

Beyond “It was Great”? Not so Fast!

A response to the argument that study abroad results are disappointing and that intervention is necessary to promote students’ intercultural competence

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The Forum on Education Abroad’s Ninth Annual Conference in 2013 was organized around the provocative theme, “Moving Beyond It Was Great.” In the opening plenary speech, Lilli Engle warned the audience of study abroad researchers, leaders, administrators, and providers that study abroad programs were not as effective as they may want to believe.

In terms of student-*learning* abroad, expectations also run high, yet the results are disappointing at best. Well beyond the fundamental goal of academic learning, we ostensibly send students abroad for more. Indeed, we prime our student-audience with promises of “transformational learning” and accounts of “life-changing experience.” (Engle, 2013)

Studies were cited to show how pre-post program measures, particularly for changes in students’ intercultural competence, often failed to support participants’ claims that “It was Great.” After sounding the alarm, recommendations were made. Specifically, the key was to intervene in students’ study abroad experience in ways that challenge and support their growth.

The Context of “Beyond It Was Great”

Before moving to the main body of this critique, it is important to understand the “Beyond It Was Great” message in the broader context of the history of the field of study abroad. For much of its history, people in the field of study abroad have been primarily concerned with program management issues such as staffing, coordination, and leadership. Concerns about students were primarily related to recruiting, arranging activities, and ensuring their safety. Relatively little attention was given to learning outcomes related to academic knowledge, language skills, and intercultural competence. (See Twombly et al. (2012) and Lewin (2009) for more detailed descriptions of the history of study abroad).

Consistently positive feedback from students and increasing enrollment numbers served as a strong proxy that all was well in the field. It is in this context of success and, perhaps, complacency in the study abroad community that the “Beyond It Was Great” alarm was sounded at The Forum’s 2013 annual conference. Truth be told, Engle and others have been issuing these warnings and recommendations for the past fifteen years. The persistent efforts of reformers such as Engle (Engle & Engle, 1999), Vande Berg (2007) Vande Berg et al. (2009), Paige et al. (2002), Cohen et al. (2005), and others have gradually moved the focus of the field beyond concerns about program management to include serious consideration of what students are learning and how their learning might be supported.

The field of study abroad needed a wake-up call. Program leaders, especially those associated

with universities, were asked to re-examine their claims and assumptions about students learning; claims often based on informal, anecdotal evidence. Similarly, assumptions about how student were learning were critically examined with a premium placed on evidence from careful, empirical studies. It is hard to dispute the timeliness and benefits of the call to practitioners and researchers alike to raise their game.

Central Assertions of the “Beyond It Was Great” Argument

Now, for the critique. First, let’s lay out the central assertions of the “Beyond It Was Great” argument. Much of the scholarship and rhetoric related to this argument is built upon two central assertions: one pertaining to the problem and the other to the solution.

Assertion 1: Contrary to common belief, results of study abroad are disappointing, specifically the development of students’ intercultural competency.

Assertion 2. Students learn best when study abroad leaders intervene, specifically when experts arrange experiences, facilitate activities, and encourage students’ intentional self-reflection.

Note on intercultural competence. Since intercultural competence is one of the most important curricular goals of study abroad, its conceptual definition (what it is), as well as its operational (how it is measured) and normative (what it should be) definitions are frequent topics of academic discussion. For the purposes of this paper, I use Deardorff’s (2006) definition of intercultural competence as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 247-248). This definition was derived from a panel of study abroad experts and represents qualities of the construct on which there was general agreement.

Assertion 1. Results are disappointing

To evaluate this central assumption, we can turn to several, large-scale studies of the impact of study abroad. The Georgetown Consortium Project (Vande Berg et al., 2009) compared the intercultural growth of 1297 study abroad students with 138 control students who did not participate in study abroad (SA) programs. Pre-post program data indicated a statistically significant change in study abroad students’ intercultural competence as measured by the Intercultural Development Inventory (Bennett, 1993; Hammer et al., 2003). In addition, Vande Berg et al. (2009) found significant differences in the amount of change between study abroad and on-campus students. Similarly, the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (Salisbury et al., 2013) examined 1,593 students from 17 institutions and found study abroad participation generated statistically significant intercultural competence gains. Finally, the Study Abroad for Global Engagement (SAGE) project by Paige et al. (2009) employed retrospective surveys and interviews of 6400 study abroad alumni from twenty-two universities and study abroad providers. Over fifty percent of SAGE participants reported study abroad as influential; eighty-three percent cited their study abroad program as the most influential of their college experiences.

Thus, contrary to Assertion 1, the results from these large studies suggest study abroad experiences do, in fact, have a generally positive effect on the development of students’ intercultural competence. This positive effect is also found in other large-scale studies (Sutton & Rubin, 2004) as

well as smaller studies (Cohen et al., 2005; Chieffo & Griffiths, 2009; Clarke et. al., 2009).

It is difficult to see how proponents of the “Beyond It Was Great” argument might find these generally positive results “disappointing.” Perhaps, the disappointment stems from an implicit expectation that gains should be greater, more rapid, or more consistent. For example, despite finding a generally positive relation between study abroad and intercultural development, the Georgetown Consortium Project also found 35% of female study abroad students showed statistically insignificant gains or even decline in intercultural competence; in addition, male study abroad students tended to learn less than their female counterparts. Similarly, in the Wabash study (Salisbury et al., 2013), gains were confined to one subscale of the Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale (Miville et al., 1999) of intercultural competence, inclination toward diverse contact. Students did not show significant growth on the other two subscales: comfort with diversity and relativistic appreciation. Interestingly, Salisbury found campus-based diversity experiences fostered a broader growth on these aspects of intercultural competence. These results are similar to findings from the earlier Study Abroad Evaluation Project (Carlson et al., 1990). This study compared 358 on-campus and study abroad students from four institutions and found study abroad students did not experience significantly more growth than their on-campus peers. Taken as a whole, empirical support is inconsistent at best for the “Beyond It Was Great” assertion about the “disappointing” effects of study abroad on the development of students’ intercultural competence.

Putting aside questions about its empirical basis, the merits of the “Beyond It Was Great” argument can be better appreciated in the historical context mentioned at the beginning of this piece. Too often, especially in the past, study abroad programs have operated under the assumption that simply encountering or being immersed in a different culture is sufficient for positive growth (Engle, 2014). And, in fact, many study abroad providers and leaders are more concerned with the logistic and safety aspects of the experience than the educational aspects. The “Beyond It Was Great” argument represents an important and provocative entry point into a broader discussion about how to be more thoughtful and intentional about how study abroad can be improved as a learning experience. The “Beyond It Was Great” argument is often used as the basis for a particular approach to developing study abroad students’ intercultural competence. This approach, often referred to as an “intervention,” is discussed in a later section.

Not moving beyond “It Was Great”

The 2013 Forum Annual Conference theme, “Moving Beyond It Was Great”, was timely and provocative with implications for just about every facet of education abroad. It is true that students often exclaim, “It was great” when asked about their study abroad experience. I also agree, as Engle noted in her opening speech, that many students struggle to elaborate precisely what was so great. How we make sense of this struggle is important, though, as different interpretations lead to widely divergent implications for understanding, fostering, and assessing the study abroad experience. In light of the evidence cited earlier for the generally positive effect of study abroad, it seems reasonable that we can tentatively believe, rather than be skeptical, that students’ experiences were, in fact, “great.” If we take this belief as our starting point, the following questions arise.

Nothing to say or can't say it?

In a number of sessions at The Forum’s 2013 annual conference, students’ inarticulateness about

their experience seemed to be taken as evidence that they had not gained much from their study abroad program. It may, indeed, be the case that students find it difficult to clearly express the impact of their study abroad experience. The limits of their expressive abilities as well as the limits of their friends' and families' attention span may explain in part why the vast and varied experiences of a study abroad program are often expressed simply as "It was great!" Gardner et al. (2008) recognized the pervasiveness and seriousness of this problem as they observed study abroad students struggle to convey the impact of their study abroad experience to potential employers. This problem becomes even more serious in light of the Collegiate Employment Research Institute's (1999) earlier research indicating that many potential employers were skeptical of the benefits of study abroad. In response, Gardner et al. (2008) designed "unpacking" sessions where study abroad returnees learned to better articulate how their study abroad experiences helped them develop specific job-related competencies.

No effect or delayed effect?

Perhaps, when students say an experience was "great," they are not referring at all to what they learned or how they changed. Instead, words like "great" or "awesome" are part of an attempt to convey the qualities of the experience itself, rather than the outcome of the experience. "Great" may refer to how their study abroad experience was absorbing, intense, and moving.

Proponents of the "Beyond It Was Great" perspective might argue that the strong feelings of the study abroad experience are fleeting; what matters most is what remains afterwards. Indeed, the empirical foundation of the "Beyond It Was Great" critique of current study abroad practice is built on pre-post measures of intercultural competence that measure the lasting effects – the outcome – of study abroad.

But how can students call an experience "great", yet remain unaffected by it? This makes little sense at an intuitive level. Also, we may be hard-pressed to think of experiences we personally called "great" that didn't have some sort of impact on us. At the very least, "great" experiences are likely to be remembered or recalled amid related experiences.

John Dewey's (1938) concept of the "continuity of experience" provides a helpful conceptual basis for understanding the impact of "great" experiences. For Dewey, living can be conceived as a series of connected experiences. In this continuity of experience, the nature of a particular experience necessarily affects the nature of subsequent experiences. Experiences that stand out from ordinary experience are likely to have a greater impact on subsequent experiences. Study abroad experiences described as "great" are likely these kinds of experiences. Dewey's perspective suggests that a fruitful place to look for the effect of study abroad experiences is in the experiences students have after the program. Importantly, the impact of compelling experiences may be immediate or delayed. Thus, to properly assess the impact of study abroad, researchers must cast a wide net; one that spans an extended period of time and includes a diverse range of outcomes.

The SAGE project (Paige et al., 2009) mentioned earlier used a retrospective methodology where study abroad alumni were asked to reflect on the impact of the experience. Data analysis focused on the relationship between participants' study abroad experience and their later career, education, worldview and values, and global engagement activities. The SAGE study is one example of how we might better understand what students mean when they say that the experience was "great". Their use of the retrospective method suggests that Paige and his colleagues appreciate how the impact of study

abroad may not only be difficult to articulate and assess immediately after the program, but also that the real impact is probably latent, only showing its effect years later.

Limitations of the students or the assessments?

In evaluating the impact of study abroad, the manner in which we define and assess intercultural competence is critical. As it turns out, we have a puzzling state of affairs in our field regarding how intercultural competency is defined and assessed. Here are the pieces of that puzzle: a) experts tend to agree on the central qualities of intercultural competence, b) despite a large number of available assessments for intercultural competence, only a select few are cited in published research, and c) experts do not agree with many of the ways intercultural competence is currently assessed.

Let's take a closer look. Fantini (2009) conducted a review of instruments for assessing intercultural competence and identified more than one hundred available at the time. The multitude of instruments might seem to suggest widespread disagreement in the field about the definition of intercultural competence; however, that turns out not to be the case. Deardorff's (2006) survey of twenty-three study abroad scholars and administrators suggested considerable consensus on the meaning of the construct. Most of the expert panel agreed that intercultural competence is,

the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes. (Deardorff, 2006, p. 247-248).

Despite the wide variety of instruments available, experts seem to agree on the central qualities of the definition of intercultural competence.

The expert panel also agreed on several aspects of how intercultural competency should be assessed:

...it is best to use multiple assessment methods and not just one method, such as an inventory. Recommended assessment methods are primarily qualitative in nature, including the use of interviews, observation, and case studies, as well as the possible use of standardized competency instruments. Quantitative methods of measurement are somewhat controversial with administrators and intercultural scholars, and there is much stronger agreement between both groups on the use of qualitative measures. Both groups agree that intercultural competence can be measured in its separate components and not holistically, as some of the literature had indicated (Deardorff, 2006, pp. 257-258).

These expert recommendations point us to a different interpretation of the plethora of assessment instruments for intercultural competence. Rather than a symptom of disagreement about the definition, the wide array of instruments may be a symptom that intercultural competence can, and should be, assessed in more than one way.

So, we have agreement about the definition of intercultural competence, and agreement about the need for multiple assessments. We also have multiple assessment instruments available. Why then are so few assessments actually used in published research? In the major studies cited in this paper, the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) is far away the most frequently used measure of intercultural competence. Additionally, in these studies, the IDI is typically the only measure of intercultural competence used.

Why is the IDI so widely used? To begin, the IDI is firmly grounded in a theoretical model: the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1993). In addition, the IDI has undergone significant psychometric testing. Cohen et al. (2005) offered this rationale for choosing the IDI as the main instrument to assess intercultural competence in their Maximizing Study Abroad project.

Paige (2004) in his review of the IDI states that, “both the original 60-item and the current 50-item versions possess sound internal consistency reliability” (p.99). In addition, “There is strong evidence of the IDI’s construct validity” (p.99). Third, we wanted to employ an instrument that was being used in research and had an established research literature. The IDI again met this test. (p.45).

Indeed, from a methodological standpoint, instruments should meet standards for reliability and validity. And, from a pragmatic standpoint, researchers tend to choose instruments widely used in the field so their work can be more readily understood and accepted.

However, recall that Deardorff’s (2006) panel of experts agreed that proper assessment of intercultural competence should not be an inventory, general (as opposed to situational), quantitative, or administered pre and post program. It is curious that the IDI, the most widely used measure, possesses all of these undesirable qualities. Even more curious, perhaps, is that Deardorff’s (2006) expert panel included a number of people who used and even promoted the IDI!

Finally, even though the IDI is widely used as a measure of intercultural competence, the IDI is actually a measure of intercultural sensitivity. One of the authors of the IDI explains:

We will use the term “intercultural sensitivity” to refer to the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences, and we will use the term “intercultural competence” to mean the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways. We argue that greater intercultural sensitivity is associated with greater potential for exercising intercultural competence. (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 422)

The IDI is designed to identify the degree to which individuals are ethno-centric or ethno-relative, placing them on a continuum describing how they perceive their own culture relative to other cultures. Intercultural sensitivity relates more to an ability to perceive, whereas intercultural competence refers to the ability to behave in culturally appropriate ways, usually through communication.

The widespread use of the IDI instrument in study abroad research has established it as the *de facto* assessment and operational definition of intercultural competence. However, given the limitations discussed above, we have good reason to look beyond our standard instruments and follow some of the recommendations outlined by the panel of experts in Deardorff’s (2006) study.

Furthermore, the perils of relying on a single or small number of instruments should be obvious. As a tool for understanding, each assessment is like a narrow beam of light illuminating only a small portion of the phenomenon of student growth during study abroad. What study abroad students call “great” may or may not be adequately visible through this limited view. Cohen et al. (2005) commented on this point when confronted with the unexpected research finding that study abroad students’ who had participated in his training program to improve intercultural competence failed to show greater gains than students who did not receive training.

A possible explanation for the lack of quantitative differences between the E (experiment) and the C (control) group was that the IDI is not nuanced enough to pick up the subtle differences between the two groups that are reflected in the E group journal entries. (p. 59)

Thus, questions about our assessment instruments give us one more reason to not be so quick to declare student growth or program instruction as “disappointing” and, instead, to take more seriously students and practitioners’ claims that “It was great.”

Assertion 2: Growth requires intervention and guided reflection

A second central feature of the “Beyond It Was Great” argument is that the development of students’ intercultural competence requires reflection and that reflection is unlikely to occur without outside intervention.

We no longer believe that our responsibilities to our students, where their learning is concerned, end when they leave the United States. We are no longer accepting the isolationist’s role that the Junior Year Abroad paradigm offered us: we have become interventionists, convinced that if our students are to learn effectively, we need to intervene, before, during, and after their experiences abroad to shape and support their learning (Vande Berg, 2007, p.395).

Vande Berg’s assertion is directly informed by a historical awareness that study abroad programs often had a “laissez-faire” belief that students will learn simply by virtue of being in a different culture. The main focus of study abroad programs was getting them there, keeping them safe, and letting good things follow naturally. Vande Berg (2009) and other interventionists clearly disagree.

In short, many of these students, when left to their own devices, failed to learn well even when “immersed” in another culture. Being exposed to cultures different from their home cultures turned out to be a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition for their intercultural learning (p.25).

What is the alternative to such “laissez-faire” approaches? Interventionists are in clear agreement on this point as well.

...we ideally cultivate self-reflection and self-awareness, believing that students, left alone, will see and experience only what their personal orientations and cultural conditioning will allow them to see (Engle, 2013).

Our working hypothesis was that while study abroad students are bombarded with intercultural experiences daily, they do not necessarily have systematic opportunities nor the skills and knowledge to reflect upon and make sense of those experiences. This principle was applied... through the inclusion of concepts that would provide frames of reference for understanding culture and intercultural encounters and learning activities that asked students to reflect on the experiences they were having and draw upon those conceptual frames in their reflections (Cohen et al., 2005, p.29).

Thus, the “Beyond It Was Great” argument begins with the assertion that study abroad students’ intercultural growth is disappointing, then further asserts that they are incapable of seeing and making sense of their experiences without outside help. The argument concludes with a final assertion that the development of students’ intercultural competence requires intervention from

experts to help them reflect on their experiences.

What is the evidence that intervention of this type leads to greater growth in students' intercultural competence? We return to some of the major studies discussed earlier. The

Georgetown Consortium Project (Vande Berg et al., 2009) reported,

Students who were able to meet and work on their intercultural learning with a mentor made greater gains than students who did not. While the samples are relatively small, students who received mentoring “often” to “very often” showed the greatest gains (p.22).

Closer examination of the data in the report reveals that although the results trended in the expected direction, the difference between students receiving more and less mentoring was not statistically significant. Similar results were found in Cohen et al.'s (2005) Maximizing Study Abroad research. This study featured an intervention specifically designed to promote students' intercultural competence through regular, intentional, structured reflection and mentoring. Once again no significant differences on IDI scores were found between the intervention and non-intervention groups. Importantly, when IDI scores for both groups were combined, the main effect was statistically significant. This suggests growth in intercultural competence was more likely due to some commonality in their experiences, rather than one group had an intervention. Similar results were found in GLOSSARI (Sutton & Rubin, 2010), a large-scale study of the effects of study abroad on students in the University System of Georgia. No significant correlation was found between structured reflection and “functional knowledge” of how to live and interact in other countries.

The lack of empirical support from these large-scale studies weakens the interventionists' assertions, but hardly refutes the claim that students' intercultural development benefits from outside help and deliberate reflection. Instead, the lack of strong empirical support may remind us just how difficult it is to promote intercultural growth. Or, as Cohen et al. (2005) suggested, the assessment instruments, in these cases the IDI, may not be “nuanced enough” to detect changes.

The interventionist approach finds stronger support in a few small studies of interventions that put an intense focus on developing students' intercultural competence. For example, Engle and Engle (1999) at the American University Center of Provence (AUCP) developed a program featuring course materials, instruction, activities, language immersion, and home stays; all designed to help students reflect on and become more aware of other people's cultural perspectives as well as their own. In the Georgetown Consortium Project report, Vande Berg et al. (2009) note that AUCP students “averaged much greater intercultural gains than the students in our study averaged.”

The AUCP program demonstrates that high intensity intervention programs can lead to impressive gains in intercultural development. However, taken as a whole, empirical support for the efficacy of interventionist approaches is hardly conclusive. As a field, we would also be well advised to explore alternative approaches, especially those founded on different assumptions about how intercultural competence develops and can be fostered.

Must we “intervene”?

Granted, some studies have shown that intervening and supporting student reflection can lead to the development of intercultural competence. Additionally, it seems sensible that careful reflection

leads to learning; reflection has probably been associated with understanding for as long as people have been thinking about learning. The often-cited quote attributed to Socrates, “The unexamined life is not worth living,” illustrates how deliberate reflection (especially philosophical examination) has long been associated with the development of the moral knowledge and principled action.

It does not logically follow, however, that intervention and reflection are the best or only means to develop students’ intercultural competence. This line of critique takes us to a basic, but important, question: Must we intervene? Specifically, does the development of students’ intercultural competence require a “more capable” outsider directing their attention and requiring their careful reflection? What are the alternatives?

Intervention: What it means, what it connotes.

Before examining alternatives to the interventionist approach, let’s take a closer look at the term “intervention.” An intervention, literally something that “comes between,” is an action where outsiders step in to change the course of things. Interventions are associated with situations where individuals are in trouble and incapable of helping themselves. Only through the assistance of more capable outsiders can the undesirable consequences be avoided. Drug and alcohol intervention, military interventions... fashion interventions; in all cases, individuals face serious problems and are helpless to make the necessary changes without the assistance of more capable others. At times, the rhetoric of the “Beyond It Was Great” perspective portrays study abroad students as facing serious consequences because of their inability to develop culturally on their own. To the degree that we agree with this portrayal, an “intervention” is the right term to use.

But what if we disagree that disappointing intercultural growth is an impending crisis due to students’ inabilities? Instead, what if we believe intercultural development is a product of the situation, not just the students’ capacity? Indeed, our conceptual perspective, terminology, and instructional approach might be quite different.

If we believe intercultural development is spurred and supported by characteristics of the situation, our “intervention” would target the situation, not the students. We would focus on offering program activities in which students have to be interculturally competent in order to participate in and accomplish a task. Or, if we believed intercultural development is learned primarily through modeling and imitation, our “intervention” would target the program leaders, not the students, to ensure that these leaders were consistently and visibly being interculturally competent. These two alternatives to the “interventionist approach” make distinctly different assumptions about the nature of intercultural development and the roles of the instructor and students. Further details about each of these approaches grounded in social learning (Bandura, 1977, 1986) and situated learning theories (Lave & Wenger, 1991) will be discussed in a later section.

The epistemological basis for intervention and reflection.

Proponents of the “Beyond It Was Great” and interventionist argument often position their perspective as part of the broader development of the study abroad field. Vande Berg et al. (2012) characterized the 100-year history of the study abroad field as an evolution through three paradigms, each consisting of distinct assumptions, values, practices, and interpretive frames. First came the “positivist” paradigm with its emphasis on learning from direct experience. The European “grand

tour” undertaken by young elites epitomized this perspective. Travel was a mix of pleasure, learning, and confirmation of the relative superiority of one’s way of life. Next came the “relativism” paradigm based on the assumption that cultural perspectives were relative, rather than hierarchical. Learning about other cultures occurred best through immersion, in study programs where students stayed long-term, often by themselves in the host culture.

Vande Berg calls the current paradigm “experiential/constructivist” where understanding of other cultures and, importantly, one’s own cultural assumptions requires not only immersive experiences in other cultures, but also extensive reflection and mentoring. The “experiential/constructivist” paradigm and the accompanying interventionist approach are presented as the most advanced stage in the intellectual evolution of the field.

Unlike positivism and relativism, the experiential/constructivist paradigm is characterized by the efforts of theorists and practitioners to bring its assumptions into awareness. In this regard, then—the commitment to helping learners and teachers alike become conscious of and explicit about their teaching and learning assumptions—the third paradigm is profoundly different from the other two” (Vande Berg et al., 2012, p. 19).

It is worth taking a closer look at the use of the term “constructivism” since it is a central feature in the current paradigm. Much of the constructivist terminology can be traced to Kolb’s work on experiential learning and education. Kolb and Fry’s (1975) theoretical work has been frequently used as a framework for designing study abroad activities (e.g. Cohen et al., 2005). The four components in Kolb’s Theory of Experiential Learning, sometimes seen as sequential, are: having concrete experience, observing and reflecting, forming abstract concepts, and testing concepts in new situations. The process of reflection featured prominently in the second stage is seen as having an important presence in all stages.

Is constructivism the right paradigm?

Kolb’s work, traceable to Dewey and Piaget, along with the central assumptions of constructivism are part of a long epistemological tradition that assigns great importance to observation, dissonant experiences, rational thinking, and reflection. These same elements can be found through much of the literature on how study abroad students learn (cf., Che et al., 2009; Brockington & Wiedenhoef, 2009). It is critical to note constructivism and its antecedent rational-empiricism are, first and foremost, epistemologies. As an epistemology, constructivism is primarily concerned with questions about the nature of knowledge, how it develops, and what distinguishes justified belief from opinion. In the field of education, the constructivist paradigm has been widely adopted for over four decades. The constructivist emphasis on rational thought, observation, reflection, and testing has led to research and practice related to understanding and promoting students’ subject-matter learning.

Because constructivism is an epistemology, study abroad scholars are necessarily equating the development of intercultural competence with the development of knowledge. Kolb’s learning cycle theory confirms this: the development of conceptual knowledge from experience is the main phenomenon of interest. However, most study abroad scholars would agree that becoming interculturally competent involves more than knowledge growth. In a study of study abroad scholars and administrators, Deardorff (2006) found general agreement that intercultural competence is multidimensional consisting of attitudes, psychological traits, knowledge, and interaction skills. Most

of the widely used assessment instruments reflect the belief that intercultural competence involves more than just knowledge. See, for example, the Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer et al., 2003) and Global Perspectives Inventory (Braskamp et al., 2009),

Thus, we should be cautious when invoking the constructivist paradigm to support arguments and practices related to the development of intercultural competence. To the degree that development of intercultural competence involves more than knowledge growth, the constructivist paradigm may be helpful, but not fully appropriate.

Alternatives to interventionist approaches

Once one opens up to the possibility of alternatives to the assumptions and practices of the interventionist approach, possibilities become virtually limitless. I will mention only two alternative perspectives: social learning (Bandura, 1977, 1986) and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These perspectives were chosen for several reasons. First, they have strong theoretical and empirical bases and have been established for decades in the fields of psychology and education. Second, both the social and situated perspectives focus on the development of attitudes and behaviors, not just knowledge. Thus, these alternative perspectives address some of the concerns raised about the limits of the constructivist-based interventionist approach. Finally, these perspectives were selected because they offer a distinct contrast to some of the central features of the interventionist perspective. To the degree that instructors are directly involved in the interventionist perspective, instructors are indirectly involved in these alternative approaches. Also, to the degree that thinking explicitly about intercultural competence is the focus of the interventionist approach, it is an implicit process of learning in these alternatives.

The social learning perspective has early roots in the work of social psychologist Albert Bandura. Learning new behaviours and attitudes is a social processes, not simply a cognitive process. Thus, modeling and imitating others becomes just as important as individual reflection. In the context of this discussion, social learning is distinct from interventionist approach because outside intervention and guided reflection are not seen as central. Instead, learning is seen primarily as a matter of observing others' behavior, internalizing the behavior, and later reproducing it. Keep in mind, intervention and guided reflection may indeed be part of some examples of social learning, but they are not seen as necessary or central elements. In the field of psychology, social learning theory has been applied to a wide range of behaviors and attitudes including aggression, phobias, self-efficacy, and moral agency.

Part of the power of social learning theory is its applicability to both positive and negative kinds of learning. Whether the focus is altruistic or aggressive behavior, becoming a criminal or recovering from anxiety, social learning theory has served as a useful framework for understanding the phenomena and bringing about change. By contrast, the constructivist/empiricist perspective is typically associated only with positive changes in students' intercultural competence. As is well known, study abroad experiences can lead to negative outcomes such as confirming stereotypes, regressing in intercultural competence (Engle, 2013; Jackson, 2011) and reverse culture shock (Cushner & Karim, 2004; Gaw, 2000). The current paradigm in study abroad learning creates a curious asymmetry: negative developments seem to occur when students are on their own, while positive development

cannot. A good theory of study abroad learning should apply to both positive and negative intercultural development.

A second alternative to the interventionist approach and its associated constructivist/empiricist paradigm is the situated learning perspective of Lave and Wenger (1991). The situated learning perspective emerged from Lave and Wenger's work as social anthropologists and their observations of learning in a wide range of informal and international settings. Lave and Wenger argued that most learning occurs outside of school, is neither explicit nor teacher directed, and is often related to accomplishing a particular task with others. In brief, individuals learn to become tailors, midwives, and butchers by being -- acting as -- tailors, midwives, and butchers. Central to the situated learning perspective are the ideas of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), community of practice (CoP), and authentic tasks (AT). For example, suppose U.S. study abroad students go to Japan for a month. While there, they work with Japanese faculty and university students (CoP) to develop and teach English language modules for elementary school students. The job of developing and teaching the language module (AT) is a real task, not a hypothetical or school-defined one. This work would be led by American and Japanese faculty with students making important contributions. Less experienced students would have simpler, yet legitimate, tasks such as gathering supplies, preparing the workspace, and cleaning up (LPP). As students become more experienced, they would take on more central tasks with the professors such as making curricular choices and designing activities. Notice how being interculturally competent is an intrinsic part of doing a good job, but not the focus. The leaders are teaching, but again, their teaching is not the focus of the activity and, certainly, it is not the kind of teaching promoted by the interventionist approach. Instead, the primary focus of the group is accomplishing the task well.

In addition to having different starting assumptions about the role of the student and teacher, the situated and social learning perspectives focus attention on different aspects of the educational task. In the social learning perspective, the primary pedagogical task is to create opportunities for students to see intercultural competence modeled by their teacher, peers, and others. In the situated learning perspective, the main pedagogical task is to find meaningful tasks, not abstract or hypothetical situations, in which becoming interculturally competent is integral to accomplishing those tasks well.

Thus, conceptually rigorous, empirically supported alternatives to the interventionists' approach exist. Additionally, although these approaches contrast sharply with the interventionist approaches, they are every bit as intentional and carefully designed. The field of study abroad should consider alternatives in the spirit of exploration, rather than competition between them. Surely, there is more than one viable path to developing students' intercultural competence.

Both of these approaches have yet to be adopted widely in the field of study abroad even though they have a strong, enduring, and productive presence in psychology and education. These approaches offer promise in supporting the development of students' intercultural competency, and careful implementation and evaluation is the next step.

Summary and Recommendations

Returning to where this paper began, the "Beyond It Was Great" argument has energized important discussions about long-held assumptions about the effects of study abroad on students'

intercultural competence. Indeed, claims about the impact of study abroad are often not supported by solid evidence. Systematic studies of the study abroad experience are still the exception rather than the rule. At a general level, this warning is warranted and we should respond quickly and thoughtfully.

With that said, the “Beyond It Was Great” argument and the associated interventionist approach are, themselves, also in need of more rigorous empirical and theoretical support. Based on the points raised in the preceding critique, the following recommendations were developed:

1. **Take seriously, “It was great.”** We cannot assume that students’ inarticulateness about their study abroad experience means they lack something to say. There is simply too much evidence, anecdotal and research based, that study abroad experiences have important effects. Therefore, when students say, “It was great”, we should take them seriously and find ways to better understand what they are trying to say.
2. **The problem may be the measure, not the student or program.** Intercultural competence is a complex construct unlikely to be fully captured by a single instrument. The lack of change on a particular measure of intercultural competence may suggest a problem with the measure, rather than the student or program. Furthermore, researchers need to examine their expectations about the magnitude, rate, and consistency of students’ intercultural growth. Therefore, when identifying the “problem” with study abroad, we should devote as much attention to critiquing our measures as we devote to critiquing our students and programs.
3. **Use a diversity of assessments.** Although many instruments have been created, study abroad researchers tend to use only a small number. A few instruments have established a *de facto* monopoly on the business of assessing and defining intercultural competence. The field of study abroad has always been a mix of marketplace and scholarship, this is not likely to change. We will need to be aware of how the close connection to marketing products and services can be both healthy and debilitating for the scholarly growth of our field. Therefore, the leadership in the field needs to organize a concerted effort to develop and, more importantly, use a diversity of instruments.
4. **Improve studies comparing instructional approaches.** Granted, studies show interventionist programs can lead to growth in intercultural competence. And some studies do show that more intervention leads to greater student gains. However, these study designs are not sufficient for supporting the claim that students learn best from an interventionist approach. Therefore, in addition to comparing programs that are more and less interventionist, the field needs more studies comparing interventionist and other programs targeting intercultural competence. Only then, can claims be made about what approach is best.
5. **Foster alternatives to interventionist approaches.** There is a strong empirical and theoretical basis for the idea that intercultural competence can develop without direct intervention or intentional reflection. Research in the social learning and situated learning tradition has long pointed to the power of modeling, imitation, and participation in authentic activities in shaping beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. These perspectives are founded on assumptions about the nature and development of intercultural competence that are significantly different from the interventionist/constructivist perspectives. Therefore, our field should actively support the development and testing of a wide diversity

of instructional approaches. The field of research on study abroad is relatively young and small. Like a developing child, exposure to a wide variety of perspectives is likely to support continued healthy growth.

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