

Practical Experience: Collaborative Research in Short-term Education Abroad

BECCA, a sweet and exuberant sophomore, looked up at us stricken, tears filling her eyes. “She said my PowerPoint was for babies,” she said, referring to the feedback she had just received from her Brazilian professor. “I was just doing it the way I’d been taught.” Our 15 students were nearing the finish line (a public presentation) after a rugged two weeks of research and writing with their Brazilian peers, and it had become strikingly clear that although the end products might not live up to our original lofty ambitions, the opportunities the collaborative research projects provided for cross-cultural learning were priceless.

While the ability to work effectively with people from different cultures has never been more valued by U.S. employers, many U.S. college students—even those who study abroad—will have had few opportunities to improve their cross-cultural communication skills through real-world experience during their undergraduate careers. Aside from those students fortunate enough to do an internship overseas, even most students who study abroad (particularly those who are limited to taking short-term education abroad courses) will interact primarily with fellow U.S. peers, and often U.S. faculty members. The short-term education abroad course that Becca participated in aimed to give students the chance to interact with students and instructors from another country in a complex and substantive way, precisely to develop the cultural competency so critical to success in a rapidly globalizing world. In this multicultural setting, even something as seemingly minor as a PowerPoint presentation could push students to challenge their own cultural framework, try on a new cultural perspective, and practice adapting to a different cultural context.

“Sustainability in a New Age” was designed by Green Mountain College Environmental Law and Policy Professor Rebecca Purdom after spending a sabbatical in Brazil. The short-term course examined issues of development and sustainability in Brazil and included a collaborative research project where U.S. and Brazilian undergraduates worked together to compare contemporary sustainability issues, for instance forest restoration or ethanol production, in Vermont versus in Brazil. To have time to become

familiar with the issues, do preliminary research via Skype with the Brazilian students, and learn a little Portuguese, the class met weekly on campus in Vermont during the semester prior to the trip. Two professors and 15 students then spent four weeks in May and June in Southeastern Brazil. The first week was spent primarily in lectures and field trips. The second and third weeks were dedicated to working on campus with the students’ Brazilian counterparts, culminating in a public presentation. The fourth week included travel to a different area of the country with a couple of days set aside to process the experience as a group and evaluate through individual meetings with each student the learning that had taken place during the month. The primary learning goals of the course included increased knowledge of environmental issues and pressures in Sao Paulo state and the development of the cultural competency skills necessary to successfully navigate Brazilian culture. Students were evaluated on their journal entries (30 percent of the final grade), the cooperative research project (50 percent), and participation (20 percent).

Planning a short-term education abroad course from scratch is always challenging; including a collaborative research project makes the task that much more difficult. If the course objectives include developing cultural competency, however, it may be well worth the extra effort. What better way to learn intercultural communication skills than by working, debating, researching, writing, and learning with peers from another country in an effort to produce a paper and presentation you can all be proud of?

Based on our experience, we would recommend that faculty and staff begin planning a short-term course abroad at least a year in advance of the course start date.



Green Mountain College students gather in front of one of the original buildings of the Methodist University of São Paulo (UMESP). The students conducted research with Brazilian students from UMESP and the Methodist University of Piracicaba.

So what could other institutions considering a similar program learn from our successes and challenges?

Feasibility and Long-term Planning

Based on our experience, we would recommend that faculty and staff begin planning a short-term course abroad at least a year in advance of the course start date. International educators should also consider a number of other questions as they decide if this type of course will be a good fit for their institution and partner institution(s).

1) Who will be leading the trip?

a) *What kind of contacts do the faculty members planning to lead the trip have in the host country?* We worked closely with a number of Brazilian professors to recruit students and supervise the research projects. We found that this model worked best when the Brazilian professors had a previ-

ously established relationship with one of the U.S. professors. When the Brazilian professors had been recruited remotely, it was much easier for them—and their students—to not follow through on the project. One professor disappeared entirely before we even left Vermont. The take home lesson: Establishing relationships early is crucial for the project to be a success.

b) *What background do the faculty members have in the country and with cross-cultural communication?*

The greater the familiarity the faculty and staff accompanying the trip have with the country where they will be working, the better they will be able to trouble-shoot and avoid possible complications. The faculty members should also be very comfortable with the host culture and with cross-cultural communication because they will need to be able to guide the students through their own learning process as they encounter the

challenges that will inevitably arise when working in another culture.

2) *What kind of administrative support can your institution and the host institution(s) provide?*

Planning this type of course entails numerous logistical hurdles, both with the trip planning itself and student recruitment, selection, and orientation at home. If your education abroad office or the international programs office at the host institution can provide you with some logistical support, you will have more time to focus on the curricular planning.

3) *Who are the students you will be working with?*

Completing a joint research project while working through barriers of language and culture will require dedication, patience, and commitment from the students from both countries. You will have some ability to select students from your institution who you think will be successful (although we found that performance in class was not necessarily an accurate predictor of success abroad; many students surprised us, both positively and negatively), but the selection of the students from the host country is also important. You will want to work with your colleagues abroad to ensure that the peer collaborators have a sufficient command of English to work with your students (unless your students are fluent in the host country language) and have the appropriate academic background for the project. Some type of official incentive (such as academic credit, a certificate, or grades) may also increase commitment to the project.

4) *What is the academic schedule of your partner institution?*

Undertaking a joint research project will be more challenging if a school vacation falls in the middle of your trip, or if the students you are working with are in the middle of finals. You may need to adjust your schedule to better enable strong participation from the host country students.

5) What kind of technology will you have access to while abroad?

We used Skype during the semester preceding the trip to introduce the student working groups and start the research projects. Once in Brazil, our students were able to use computer labs with internet access at our host institutions. Their final presentations were done on PowerPoint. This was all possible because we were in a highly developed region of a rapidly developing country. If the on the ground conditions where you will be working are markedly different, you will need to plan your projects and outcomes accordingly.

Designing the Course

If the faculty background and relationships, institutional support, and logistics are in place to plan a collaborative research course, what else should you keep in mind in planning the course?

You want a project that is academically rigorous, and yet achievable in the time allotted. Our students worked together remotely during the semester that led up to our trip, and then had two weeks to work together in country (interspersed with lectures, field trips, and cultural activities) to craft a substantial research paper and public PowerPoint presentation. The students worked hard, yet the results varied enormously. To give the students the best chance for success, set clear goals and deadlines from the beginning. Have deliverables due early on so that problems can be addressed then. Be available to provide feedback at every stage, and be flexible.

Schedule In-Country Time

Remember you are working with young people. Our students were serious and committed to their projects, and yet it was overwhelmingly compelling to spend time just having fun with their new Brazilian friends. And that was part of the point. Be sure to include social activities and downtime in your schedule. Your students will learn more, and they'll be more productive, if they get to relax and have fun as well as study.

Anticipate cultural adjustments, fatigue, sickness, and distraction. Your students will probably not be as productive academically



Green Mountain College students visited Alto Ribeira State Tourist Park (PETAR) in São Paulo State; visiting the park allowed the class to explore the impacts of ecotourism on the Atlantic Rainforest and communities near the park.

ically as they would be at home, but they will be learning other important lessons. They also may be traveling abroad for the first time, or they may have a terrible cold, have eaten meat accidentally, or have fallen in love. The goal of the travel course is not just to produce a research paper, it is also to learn through new experiences in another country. Make sure to allow time for these “unexpected” distractions.

Plan time and space for check-ins and processing. Brazil is a quickly developing country in many ways not so different from the United States. Yet our students struggled with things as simple as eating lunch (How do I order? Is there meat in that?). In doing the collaborative research projects, our students also had to learn to respect and accommodate the academic priorities of their Brazilian peers and professors, which were sometimes very different from their own. Dealing with cultural differences can be disorienting and exhausting, so it is important to set aside some time for your group to discuss what they are experiencing.

Plan an achievable end-point and appropriate recognition. Joint research papers could go back and forth in editing until all the students involved have graduate degrees, which isn't the point. We planned a public presentation for our last day on-campus in Brazil, which meant the projects had to be complete. We might have gotten more polished work if they had kept working on them for the remainder of the trip,

and after, but it was more important to be finished and have time and space to reflect on the process. You also want to plan some official recognition of the relationships that have been built through this collaborative process. We had a final dinner, complete with presents, hugs, and tears, to acknowledge the friendships that had grown out of the pressures of working together.

Conclusions, Reflections, and Surprising Take-aways

It is important to balance the product and process of a short-term course abroad. In addition to hoping that students would finish the course with a greater understanding of the struggles developing countries face in creating clean water systems, eco-tourism, and sustainable urban development, we aimed to give our students the opportunity to practice cross-cultural communication and to learn about the challenges of working in another culture in professional and academic settings. When you schedule your debriefing sessions, write journal prompts, or have informal check-ins with your students, be sure to devote time and energy to the cultural adjustment issues as well as the more academic ones. And if the academic product sometimes takes a backseat to the collaborative process, remember that the process may be where the most important learning is taking place.

Also, anticipate that cultural differences will present both expected (language, food, attitudes toward time) and unexpected (PowerPoint) challenges, and be prepared to use those challenges as learning opportunities.

In the example cited at the beginning, Becca encountered a difference in cultural perspective in a professor's critique of her PowerPoint presentation. Becca had been taught according to U.S. academic norms to use ample pictures and limited text; she was prepared to use the slide as a prompt for a more nuanced explanation during the presentation. The Brazilian professors and students, however, found this style to be simplistic and juvenile, almost cartoonish. They preferred slides packed with text, which they saw as more professional and a more accurate representation of their research. With our U.S. training, we agreed with our students and found the Brazilian tendency jarring. Yet, we encouraged our students to look at both perspectives and find a compromise. And this leads me to my next point,

Instructors must beware of their own cultural lenses. Unless an instructor is completely bicultural, he or she should be prepared to acknowledge his or her own confusions and challenges to students, and

check himself (or herself) when dealing with colleagues. Becoming skilled in cross-cultural communication is a lifelong process, and it can be highly valuable for students to witness an instructor's own struggles to build deep, honest, and respectful relationships with international students and colleagues.

Lastly, know that designing a short-term education abroad course, despite the fact that it may be challenging at times, will be well worth it. Although we knew that not all of our course objectives had been fully achieved, we watched our students struggle with Brazilian academic norms and develop deep relationships with their Brazilian peers, and we knew they were learning. In the post-course written evaluation, fully 100 percent of the students reported that the joint research project was "highly valuable" in achieving the course's learning goals. One student summed up the pivotal importance of the research projects when she said, "Working on the projects with the [Brazilian] students gave me the most insight out of all the experiences

in Brazil... [I learned] how different modes of education can be, how difficult a language barrier is, and even more, how difficult it is to work with two groups of people with different cultural and developmental frameworks. I could have theorized about all these things, but would never have internalized certain issues without these interactions. I also would never have made what I consider to be lifelong friendships." If including collaborative research is a possibility when planning an education abroad short-term course, do it. Your students will thank you. **IE**

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