

International Study and Experiential Learning: The Academic Context

Lynne Montrose

Regis University

Introduction

Recently a student returned from a semester in Ireland and enthusiastically reported that it was “an amazing learning experience.” Intrigued, I asked her, “What did you learn?” She began to describe the trip, her residential situation, some humorous events that had occurred, and then she stopped. She had a relatively easy time recounting the concrete experiences of the semester, reflecting about key events that had meaning for her, but when it came time to put what she had experienced over the semester into an educational context she didn’t know where to begin. Study abroad opportunities provide some of the richest and most powerful forms of experiential learning for our students. However, there is far too little understanding of the theory and practice of this type of learning. The activity of studying in a foreign country in and of itself does not provide learning—the kind of learning that can be evaluated, graded, and accredited. How are we to understand the learning derived from out-of-classroom experiences abroad?

One approach to understanding experiential learning is to compare it to traditional classroom learning. In the summer of 2001, a brief but interesting story aired on CNN: some clever Japanese farmers in southern Japan had solved the dilemma of storing awkward, cumbersome, oblong watermelons into small, square Japanese refrigerators. The farmers inserted the seedlings into square, tempered glass cases while the fruit was still growing on the vine. The square boxes were the exact dimensions of the typical refrigerator and produced square melons that were a perfect fit. However, what may be good for watermelons may not be so good for students!

The watermelon story demonstrates by way of analogy the difference between traditional and experiential education. The mission of traditional education is the standardization of learning so that students can graduate and neatly “fit” into existing social institutions, opportunities, and employment in this manner. In most traditional college classrooms, a “one size fits all” syllabus is produced for the entire classroom. The instructor determines the content of the course and develops the learning goals, chooses the texts, and designs the methods of evaluating the students in the course. Of course, there is a legitimate place for channeling and directing minds. Traditional classroom learning has a long history, with outcomes that are valid and predictable, in a time-honored paradigm that is familiar to those of us in academe. It is by far the most common learning mode, anticipated by students and practiced in most educational settings in the United States and around the world.

Experiential education complements traditional models of education as a method of teaching and learning that supports the individualized knowledge that occurs outside the classroom walls, and allows students to stretch in unique and creative directions. Moreover, this type of learning exposes students through concrete learning experiences to different ways of processing how they acquire knowledge. Experiential education creates a place for the oblong, bulky kind of learning that doesn’t “fit” as neatly into the classroom format. Because the learning takes place outside of the classroom, it is beyond the comfort and predictability of the student’s home learning environment, a place that is new and unfamiliar, such as a new culture and society.

Experiential learning sends students out of the classroom into a world that is complex and interconnected, challenging their prevailing world view and their ability to take responsibility for their own learning. In experiential learning it is the student who determines intentional, measurable learning objectives. Learning is then evaluated based on reading, writing, presenting, or producing projects that measure achievement based on direct experience.

The core methodology of experiential learning is designed to promote a sound academic agenda, where legitimate grades can be given, academic course credit can be awarded, and concrete experiences are integrated into the curriculum. This learning paradigm of deriving educational outcomes from direct experience can be and is structured for the

awarding of academic credit. It does not work as well if the study abroad experience is a brief tour, a trip, or a sightseeing adventure in a foreign country. Understanding the theory and practice of experiential learning is necessary to support and legitimize academic integration of an international experience with the rigor and credibility afforded to traditional discipline-based learning.

Experiential learning is a pedagogy that actively engages the student in the phenomena that they are studying, such as in cooperative education, internships, clinical experience, service learning, outdoor leadership, organizational development, and activity-based learning. When students develop their own research agenda, engage in critical thinking and test their interpersonal skills, they come face to face with an alternative worldview, learning through both action and reflection, including the consequences of the larger social and ethical implications of this knowledge. This type of learning engages students in a deliberate process of hands-on problem solving and critical thinking. It often evolves with a minimum of the usual institutional structure dictated to the student in advance of the learning experience. Students in an experiential learning context are not memorizing and feeding back information: they are generating their own ideas and working through possible solutions to complex problems. This integration of concrete action and reflective thought makes possible the evaluation of learning through intentional, measurable learning goals and objectives.

This article will explore experiential learning as a framework for enhancing the educational value of an international experience. After a brief review of theorists of experiential learning, the accepted principles of good practice in the field will be discussed, followed by discussions of the design of learning objectives and learning contracts, and the importance of this type of learning as it relates to international programs.

Theorists of Experiential Learning

The American philosopher John Dewey is considered the modern father of the pedagogy of experiential learning. He posited, late in the 19th century, that when we experience something, we act upon it, creating a consequence. We “do” something, and something happens to us in return. How the individual connects these two events denotes the true value of the experience. “Mere activity does not constitute experience,”

says Dewey, “[...] experience involves change, but change is a meaningless transition unless it is consciously connected with the return wave of consequences, which flow from it.” But as Dewey pointed out in *Experience and Education* (1938), even though all genuine education comes about through experience, not all experiences are equally educative:

There is, I think, no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process, just as there is no defect in traditional education greater than its failure to secure the active cooperation of the pupil in construction of the purposes involved in his studying.

Dewey once asserted that traditional, classroom-based education was developed in an effort to train students to become cogs in the machinery of urban industrial capitalism. This kind of education assumes the passive acceptance of the learner and the wisdom and authority of the teacher. Dewey argued that traditional education was inherently undemocratic because the students did not have equality in the hierarchical, top-down classroom structure.

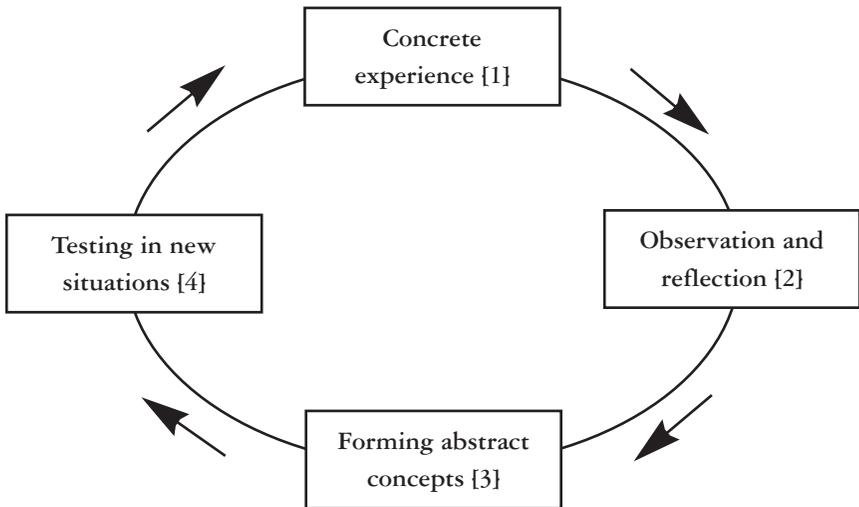
Paolo Friere, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, expanded on this thought with the “banking concept of education.” In Friere’s view of traditional education, the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing educational “deposits.” Friere wrote that, “The teacher leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content (of the lesson). This turns the students into “containers,” receptacles to be “filled” by the teacher. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits, which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat.” But in the final analysis, it is the students themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this undemocratic, non-participatory system. Friere says, “Apart from inquiry, apart from praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and each other” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 53).

Experiential learning, therefore, refers to learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. However this personal approach to learning, paradoxically, does not come naturally to

students. Dr. William G. Perry, Jr., the noted student development theorist, wrote in his book, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years*:

All students can benefit from direct learning opportunities. {...} Most college teaching is vicarious in nature (reading, writing, talking about ideas) and students often have a difficult time making connections between their learning and their own lives.

One of the best known contemporary theorists of experiential learning is David Kolb of Case Western Reserve University. What he calls a “simple description of the learning cycle” (1984), illustrated below, is based on the pioneering work of Kurt Lewin. The cycle begins with a concrete experience, followed by observation and reflection, which are assimilated into the formation of abstract concepts and generalizations, from which implications for action are deduced. Finally, these lead to testing implications of concepts in new situations, followed by another concrete experience, which starts the cycle anew.



Using Kolb’s learning cycle model, experiential educators can structure learning objectives, learning outcomes, and evaluation strategies. This model is a useful tool for understanding the process by which students abroad integrate experience with the analysis of their experience.

The cycle is meant to be a continuing spiral, where the learning achieved from new knowledge gained is formulated into a prediction for the next concrete experience. Within study abroad learning, as the student approaches a new international experience, the first part of the cycle is the immersion in the actual “doing,” or concrete experience of study abroad. The reflection stage is stepping back from the experience and noticing differences, comparing and contrasting what is familiar with experiences that are new. The most important stage for academic assessment is the conceptualization stage, where students generalize and interpret events. This stage is where students ask, “What does this mean?” This is essential to the integration and understanding of relationships or general principles and theories that explain the experience. The final step is testing the new theory or principle in new situations. This is the critical stage, where the student has an opportunity to change behaviors or thinking and apply these changes to a new set of circumstances. This process requires intentional planning and the transfer of new knowledge into concrete actions. Such actions are taken after observations have been refined based on the abstract concepts deduced from reflection on the initial concrete experience.

Chris Argyris and Donald Schon conducted a study of graduate-level field education that led to further development of this model. Unlike Kolb, they developed a theory of action where not only the subject under study is critical to making the experience meaningful, but also the learner’s entire intellectual framework. Schon argued that the epistemological assumptions one brings to the design of experiential learning could have a profound effect on what the educational value of the experience produces. The learner brings to the equation an ability to develop his/her own theory of action along with their knowledge of the field, process skills, and ability to process change in their own behavior.

Experiential education involves the student in a concrete experience, adds pre-determined educational outcomes, and engages the learner in critically analyzing the situation in order to form new knowledge that can be utilized the next time a similar situation is encountered. 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.

And so it is also true of study abroad experiences; it is not the activ-

ity of leaving one's homeland that creates learning, but the subsequent analysis of that activity where the real learning occurs. It is important to link study abroad to a learning paradigm to validate the learning that occurs. Many study abroad programs simply transfer academic credits from one traditional discipline-based educational institution to another without intentionally utilizing the international experience itself as the basis for learning. When the international experience becomes the foundation for academic credit and grades, then the tools of experiential learning and practice may be used to assess study abroad learning.

Principles of Good Practice of Experiential Education

The National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE), a professional association for practitioners of experiential learning, has developed a set of guidelines referred to as "Principles of Good Practice," which are intended to apply to all of the various programs that embody experiential learning. The learning opportunities for students are maximized when they are contextualized within programs that follow these principles. The NSEE principles are:

Intention. The student, faculty, and study abroad coordinator should determine what specific learning is intended as a result of the experience. Why is the student going abroad; what could be gained in a learning context from this experience?

Authenticity. Situations are "real" for the learner and not simulated. There are a few experiences that can encapsulate "authenticity," like the physical and emotional experience of traveling far away from the comfort and familiarity of one's home.

Planning. The learning activity or program must have realistic, intentional, and, most importantly, measurable, objectives and goals.

Clarity. Communicating expectations and goals between the student, instructor, study abroad site coordinator and home institution coordinator is essential. A learning contract, orientation, training and mentoring, and agreement should be designed to maximize the learning opportunity. Defined protocols and procedures shared between all stakeholders are the keys to successful experiential learning.

Monitoring and Assessment. It is important to establish ongoing

processes that define each person's role, what outcomes are expected, evaluation measures. These processes might include: journals and progress reports, critical incidence essays, threaded online discussion groups, e-mail communications with professors or study abroad coordinators at the home institution.

Reflection. The continuous process of personal self-examination enables the learner to examine his/her actions and learning against the outcome measures established at the beginning of the experience. Reflection can be facilitated through personal journaling during the experience, debriefing sessions upon the student's return home, and reflective questions posed online during the study abroad period.

Evaluation. Can be quantitative or qualitative, and should support the learner's assessment of predicted learning outcomes against the outcomes actually achieved. Students evaluate their experience, and instructors, site supervisors, and community partners can all have an evaluative role. Students can be evaluated by submitting writing assignments like portfolios, analytical papers, reflection essays, or through analyzing reading assignments that complement the study abroad experience. Oral presentations can be evaluated after students return, or projects such as video diaries, case studies, PowerPoint presentations, or photography portfolios can be utilized.

Acknowledgement. A final event, celebration, or "passage," giving all of the stakeholders' acknowledgement and thanks for their participation and guidance in the learning process is an important way to bring closure to experiential learning. Feedback and sharing experiences are structured ways of showing appreciation for the effort and outcome of the learning experience.

The implementation of a structured and comprehensive experiential program that incorporates the principles of good practice will serve as a foundation to insure quality learning outcomes for study abroad participants.

Determining and Assessing Learning Objectives

The critical success factor in deriving meaningful learning from a study abroad experience is helping students articulate intentional, mea-

Learning Objectives Matrix

{Specific Program Content}	{ Core Learning Outcomes }			
	Academic Integration	Skills Development	Problem Posing	Values Clarification
Academic Courses		To learn about the architecture of Barcelona and how this is influenced by the history and culture of the city		
Language and Culture	Deepen my understanding of the cultural implications resulting from the partition of the six counties of Northern Ireland			
Government, History or Geography	Through a video diary, identify historical, government and geographical landmarks of my host country			
International Travel/Group Dynamics				Understand intercultural communications and the effect they have on values and beliefs
Outstanding Critical Incident			Understand the nature of cultural stereotyping and how to address these issues more productively in my life. To keep a log of incidences of cultural biases that I identify in myself as an American in an international setting	To keep a log of incidences of cultural biases that I identify in myself as an American in an international setting

asurable learning objectives. Proposing preliminary learning objectives before the student arrives at his/her destination will likely meet with confusion and some resistance. In defense of most students' objections to spelling out these goals prior to the actual experience, it does seem counter-intuitive. "How do I know what I want to learn before I have the experience?" is the typical response from students.

Because determining learning objectives is so essential to the experiential process, I have developed a matrix that may be helpful in taking participants through the process of defining intentional learning goals prior to the study abroad experience. Cheryl Cates and Patricia Jones divide learning objectives into four categories: Knowledge to be Acquired, Skills to be Developed, Problems to be Solved, and Values to be Clarified (Cates and Jones, 1999, 44). I have utilized these four categories in designing the above Learning Objectives Matrix.

How to Use the Learning Objectives Matrix

Four core learning goals provide the horizontal axis of the matrix. These objectives encourage students to communicate, analyze critically, and assimilate theoretical concepts with practical experiences.

The goal in the Academic Integration category is the integration of academic disciplinary knowledge with the international experience, to increase technical knowledge as it relates to a specific academic discipline, and to utilize higher-level reasoning skills by discovering a principle from one or more academic disciplines to solve a problem during the study abroad experience.

The Skills Development category includes development of leadership, negotiation, and self-management skills. This particular objective encourages students to develop creative problem solving and decision-making skills, generate alternative solutions, evaluate risk, and implement specific action plans. Evaluation of these skills can include written and oral presentations where students can show the effective transfer of ideas and information.

Problem Posing and Values Clarification categories focus on analyzing situations, developing interpersonal skills, and illuminating one's own values and beliefs. These learning objectives encourage the development of intercultural sensitivity, recognition of political and ethical implications of one's decisions, resourcefulness, and knowledge about oneself.

On the vertical axis are examples of different study abroad program content areas. Faculty, program coordinators, or students, or any combination of stakeholders, can determine the specific content areas particular to their own program. The idea is to identify and then structure the most important learning objectives for that particular study abroad program. These might include, for example, subject-specific content knowledge (Spanish language, Greek architecture, Irish archaeology, Middle Eastern history and politics); cross-cultural communication skills and intercultural awareness; personal growth and development; critical thinking; teamwork, and so forth.

Students should review the categories that run vertically along the left side of the matrix, and choose three or four categories that pertain to what they hope to learn. Then students should choose one of the four core

learning outcomes across the top. Where content and process categories intersect, instruct each student to develop a learning objective that is quantifiable and lends itself to objective evaluation acceptable to the program and academic sponsors. The evaluation portion can be designed to include writing or reading assignments, a class presentation, or other types of projects that fulfill the target learning objective in a way in which the learning can be validated.

Again, where two categories intersect on the grid, students can determine a learning goal that is specific, individualized and meets their personal educational objectives. For example, looking at the samples provided on the grid: where Academic Courses intersects with Skills Development, the Learning Objective might be “to learn about the architecture of Barcelona and how this is influenced by the history and culture of the city.” A method of evaluation of that outcome might be to give a 5-10 minute presentation on the architectural influence in Barcelona, at the debriefing seminar, to be done entirely in Spanish. Other examples of intersection on the grid above include:

Where Language and Culture intersects with Academic Integration:

Learning Objective:

- Deepen my understanding of the cultural implications resulting from the partition of the six counties of Northern Ireland.

Evaluation:

- Write a two-page critical analysis paper on how the history of Northern Ireland has affected religion, culture, and society in the Republic of Ireland.

Where Government, History, or Geography intersects with Academic Integration:

Learning Objective:

- Through a video diary, identify the historical, government and geographic landmarks of my host country.

Evaluation:

- Prepare a “video diary,” utilizing either a digital or video camera, that identifies sites in your host country that reflect the history, geography, and government of your host country. Add a paragraph with each photo describing each landmark or site and why this picture defines the essential characteristics of your country.

Where Outstanding Critical Incident intersects with Problem Posing:

Learning Objective:

- To understand the nature of cultural stereotyping and to address these issues more productively in my own life.

Evaluation:

- Describe in a short reflection paper the various cultural stereotypes that you have heard about people in your host country.
 - Did you find yourself judging people against those stereotypes?
 - Did you hear stereotypes about Americans while you were abroad?
 - What are the reasons that stereotypes are used to define people?
 - How did you combat your inclination to judge people by these cultural stereotypes?
 - Were any of these values confirmed or denied during your study abroad experience.

Where Outstanding Critical Incident intersects with Values Clarification:

Learning Objective:

- To keep a log of incidences of cultural biases that I identify in myself as an American in an international setting.

Evaluation:

- Remember a particular incident while traveling that made you aware of your own cultural biases. Write a personal essay and address the following questions:
 - Describe the incident in detail.
 - How was your thinking and reacting particularly “American”?
 - Explain the importance of flexibility and refraining from judgment.
 - How did you deal with the situation? How did you re-contextualize your values?
 - If this situation came up again in the future, would you handle it differently?

The Learning Contract

One of the useful ways to structure experiential learning is by developing an individual learning contract, which acts as the syllabus for the experiential education course. The learning contract is a written record that structures the student's learning so that learning objectives are clearly identified, evaluation methods are documented, and a clear agreement between the student and instructor or program coordinator is defined. It is similar to a course syllabus in that the goal is mutual understanding and agreement on the objectives of the program.

Typically, the learning contract includes a brief description of the experience, where it will take place, key stakeholders in the program, length of stay, and expectations of the student. The contract outlines specific learning objectives (these may include knowledge and skills, personal development, or cross-cultural learning goals), evaluation methodology (these include evidence of accepted modes of demonstration of the accomplishment of these goals and the means for validating and assessing the evidence), time frames (when certain papers or projects are due), and all other agreements. It may be appropriate to include in this document behavior policies, academic policies that involve leaves of absence, and other administrative procedures that impact the student's program abroad and subsequent return to the home institution.

It is important that the student, program coordinator, instructor, and, if appropriate, a key individual from the study abroad site all sign off on the learning contract. This document can be useful in monitoring the learning experience at various checkpoints throughout the length of the program. Monitoring can include: journals and progress reports, mid-term and final evaluations, critical incidence logs, threaded online discussion groups, a seminar before and/or after the study abroad experience, scheduled e-mail check-in, and scheduled meetings with a faculty sponsor or program coordinator at the home institution at the conclusion of the experience. If all parties are in agreement, the contract can be revised and modified as the international experience progresses.

The important criteria for the construction of a learning contract or agreement are:

1. The learning objectives are clear, measurable, and realistic.
2. The timeframe for evaluation and assessment of these goals is

- well-defined.
3. The policies and procedures that affect the student are stated in writing.
 4. All parties involved in the learning experience have signed the document.
 5. Monitoring and assessment methods are identified.
 6. Specific guidelines from the host institution or program are included.

The benefits of a structured learning contract are obvious. The document can help alleviate misunderstandings, create a positive learning plan, and guide the student to an enhanced educational experience.

Conclusion

The importance of an international experience for the purpose of language development, cultural immersion, service projects, discipline-specific studies, or enhancement of a student's world view cannot be underestimated. Although there is little doubt about the benefits and importance of encouraging students to participate in study abroad, in many cases there is a lack of integration between the experience and the learning or educational value that can be derived from it. Experiential learning is a pedagogy with a long tradition of theory, research, and practice. Although the methods are not the same as traditional educational approaches, the structured approach is significant in transforming experience into a worthwhile academic experience, deserving of academic credit.

The key to understanding experiential learning is realizing that it is not the activity itself, but the critical analysis of that activity that transforms the study abroad program into a worthwhile academic experience. It has been difficult in traditional academic settings to structure experiences in a way that maximizes intentional learning. To ask institutions to shift from the comfort of a traditional syllabus with learning objectives established by the instructor, to student-driven learning objectives outside of the classroom has been an uphill battle at many colleges and universities. Now, with field-tested strategies on constructing learning contracts, monitoring techniques using the Internet and e-mail, and the development of meaningful, measurable learning objectives, it is possible for program coordinators and instructors to create stronger links between

international programs and experiential learning.

The most important reason for integrating experiential learning into existing programs is the benefit that students derive from it. The opportunity to take an individual “peak experience” and guide students to transcend the mere memory of a situation, to coach them to analyze, theorize, and to better understand themselves and others is an opportunity that many of us welcome and appreciate. Although instinctively we can all agree that there are significant and unpredictable learning opportunities that occur when students participate in international experiences, there is also a paradigm and a methodology that substantiates our intuition. Experiential learning can provide a foundation that will enhance and support learning from experience. There is a place in the academy for learning that doesn’t fit neatly into defined, traditional categories. An international experience may be too expansive and misshapen to fit the confines of the traditional classroom; thankfully, experiential learning is a pedagogy that provides the perfect fit.

References

- Cates, Cheryl and Patricia Jones. *Learning Outcomes, The Educational Value of Cooperative Education*. Columbia, Maryland: Cooperative Education Association, Inc., 1999.
- Dewey, J. *Experience and Education*. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1963.
- . “Experience and nature.” 1929. *John Dewey: The later works*. Ed. J.A. Boydson. Vol 1. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981.
- Friere, P. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 1970.
- Kolb, D. *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1984.
- Lewin, K. “Group decisions and social change.” *Readings in Social Psychology*. Ed. G.E. Swanson, et al. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1952.
- Perry, W. G. *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme*. Troy, MO: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970.