



Supporting Children, Families, and Education: Combining Service and Experiential Learning to Prepare Preservice Teachers for Global Classrooms

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Abstract

This essay describes a pioneering program worthy of recognition for its exceptional contributions to service and experiential learning. Focused on supporting children and families in education, the program stands out for innovative integration of interdisciplinary academic study with hands-on service in Ecuador's diverse communities. Students engage with public and private schools, collaborate with local NGOs, and participate in meaningful projects addressing educational and social challenges, making a direct impact on the lives of children and families. The program's commitment to experiential learning is further exemplified through cultural immersion, host family stays, and ecological exploration of Quito and the Galapagos Islands. Students benefit from an unparalleled opportunity to gain practical skills, develop global awareness, and build cross-cultural competencies, contributing to local communities. This program's success facilitates authentic, transformative experiences that leave a lasting impact on participants and the communities they serve. This initiative contributes to setting a new standard for study abroad curriculum.

Keywords

Children, experiential learning, families, service learning, teacher education

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Introduction

This study abroad program represents the culmination of over two years of dedicated effort, forged through a collaborative partnership and a shared vision for the possibilities that could become reality. From the thoughtful design and implementation to the comprehensive assessment, this program embodies high-impact educational practices that will be highlighted. Additionally, the integration of the Forum on Education Abroad's (2023) *Standards of Good Practice* demonstrates the intentionality and mindfulness with which this program was developed. Evolving from a virtual exchange and COIL project in 2021, this study abroad opportunity was planted as a seed of collaboration among faculty seeking to expand their students' access to global perspectives and critical issues. Through these initial cross-cultural dialogues and subsequent site visits, the foundations were laid for an immersive, interdisciplinary study abroad experience that would ultimately come to fruition in the summer of 2024. The course profile is presented in Table (1) below, with further details presented in the course syllabus, program guide, and signature assignment (see [List of Supplemental Materials](#)).

TABLE (1)

COURSE PROFILE

Course or Program Title and Numbers	Summer 2024: EDG 4910: Supporting Children and Families in Education: Study Abroad Service Learning Summer 2024: EDG 4910: Supporting Children and Families in Education: Study Abroad Experiential Learning
Target Student Population(s)	EX: Undergraduate students, any major in good standing
Content Focus, Field, or Discipline	Focus: Education, Family, Community, Youth Science
Credit-Bearing	Yes
Program Level	Undergraduate
Program Duration	A total of six weeks, including four weeks of travel Online orientation, in-person program travel, online post-travel
On-site Location(s)	Quito and Otavalo, Ecuador San Cristobal & Santa Cruz, Galapagos Islands, Ecuador

This program filled a gap that was evidenced by the lack of study abroad opportunities with an education-focus and an increased interest among students associated with the College of Education in having experiences that support their preparation for a global world. The College of Education had not offered a study abroad option for several years, so this program was the response to this need. Evolving from a virtual exchange/COIL project in spring 2021, this study abroad program was planted from a seed of collaboration among faculty interested in furthering their students' access to global perspectives and issues. That virtual exchange/COIL project focused on mental health in teachers in Ecuador and the United States that then led to partner visits at both institutions to participate in collaborative endeavors and professional learning talks. Through this collaboration, faculty began exploring ideas for bringing their students together via a study abroad program. Ultimately, this led to a successful short-term study abroad program being delivered in Summer 2024. *Supporting Children, Families, and Education* was a faculty-led study abroad program developed in collaboration with a university in the United States and a university in South America. This program was created to offer students hands-on, experiential learning in diverse educational and cultural settings across Ecuador, including Quito, Otavalo, and the Galapagos Islands.

Design

Through the design, it was crucial to implement real-world experiences that were authentic for the student and community in which they served (see Table 2 on the next page). Students engaged with local schools, NGOs, and community organizations, contributing to social and educational support systems for children and families, including partnering with a library and local author, creating programming for public and private schools, and contributing to after school programs for local children in remote areas. The program emphasizes service learning and intercultural competence, with a strong focus on educational issues in Latin America. Key learning objectives included expanding students' perspectives on educational issues, applying theoretical knowledge in practical settings, and enhancing intercultural communication skills. Interactions with faculty and peers about topics and challenges were crucial to their reflection exercises.

The curriculum was designed in an intentional manner to support the student journey as they experienced the context and culture and served in the communities alongside children and families. Prior to the program departure, students were guided through a series of online orientation modules in which they were introduced to the country, culture, customs, and more. We met synchronously on Zoom with in-country partners to ask questions, get information, and prepare for our arrival. Travel then began after the

orientation, encompassing a four-week short-term study abroad travel. After re-entry to the United States, the students spent their last week of the program debriefing, unpacking, and reflecting as they completed their final project and presentation. The program had an entire duration of six weeks.

TABLE (2)

STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND LEARNING ALIGNMENT

Experience	Objective	Assessment
Local school projects & engagements	Service learning – applying theory to practice	Reflections/final projects/surveys
Cultural immersion experiences	Experiential learning – applying theory to practice	Reflections/final projects/surveys
Guest lecture opportunities	Expanding knowledge and perspective on educational issues	Reflections/final projects/surveys

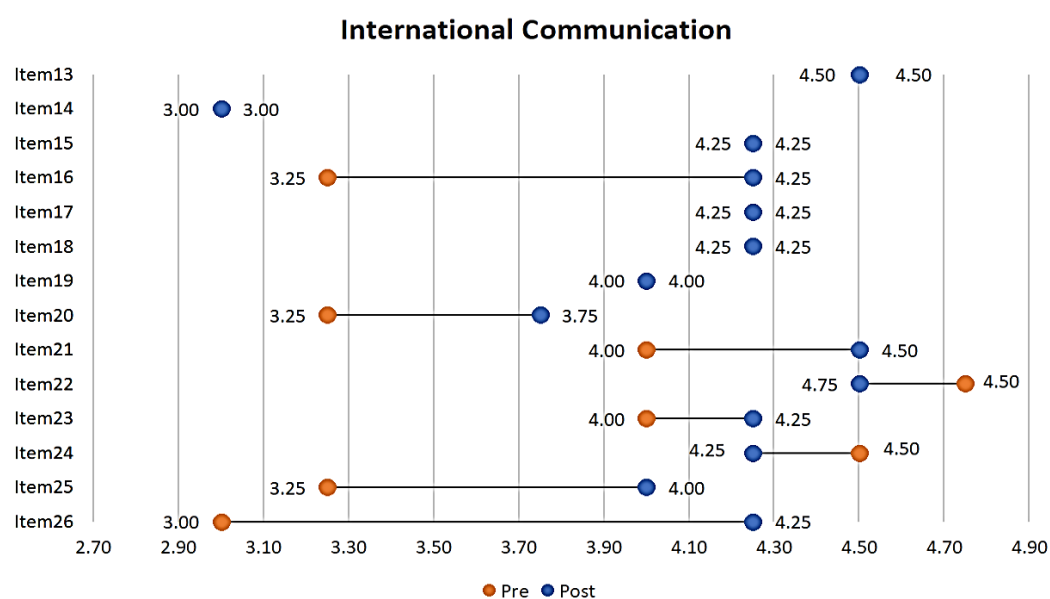
Outcomes

Outcomes were assessed through reflection prompts, journaling, pre- and post-course surveys, collaborative group discussions, and a final presentation of experiences. These methods encouraged students to critically analyze their growth, both academically and personally, and apply this understanding to professional contexts in structured reflective opportunities to make meaning of their experiences. The program intentionally integrates local culture and environmental contexts into the curriculum. For instance, students collaborated with local NGOs and worked with children in educational settings that spanned both urban and rural environments. This engagement deepened students' understanding of Ecuador's social, political, and educational systems while providing them with a once-in-a-lifetime experience in one of the most biodiverse regions on Earth. To challenge students' understanding of the onsite context, the program included workshops on Ecuador's history, politics, and cultural and linguistic dynamics. Students engaged in taking daily field notes, journaling, reflecting on how Ecuador differs and remains similar in terms of educational systems in the U.S., prompting them to develop cultural responsiveness and critical thinking skills. These reflections were discussed in group settings, providing multiple perspectives and fostering deeper analysis. Local experts and faculty members were invited to group reflection sessions to provide deeper context and facilitate dialogue on issues surrounding indigenous languages, geopolitical challenges, and social stratification. These opportunities to engage with local experts allowed for space to ask questions, posit reflections on practice, and gain a deeper understanding of context.

Post-program engagement was structured through self-reflections and final e-portfolio presentations. Students were guided to critically reflect on their growth and how their experiences abroad can inform future academic and professional goals. Re-entry activities also included discussions on leveraging the international experience for career opportunities. E-portfolios were created using online platforms, including Google Sites and GeoStories, to publicly share the connection between story, place and personal growth. Family members and faculty from both institutions were invited to view their final student work. Inclusive pedagogy was modeled through varied learning experiences, including collaborative projects with Ecuadorian students, culturally relevant excursions, and interdisciplinary discussions. The growth can be highlighted in the results of the Pre and Post surveys to assess change in communication and critical thinking via the IntCRIT and IntCOMM tools (University of Florida, 2014). This program showed growth in nine areas of the 25 items, most significantly in areas related to flexibility when interacting with members of another culture and ability to adapt in different cultural environments. In seven areas, neutral growth was reported. Finally, in areas that showed a decline in growth, students shared that their increased knowledge and experiences made them feel more critical of their own abilities and the responsibility for engaging in cultural communication and critical thinking can be even further improved. This leads us to address that students may have reported elevated or skewed interpretations of their own abilities prior to having study abroad experiences and reported more critically after gaining more experience. This is illustrated in the two following figures.

FIGURE (1)

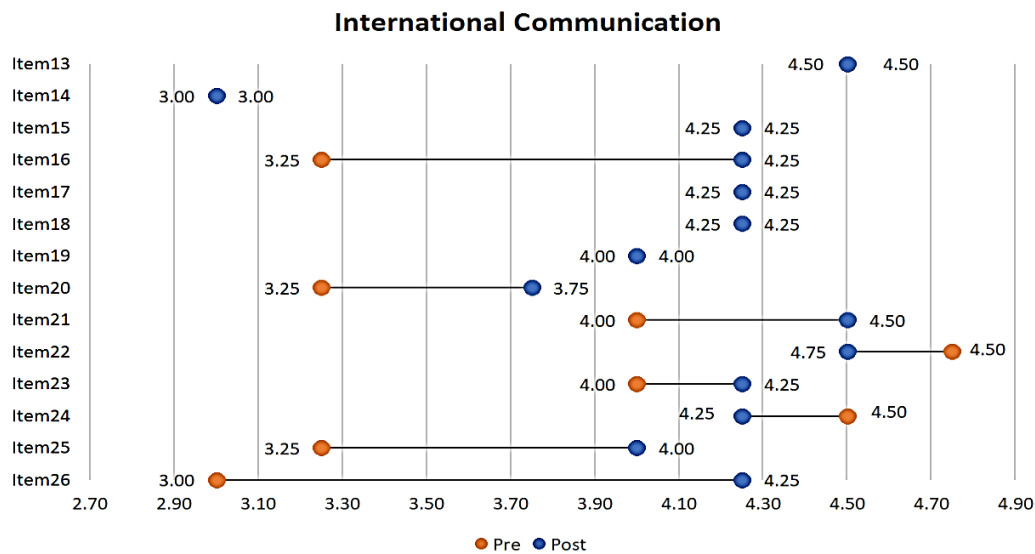
INTCOMM SURVEY PRE/POST RESULTS



RESULTS FROM THE PRE AND POST SURVEY TAKEN BY PARTICIPANTS REGARDING THEIR PERCEIVED ABILITIES AROUND INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION.

FIGURE (2)

INTCRIT SURVEY PRE/POST RESULTS



RESULTS FROM THE PRE AND POST SURVEY TAKEN BY PARTICIPANTS REGARDING THEIR PERCEIVED ABILITIES AROUND INTERNATIONAL CRITICAL THINKING.

Final Thoughts

This course is unique in its collaboration with the partner institution and its integration of service and experiential learning in highly diverse and geographically significant locations like Otavalo and the Galapagos Islands. What sets this program apart is its interdisciplinary approach, open to students from multiple fields beyond education, including business, anthropology, and sociology. This offered learners the chance to discover relevance of their learning through the lens of their own interests and major area of study. The immersive nature of the program—through fieldwork, host family stays, and cultural excursions—allowed for a deeper engagement with Ecuador’s communities. A challenge was facilitating language learning for non-Spanish speakers but was navigated through the inclusion of translators and opportunities for conversational practice with host families and local students at the university and in local schools. This program is the first of its kind in the Colleges of Education for both institutions and provides an opportunity for students to engage in education systems from a unique variety of perspectives. The program offered diverse perspectives on social and educational issues in Ecuador, encouraging students to consider the lived experiences of the people they engage with. This approach fostered an inclusive learning environment that values multiple viewpoints and cultural experiences that extend into their own professional philosophy and future work with children and families. The innovation and dedication of this curricular endeavor is sure to remain a guidepost for the participants as they move toward their personal and

professional futures. As one student participant considered her experience, she offered the following reflection,

It is a great way to immerse yourself in the culture and make more out of your stay if you have as much interaction as possible with local people instead of always sticking to the group and talking with other students. Enjoy it and take advantage of all the free moments you have to explore!

References

- The Forum on Education Abroad. (2023). *Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad* (6th ed.). <https://www.forumea.org/standards-of-good-practice.html>
- University of Florida. (2014). The International Critical Thinking (IntCRIT) and International Communication (IntCOMM) scales.

List of Supplemental Materials

Suppl. 1: [Course Syllabus](#)

Suppl. 2: [Program Guide](#)

Suppl. 3: [Final Project of Professional Growth](#) (signature assignment)

Author Biography

Dr. Tara Mathien is a Clinical Assistant Professor and Program Area Leader for Early Childhood Studies for the University of Florida's College of Education. She works to foster interdisciplinary strategies and professional growth in future educators. She has served as a program advisor to early childhood organizations, including in Nepal and Switzerland. Mathien has extensive experience developing programs and curriculum, bolstered by COIL projects with global partners and creation of a study abroad program.