creating a continual loop that ensures that students are presented with “appropriate”⁷ opportunities that allow them to be engaged and deliberate learners.

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¹ As defined by NAFSA: “U.S. students engaging in study, internship, work, and volunteer opportunities abroad.”

² Such projects include: the *Georgetown Consortium Project* (JSIE 2007), the Engle’s work on *Study Abroad Program Classification Types* (Frontiers 2003 & 2004), James L. Citron’s work on *Host Culture Integration or Third Culture Formation* (Rockin... 2002), and Vija G. Mendelson’s own doctoral work on *Second Language Acquisition in a Study Abroad Context* (Frontiers 2004).

³ Michael Vande Berg, *Intervening in the Learning of U.S. Students Abroad*, p. 397.

⁴ Michael Vande Berg, *Intervening in Student Learning Prior to and During Study Abroad: A Research-Based Inquiry*, slide 25.

⁵ *ibid*, slide 29.

⁶ Bennett, Janet M. *Cultural Marginality: Identity Issues in Intercultural Training*.

⁷ Appropriate in terms of challenge and support (see footnote 6).

What is compelling about the recent trends in research described here is how they reflect the original principles proposed by Allport in 1954. In his seminal work, Allport proposed that the “contact hypothesis” was a myth – arguing that it is not the case that simply putting people together from different cultures would lead to positive contact. Instead, he posited that several conditions must be present in order to achieve the outcomes we so often seek. The impact of Allport’s work has been profound for educators and practitioners in numerous disciplines. In fact, a recent meta-analysis (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006) of more than 500 studies on the contact hypothesis determined that there is significant support for Allport’s conditions, concluding that in order to have positive interactions between members of different groups, consideration must be given to who the participants are, how many there are, what is the nature of the task that they are working on together, and whether or not they have support for their efforts from the community. While much of this research focused on reducing negative stereotypes and perceptions of out-group members (an outcome that might be considered an elementary focus for some programs), the concepts provide ample guidance for creating positive interactions.

The contact hypothesis research, combined with research on language acquisition and intercultural competency development, provides us with a clear direction on how to create the most impactful study abroad experiences. As practitioners, we are well served to understand the research results and just as importantly, the theory underlying the research. For example, the contact hypothesis might help program providers make choices about how many students are too many students in an immersion program (do you have the capacity for sustaining one-to-one matching or small discussion groups with a facilitator?); what type of evidence exists that these students’ experiences are fully supported by their home and host institution; and what tasks are the participants engaging in together (not just that they are in proximity to one another); and much more.

What has been an exciting journey for U.S. study abroad research should be an invitation to conduct this research on a global level. What can we learn, for example, from the thousands of programs on U.S. campuses aimed at improving interactions between U.S. and visa-holding international students? What is happening in the world that does not involve U.S. students? What models have universal appeal, and which ones are context and culture specific? We are at a point in the journey when we can begin compiling research questions and results that drive our understanding of how to use the contact theory, intercultural competency theory, and what is known about language acquisition to guide our strategic reflections, proactive interventions, and learner-centered strategies to propel us along.

– Barbara Kappler Mikk

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