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Exploring the Process and Outcomes of Leading a Study Abroad Program Using Real-Time Perspectives

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Abstract

A study abroad program can be a transformative experience for students, but these programs rely on the support of program leaders who play a crucial mentoring role. Program leaders can also learn from their experiences abroad, but their experiences are less studied than those of students. To better prepare future program leaders, this paper describes the experiences of program leaders during a two-week study abroad program. We introduce a novel data collection approach, autonomous focus groups, to capture real-time perspectives. Through the lens of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, we characterize the process of leading a study abroad program and the conceptualizations that program leaders form about students during their time abroad. Our findings provide a more nuanced view of the day-to-day experience of leading a study abroad program than previous studies, which can inform the preparation and training provided to program leaders.

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Abstract in Spanish

Los programas de estudio en el extranjero pueden ser una experienca transformadora para los estudiantes, sin embargo, estos programas dependen de los líderes quienes tienen un rol fundamental en la tutoría de los estudiantes. Los líderes de estos programas pueden también aprender de estas experiencias en el extranjero, aunque estas experiencias no han sido estudiadas al mismo nivel de detalle como han sido estudiadas las experiencias de los estudiantes. Para preparar mejor a los futuros líderes de estos programas, este artículo describe las experiencias de líderes en un programa de estudio en el extranjero que duró dos semanas. En este trabajo presentamos una innovadora forma de recolectar data, como son los grupos focales autónomos, donde capturamos las perspectivas de los participantes en tiempo real. Usando el lente de la Teoría de Aprendizaje Experiencial de Kolb, caracterizamos los procesos involucrados en dirigir un programa de estudio en el extranjero, así como las conceptualizaciones que los líderes del programa formaron sobre los estudiantes durante el tiempo que estuvieron de viaje. Nuestros resultados ofrecen una manera más adecuada de entender las experiencias en el día a día cuando se supervisa un programa de estudio en el extranjero, estos resultados pueden ayudar a preparar y entrenar futuros lideres de programas de estudio en el extranjero.

Keywords:

Program leaders, experiential learning, program leader preparation

Introduction

Student experiences abroad have been widely studied. Much is understood about how to design study abroad programs to support student learning (Ogden, 2015; Vande Berg & Paige, 2012). On the other hand, there has been less research exploring the experiences and learning of the other key participants in study abroad programs: the program leaders. Two arguments support the need for research on program leaders' experiences and learning in study abroad programs. First, prior research has emphasized the significant role that program leaders can play in facilitating student learning while abroad (Lou & Bosley, 2012; Vande Berg et al., 2009). Second, improving our understanding of the *process* of leading a study abroad program will help us better prepare program leaders to be effective in that role. Our work provides insights into this process and identifies opportunities to better prepare faculty as they support student learning abroad.

In this article, we examine the experiences of study abroad program leaders through the lens of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory. The purpose of our study was to characterize the "real-time" process of leading a study abroad program and understand the influence of that experience on program leaders' learning about students. We used a unique approach to collect participants' reflections while they were abroad, enabling us to address two research questions:

1) How do program leaders describe their real-time experiences leading a study abroad program?

2) What conceptualizations do program leaders develop about students while leading a study abroad program?

Literature Review

Prior research exploring the role of program leaders in study abroad programs has primarily focused on characterizing the responsibilities of program leaders during these programs. In general, the program leader role has been identified as multi-dimensional and complex, going beyond what is typically expected of faculty in a classroom setting (O'Neal, 1995; Rasch, 2001). For example, Goode (2007) identified four dimensions of responsibility for study abroad leaders: "dean of students" (i.e., student support), logistics, intercultural, and academic. These categories align with findings in other studies of program leader roles (Ozkan et al., 2020; Rasch, 2001). Some of these studies go further than simply listing categories and attempt to characterize the uncertainty involved in the experience of leading a study abroad program. O'Neal (1995) describes the constantly shifting responsibilities involved and suggests that on-the-spot problem solving ability is critical. The participants interviewed by Rasch (2001) describe the experience as "intense" with lots of emotional strain and advise new program leaders that they will need lots of flexibility and adaptability to be successful. Although such descriptions attempt to provide insights into the experience of leading a study abroad program, they fall short of providing sufficient detail to help prepare program leaders. These studies primarily relied on retrospective interviews which are necessarily summative in their descriptions of what happens while abroad. In contrast, our study aims to characterize the "real time" experience of leading a study abroad program. We capture experiences in greater detail than prior studies, supporting the development of pre-program training that better prepares program leaders to succeed in this unique educational environment.

Prior research supports the perspective that leading a study abroad program can be viewed as a faculty development opportunity. Several studies have suggested that faculty learning abroad may improve more than just future study abroad programs, as faculty bring lessons from their experiences abroad into their traditional classrooms (Davis & Knight, 2020; Dooley & Rouse, 2009; Ellinghaus et al., 2019; Loebick, 2017). These findings argue for the potential influence of faculty intercultural learning on campus internationalization initiatives. However, just as students require support in learning abroad (Vande Berg & Paige, 2012), it is important to provide program leaders adequate support and training so that they can learn while abroad (Ozkan et al., 2020). Program leader preparation has improved over time, starting from little university support (Rasch, 2001) to increasing numbers of resources, pre-travel training opportunities, and handbooks available to program leaders (Goode, 2007). However, much of this information remains focused on the logistics components of leading a study abroad program with less emphasis on the intercultural or student support roles (Goode, 2007). Although logistics are important, such training may give program leaders an inaccurate perspective of what to expect out of their role. For example, Ozkan et al. (2020) reported that many program leaders anticipated logistical difficulties related to student discipline yet did not experience these difficulties while abroad. To help faculty develop the skills necessary for leading a program and to support their learning through the study abroad experience, it is important to explore faculty learning experiences abroad, which is the focus of the present study.

In addition to their own learning, study abroad program leaders also play a significant role in the experiences of students. While abroad, program leaders encourage students to reflect and to continue to engage with the host culture—a process known as “cultural mentoring” (Lou & Bosley, 2012; Vande Berg et al., 2009). Providing such support has been identified as one of the key contributors to student learning abroad (Engberg et al., 2016; Spenader & Retka, 2015; Vande Berg et al., 2009). However, limited research has focused on characterizing cultural mentoring to understand how program leaders approach this responsibility. Niehaus et al. (2018) identified four types of tasks associated with cultural mentoring: setting expectations, explaining the host culture, exploring self in culture, and facilitating connections. However, there appears to be variation in the level to which program leaders engage in these activities. Some program leaders provide supportive facilitation of learning and

group dynamics while others are "absent" when needed (Johnstone et al., 2020). This disparity may be related to program leaders' own level of intercultural development or their skill in facilitating intercultural learning (Goode, 2007). Further, several studies have identified gaps between program leaders' expectations of what their roles will be while leading a study abroad program and what actually occurs (Goode, 2007; Ozkan et al., 2020). Our study builds on this earlier work by investigating the real-time experiences of study abroad program leaders while they are abroad, which can inform the preparation of future program leaders to better support student learning.

The studies described above have explored program leader experiences and learning primarily through post-program interviews or surveys. Our study presents a unique perspective on these experiences by capturing day-to-day conversations between program leaders while they are abroad. By providing detailed insights into the study abroad program leader experience, our study can inform both preparation and recruitment of faculty to improve student experiences abroad.

Theoretical Framework

Our exploration of program leaders' learning in study abroad programs was informed by Experiential Learning Theory (ELT; Kolb, 1984). Because our data gave us a real-time perspective on the program leaders' experiences, we were able to see how they responded to events as they occurred during the program. In our initial review of our data, we found that this process was reflective of the stages described by ELT. This theory presents a cycle of four "modes" through which people grasp their experiences and transform those experiences into knowledge (Kolb, 1984; Passarelli & Kolb, 2012). In the first mode, a learner "does" something, which is described as a *Concrete Experience*. Based on this experience, they make *Reflective Observations* (second mode) about what happened. These observations serve as the basis for the third mode, *Abstract Conceptualization*, where the learner forms generalizations about the experience. Finally, the learner applies these generalizations to draw new implications for action, which are tested through *Active Experimentation*. This process is shown in the left side of Figure (1). ELT is a common way to describe and investigate student learning abroad due to the experimental nature of learning about a culture by interacting with it (Ogden, 2015; Passarelli & Kolb, 2012). Because the theory was originally based on adult learning through

experience (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012), we believe it is also a logical choice to understand the learning of program leaders.

The nature of our data was such that we did not see all four modes of the ELT cycle directly represented. In our analysis, we combined *Concrete Experience* and *Reflective Observation* into one category, because the program leaders frequently discussed them inextricably. Additionally, we divided experimentation into two categories: *Proposed Experimentation* and *Implemented Experimentation*. Making this differentiation allowed us to capture the moment when program leaders completed the learning cycle and put a "plan" into action, thus starting a new cycle. By documenting this process, we were able to highlight a unique aspect of our real-time data collection approach. Our adapted version of the ELT cycle is shown on the right side of Figure (1).

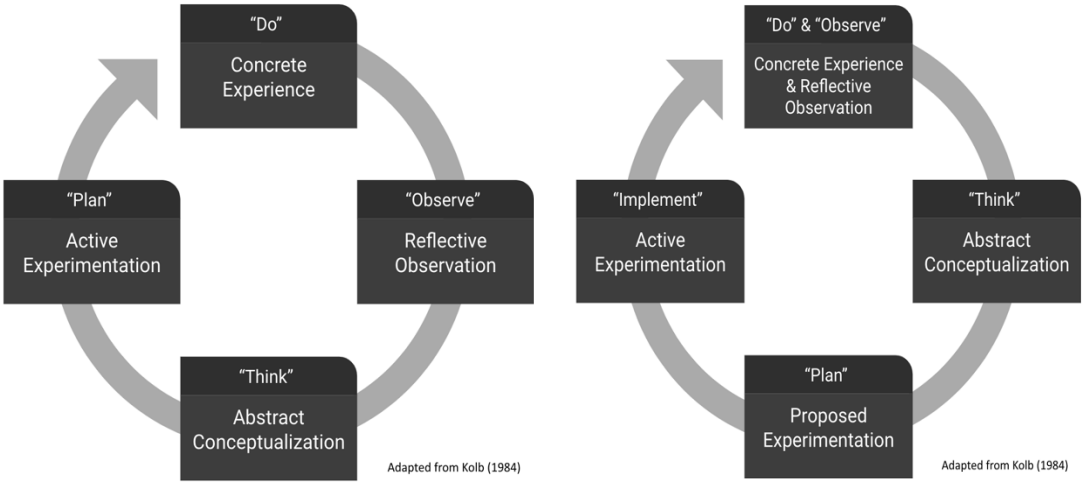

FIGURE (1): ORIGINAL ELT FRAMEWORK (LEFT) AND ADAPTED ELT FRAMEWORK (RIGHT)

Methods

We took a qualitative approach in examining program leader conceptualizations about their experiences during their study-abroad program. To capture the experiences of program leaders while they were abroad, we developed a real-time data collection technique which we term *autonomous focus groups*. To facilitate this process of data collection, we provided reflection prompts and audio recorders to the program leaders and asked them to record their leadership team's group debriefs periodically throughout the program. The process is summarized in Figure (2) below and described in detail in the remainder of this section. We collected data from six two-week international

tracks that are part of the same umbrella program. We analyzed the data through an iterative coding process (Miles et al., 2020), using the lens of Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984). We discuss the program context, data collection, data analysis, and research quality in the following sections.

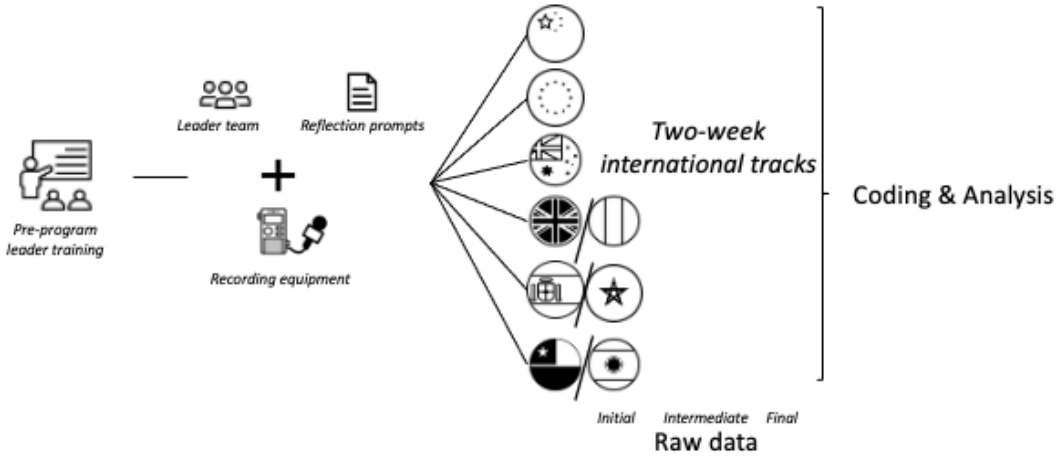

FIGURE (2): STUDY CONTEXT AND RESEARCH APPROACH

Program Context

The Rising Sophomore Abroad Program (RSAP) is a program for first-year engineering students that combines a spring semester course with a two-week international track abroad. The program is housed at a research-focused university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The 3-credit course, *Global Engineering Practice*, includes three modules focusing on global engineering problems, global collaboration, and preparation for professional engagement abroad. All students in the program complete the same course, but then travel on international tracks of 20-30 students and track leaders to different locations (in our program, we use the term *track leaders* rather than program leaders). During the international tracks, students and leaders visit engineering companies and universities and participate in cultural and social activities in the host countries. In Spring 2019, the year that these data were collected, the RSAP program included 180 students across six international tracks, which were led by 17 track leaders. Each track was led by 2-4 track leaders, who were a combination of faculty and graduate students. The tracks in the 2019 program traveled to China, Italy/Switzerland/Germany, Australia/New Zealand, UK/Ireland, Spain/Morocco, and Chile/Argentina. In addition to traveling with the students during the international track, track leaders also met with students for a weekly hour-long recitation section during the semester, focused on preparing for their individual tracks.

Data Collection

This study uses data collected through audio recordings of reflective debrief conversations between the leaders on each track. We are introducing the term *autonomous focus group* (AFG) to refer to these conversations because the data collected using this method resembles focus group data but is more fluid due to the lack of a designated interviewer. During the pre-program leader training, the researchers provided reflective discussion questions to each leader team (shown in Table 1) and asked that the program leaders use these questions to guide "debrief discussions" periodically throughout their time abroad. The prompts were designed to spark conversation amongst the faculty leaders about anticipated and realized roles, observations about student learning, and reflections about their professional identities.

Suggested Timing	Reflection Prompt
First Discussion	• What roles will each track leader play during the program and how will they be integrated?
Intermediate Discussions	• Take a moment to identify key events that have occurred over the past few days. Discuss what you picked and why. Did you pick the same things? Why or why not? • What have you been observing/learning about students through this experience? • How might what you're learning influence your teaching/advising going forward?
Last Discussion	• How did roles actually play out on the study abroad experience? • What do you wish you had done in the Friday track classes?

TABLE (1): GROUP REFLECTION PROMPTS USED IN THE AUTONOMOUS FOCUS GROUP

This set of prompts simulated a semi-structured focus group, but track leaders were asked to facilitate their own conversations (i.e., no interviewer was present). Some of the questions were developed based on our prior research of study abroad program leader roles and learning while abroad (Ozkan et al., 2020). The question about identifying key events builds on the Critical Incident Technique, which asks individuals to tell a story about a specific event (Bott & Tourish, 2016; Flanagan, 1954). The design of the prompts was not informed by Experiential Learning Theory, but rather with the intent of supporting track leaders in reflecting about their experiences. We note that a majority of our data analysis for this paper focused on the *Intermediate Discussions* conversations, because these made up most of the data and were most aligned with the research questions for this paper.

During the pre-program training session, the research team explained the purpose of the research study and the data collection plan to the track leaders. This study was approved by the Virginia Tech Institutional Research Board, and all participants provided consent for their participation in this study. Each track leader team was then given an audio recorder and asked to record at least three of the team's conversations throughout the two-week program. A unique aspect of the AFG data collection approach is that these conversations took place in *real-time*, that is, during the study abroad experience, rather than after program leaders returned home. The conversations frequently occurred over a meal and had a more casual tone than traditional interviews or focus groups. The track leaders typically started the conversation by discussing the prompted questions, but often used these as a jumping-off point to discuss other topics. For example, although we asked questions about program leader roles, the conversations tended to focus more on the day-to-day events of leading a study abroad program and observations about students. In some cases, the team left the audio recorder running throughout a meal, so the data we collected were more wide-ranging than a typical focus group.

Data Sample

The characteristics of the data collected through the AFGs are provided in Table (2) on the next page. Of the six tracks, three tracks recorded at least three conversations, while the other tracks recorded one conversation at the end of their time abroad. Due to different approaches to recording (e.g., stopping the recording after the prompts were discussed, or leaving the recorder on for an entire meal), some tracks recorded significantly more minutes of conversation than others. At the surface level, this variation suggests that tracks with more recorded minutes may be overrepresented in our findings. However, because these longer conversations tended to stray away from topics of interest to this study, the amount of data analyzed across tracks was comparable. In total, this data collection approach resulted in 10 hours of recordings and 313 pages of transcripts.

International Track	Number of Conversations Recorded	Number of Minutes Recorded	Pages of Transcripts
A	1	79	41
B	1	70	24
C	3	85	41
D	1	27	12
E	4	244	157
F	5	95	38

TABLE (2): AGGREGATED PARTICIPANT AND DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION[1]

Data Analysis

The data collected through the AFGs was, as described above, unique in several ways compared to data from traditional interviews or focus groups. In particular, the *real-time* nature of the data resulted in conversations where track leaders were processing experiences in the moment without the separation of time that is more typical. The track leader groups were also fairly comfortable with each other, since they were traveling together, resulting in frequent exchanges of ideas, friendly disagreements, and digressions beyond what may be common using other methods. To determine how to analyze this unique data set, the research team read the transcripts in-depth (Bazeley, 2021; Saldaña, 2013). Through group discussions, we came to a shared understanding of the structure and content of the data. We also identified alignment between the *real-time* processing of experiences reflected in the data and Experiential Learning Theory. Based on this initial reading and discussion, we developed our research questions and identified a plan for data analysis that included three rounds of coding: *Excerpt Selection*, *Theoretical Coding*, and *Concept Coding*.

In the *Excerpt Selection* phase, we reviewed the transcripts to identify conversational excerpts in which the track leaders exhibited one or more phases of the ELT cycle (i.e., experience, observation, conceptualization, active experimentation). In the *Theoretical Coding* phase, we broke down each conversational excerpt line-by-line based on the phases of the adapted ELT framework (Figure 1). An example of how this analysis was done is shown in Table (3). Finally, in the *Concept Coding* phase, we coded the conversations based on the abstract conceptualizations that the track leaders were discussing in that excerpt (Saldaña, 2013). We focused on the conceptualizations because this aspect of ELT characterizes the meaning making that is taking place through the experience. The concept coding process began with group discussion and open-

[1] We anonymized the track locations to mask leader identities.

coding processes to identify concepts, which were then refined based on iterative coding. In each round of coding, two researchers completed the coding process per excerpt and then discussed their analysis to reach agreement.

Excerpt from Conversation	Theoretical Code
Speaker 3: No, I mean, all in all, **we have a very good group**, I think, this year. I don't think we have any kind of… like, you're not hiding things from us, which is good. In years where we've had trouble, its drinking goes underground or… Yeah. Speaker 2: Yeah. They definitely don't have a filter, for better or for worse, and that kind of helps us keep eyes on people we need to keep eyes on.	Experience / Observation
And I think at the beginning too, when [Track Leader] and I were talking about the students who hadn't shown up to the Friday classes, we were kind of worried that they would forget that there is authority on this trip. And so, **one of the strategies I think was go get to know them**, put a face to the name and be like, "Hey, we care about you," blah blah blah.	Implemented Experimentation
So, when you do screw up, **you're going to be letting humans down and people that care about you**. So, whether or not we actually follow through on that, that was the intention.	Conceptualization
I think you guys set the stage really well in the Friday classes. It was a very smooth transition. I know often it will, I don't know, I just feel like **it's been seamless from the start**. Usually, it takes a few days to get to where we are now already.	Experience / Observation

TABLE (3): EXAMPLE OF CONVERSATION EXCERPTS CODED BASED ON ELT

Limitations

Our data collection and analysis methods had three notable limitations. First, the track leaders knew they were being recorded and were responding to reflective prompts that we provided, which may have limited the topics they chose to discuss. However, given the casual tone and content of the recorded discussions, we believe the data we collected provides realistic snapshots of in-the-moment conversations. Second, the real-time and autonomous format of the data collection limited our ability to probe or follow up on topics the participants brought up. Follow-up interviews with the leader teams could have allowed us to explore the themes we identified in greater depth. However, the present study builds on a previous study in which we collected and analyzed individual leader interviews (Ozkan et al., 2020), so we have some insight into the type of information that can be collected using that method. We found that the organic

nature of the autonomous focus groups provided richer and more reflective stories that may have been more challenging for leaders to articulate once they returned to campus. Third, the data analysis was conducted by authors who were also track leaders. Although we assigned coding responsibilities such that authors were generally not coding their own conversations, it was possible for authors to provide additional context in group discussions or as part of later rounds of analysis. This additional familiarity with the data could have resulted in biased interpretations. We worked to mitigate this limitation through always having multiple researchers coding every conversation through each stage of the analysis. We acknowledge that our dual roles as participants and authors could influence our analysis (e.g., towards identifying outcomes that mirror our own experiences). On the other hand, our familiarity with the experiences of the participants also enriched the analysis process because we were able to better interpret the significance of different aspects of the data.

Research Quality

We employed several strategies to increase the trustworthiness of our research process (Leydens et al., 2004). First, as described above, we were cognizant of the potential bias we could bring to the study and therefore discussed all analysis and interpretation with the entire research team to mitigate these concerns. Second, we created a clear audit trail of memos and analysis files documenting our conversations and decisions throughout the analysis process (Saldaña, 2013). Third, our prolonged experience with the phenomenon under study (i.e., with leading study abroad programs) provided us with enhanced insights into the interpretation of the data (Leydens et al., 2004; Walther et al., 2013). Finally, our iterative analysis process, supported by group discussions, helped to ensure close alignment between participants' comments and our reported results (Walther et al., 2013).

Results

Our research questions were: (1) *How do program leaders describe their real-time experiences leading a study abroad program,* and (2) *what conceptualizations do program leaders develop about students while leading a study abroad program?* This section presents our results in answer to both questions and is organized around the four main emerging themes we identified through our Concept Coding process. We address RQ1 by providing excerpts from the conversations of the program leaders and demonstrating how they map onto our modified Kolb experiential learning cycle. We address RQ2 by

presenting the four themes describing the conceptualizations about students that program leaders formed during their discussions. The four conversational themes are summarized in Table (4) and are presented in order from the most to least frequent in their representation in our data set. The *theme names are italicized* and **stages from the ELT are bolded** throughout the Results section.

Theme	Definition	# Tracks Experienced	# Excerpts
Student Engagement	Track leaders' conceptualizations about how students engage with the planned activities on RSAP tracks.	6	20
Student-Leader Interactions	Track leaders' conceptualizations about the roles of track leaders in the program, track leaders' interactions with students, and how track leaders think students respond to track leader roles and interactions.	5	18
Group Dynamics	Track leaders' conceptualizations about how students interact with each other on RSAP tracks and how smaller sub-groups are developed.	4	19
Cultural Learning	Track leaders' conceptualizations about how to help students engage with another culture.	2	12

TABLE (4): TRACK LEADER CONVERSATIONAL THEMES

Student Engagement

The most frequent conversational theme was *Student Engagement*, which describes conversations where leaders discussed their **conceptualizations** about how students engage with learning opportunities while abroad. This theme captures discussions about student engagement during engineering site visits, free time, and facilitated group reflections. Within this theme, track leaders discussed both factors that promoted engagement as well as concerns about student engagement. The leaders of every track discussed this topic at least once.

The most common topic within the *Student Engagement* theme was factors that promote engagement. Some track leaders discussed context factors as a potential influence on *Student Engagement*, such as the format or delivery of presentations during company site visits. For example, the leaders on Track A discussed a **conceptualization** that the empathy shown by the representatives of an engineering firm helped students engage, saying:

The company cared about what the students were saying, the students cared about what they were being told back, and even though it was interpretation yesterday, they were being valued and heard. And that went a really long way for them.

In other cases, track leaders also considered student characteristics that might influence *Student Engagement*. In the following conversation, the leaders on Track E began with an **observation** that nontraditional students tended to ask many questions at company visits:

Speaker 2: I had the best conversations with those students.

Speaker 1: Yes […] It's almost like, have they just lived different lives that give them more perspective?

Speaker 2: Yes, I think so.

[…interruption…]

Speaker 2: I think that, I mean, some of them *[other students]* appreciate the questions.

Speaker 3: Yeah. Do you think some of them don't? Or do you think they're like, "ah, I can't believe he's asking another"?

Speaker 1: Yes, probably that.

[…]

Speaker 1: [Track leader name] last year had this theory that the *[nontraditional students]* […] asked good questions that spurred the other students to also ask better questions. But I feel like these guys are just so far ahead…

Speaker 3: NBA-level players and the high school and college-level players.

Speaker 1: Yeah. I think they may be intimidating other people from asking questions because they're like, "I don't have questions anywhere near as well thought out as that."

In this conversation, the track leaders explored **conceptualizations** both about why the nontraditional students are more engaged at company visits and how their engagement may influence the other students on the track. Leaders on other tracks also discussed this idea that the *Group Dynamics* might play a

role in *Student Engagement*. Lastly, track leaders discussed how a personal connection to the topic of a site visit enhanced engagement. For example, the leaders on Track C made the following **observations** about students during an engineering site visit:

> *Speaker 1:* I was particularly surprised, I guess, by this morning's lecture. [Student] was so engaged and he was answering questions. They talk about, especially, in conceptual understanding research […] if you can see meaning in what you're taught to your own interests, your own experiences, it connects more. […] Every time the guy asked about the musical instrument, [Student] was one of them that raised his hand. [Student] is involved in music outside of engineering. He was able to make the connection today. And some of the others were too. There's something to be said about using things they're interested in and they engage in outside of the classroom, as a method to teach them the thing you're trying to teach them.
>
> *Speaker 3*: I also think that one of the coolest outcomes of that, that I was not expecting, was that they carry that excitement […] And then they continue on conversations with the people who are next to them, their friend group […] And it ends up being a peer-to-peer learning situation […] even the ones that aren't musically active, are continuing to chat.

The track leaders in this conversation build on their **conceptualization** about the connection between student interests and student engagement to suggest **potential experimentation** within teaching more broadly. However, in general, ideas for experimentation were less common in conversations where track leaders felt students were engaging well. Instead, these conversations focused on trying to develop shared **conceptualizations** about the specific environmental, individual, or group factors that led to the successful student engagement (e.g., grade or career incentives or the perceptions of other people).

On the other hand, some track leader conversations focused on situations where leaders wanted to intervene to encourage additional *Student Engagement*. Most of these conversations began with an **observation** that students were not asking questions during site visits. Track leaders suggested a variety of **conceptualizations** for why *Student Engagement* was not happening,

with different ideas about how to respond. For example, one lengthy conversation on Track C discussed fear of public speaking as a possible reason for lower engagement:

> *Speaker 1:* I think there is a – and this is not true of all the students, but a good chunk of them that [...] have been hesitant – there is some element of public speaking fright that is very clear for this group of students.
>
> [...general agreement...]
>
> *Speaker 1:* I don't know if they maybe look at these people that are presenting and just think that they can't measure up because they're impressive or they're from a different culture or they admire them. They're like, "Oh my God, I can't speak to these people."
>
> *Speaker 2*: Also, they have to represent all of their peers.
>
> *Speaker 1*: That's probably the biggest part of it, isn't it?
>
> *Speaker 3*: Well, we can do some practice next year, in the [pre-travel course].

In this case, the track leaders discussed a **proposed experimentation** for next year's cohort of the program. Based on various conceptualizations about *Student Engagement*, track leaders across tracks identified a range of experimentation options, including helping students empathize with the engineers they were visiting, incentivizing question-asking using course grades, and helping the students frame questions beforehand. Some of these ideas were enacted immediately during the program, as **implemented experimentation**, such as a group discussion on Track E about how asking questions can help the engineers at the site visits understand what topics are interesting to students. These **implemented experiments** led to further **observations** and **conceptualizations** in later discussions, providing evidence of the ELT cycle in action.

Student-Leader Interactions

The *Student-Leader Interactions* theme captures track leaders' **conceptualizations** about the informal nature of their interactions with students while traveling and how they think students respond to these interactions. It is important to note that we only have the leaders' perspectives,

so although we use the term "interactions" we do not know what the students were experiencing. This theme explores the unique relationships that are developed between students and leaders on a study abroad program as compared to in a traditional classroom. Track leaders described how these informal interactions helped them build trust with the students and better understand their role as track leaders.

Many leaders discussed **conceptualizations** about how getting to know students builds trust and can ultimately improve student learning experiences. Across several tracks, leaders described how meaningful they found their one-on-one or small group conversations with students and speculated that students also found these conversations meaningful. One leader from Track F described this perspective in the following comment:

> *I'm just thinking about the fact that the one-on-one opportunities that I had with students, I think were some of the most impactful […] Getting to know them more personally, like on the train ride and things like that. So, in my mind, I'm like, it would be great to facilitate more ways to just engage with students outside of the formal setting.*
>
> *[…] If there would be a way to try to build in some more informality, because I think that's where students really opened up and you get to know them more. And then I think that makes them more willing to do the things that we want them to do.*

In this case, the track leader built on their **conceptualization** that being open with students helped motivate them by suggesting a **proposed experimentation** of building more informality into traditional classroom environments. The leaders on Track C expanded this idea beyond individual student interactions and suggested that the tone set by the track leader team was influential in the overall *Group Dynamics*, saying:

> *Speaker 2:* I think collectively we were super calm, and then [Student] gave you credit for that today.
>
> *Speaker 3:* He did?
>
> *Speaker 2:* He said he was so glad that when he lost his passport, [Track Leader] didn't get super mad, and he thought he would get mad.
>
> *Speaker 3:* Aw, okay.

Speaker 2: [Track Leader] was just like, "No, we'll figure it out." And I think that was infectious throughout the trip. […]

Speaker 3: I think that also is because there is this group identity support system in place. People feel safe in our group. And so, when things go wrong, and they feel comfortable asking us, telling us whatever, and then that's really cool because otherwise you have that forbidden fruit or you hide it and then it builds up and it becomes a bigger problem.

These conversations demonstrate how track leaders reflected on the influence their interactions with students can have on both individual and group experiences. These **conceptualizations**, as shown in the second example, were typically built on **observations** of student responses to or comments on how track leaders handled specific situations.

Track leaders also discussed how their interactions with students helped them understand their role as a track leader. Leaders developed **conceptualizations** that their relationship with students was more like that of a mentor than a typical instructor. For example, a leader on Track C remarked that "you get the sense that there's this personal, role model connection" and another on Track A **observed** that "I like the way that some of them approach us to just ask questions or ask for advice. I think we did a very good job of showing that we are mentors beyond the program or the classrooms." At the same time, track leaders also discussed a need to balance developing these more personal relationships with maintaining a level of authority. For example, leaders on Track F had the following conversation:

Speaker 3: Here they were just calling me [First Name] or they just walk up to me and ask me whatever. But the fact that they still came to me to ask like logistical question, or can I do this kind of thing, showed me that I think I achieved what I wanted to do. And that was, I don't want to be "Ms. [Last Name]," but I still want you to respect that I'm not 18. […] Considering I've had those interactions with students, I think I achieved the perception that I wanted to get. I don't know for sure.

Speaker 1: […] I was not trying to become like too super buddy-buddy with the students, but I wanted them to know that if they needed something and I was there for them. And also, if they were doing

> something wrong, I can call them out. And so, I do think that there was still some degree of – formality isn't the word, but there was a little bit of distance between us, but it wasn't awkward or whatever.

In this case, the track leaders built on their **observations** of student behavior towards them to develop **conceptualizations** about whether they were achieving the role they felt was appropriate as a track leader. Although several tracks discussed similar ideas, few track leaders suggested specific ideas for **experimentation** related to defining their role with their RSAP track.

One exception to this pattern was a conversation between the leaders on Track A, where they discussed how their gender, race, and other personal identities influenced their roles as leaders. On this track, they experienced a company visit that sparked a group conversation about gender roles in the host country and in the United States. In reflecting on this conversation, the track leaders discussed their roles in the following way:

> *Speaker 1:* I will say, as a woman of color, again bringing gender back into it because we can, I took my opportunities […] to show that I can also have some authority […] When we went to the companies, often they would talk to you guys […] I did want the students to be able to see, not even just the men […] I wanted them to be able to see that this was a thing that a woman can do, that a woman of color can do.
>
> *Speaker 2:* I was very happy every time you would step up and say something.
>
> […]
>
> *Speaker 1:* Summing that point up, […] leadership, if it is a diverse team, can work effectively to demonstrate how different people can be role models for different types of roles, regardless of who they are, where they come from, and what they look like.
>
> *Speaker 2:* That's a good point. Now you're making me think about our role and our responsibility. Because, like you said, and I agree with you, […] we are not the rule, for sure, for the populations that we represent. What are we doing with this? I mean, we need to do something, and how is it important?

In this conversation the leaders of Track A were building on several **observations** of the interactions between students and track leaders at company visits and during the conversation about gender. These observations led to **conceptualizations** about their roles as track leaders and ultimately **proposed experimentations** about the importance of having a diverse leadership team that reflected the demographics of the students in a program.

Group Dynamics

In *Group Dynamics* conversations, track leaders described their **conceptualizations** about how students interacted with each other during their time abroad. This was a common topic, perhaps because (based on their comments) many track leaders perceived it to be their role to ensure that students were connecting with each other and that no one was left out. The conversations within this theme took two main forms: discussions based on concerns the track leaders had about group dynamics and discussions where track leaders were pleasantly surprised at the way students were looking out for each other.

Many conversations in the *Group Dynamics* theme began with track leaders making an **observation** about student behavior that they found concerning. Common concerns included students not connecting with each other, students forming cliques, and students being left out by the larger group. Based on these observations, the track leaders would discuss possible **conceptualizations** about why this behavior was happening and what they could do to intervene in the situation. On tracks where we have multiple recordings, track leaders would often return to the topic of *Group Dynamics* repeatedly and discuss updates based on new **observations**. For example, one of the leaders on Track F observed early on:

> *I hope that'll break down a little bit, but they're getting awful comfy now in their groups. Even when I was asking yesterday [Name] and his roommates, "Well, who are you roommates with?" And they didn't even know [their] names.*

But later in the experience, the leaders on Track F felt the group dynamics had improved and developed **proposed experimentation** based on their new **observations**:

> *Speaker 1:* So, continuing with that theme of more cohesion in the group, I was kind of amused today, even at lunch where, while they were

waiting for lunch, there was this group crossword puzzle kind of thing going on, or I don't think it's a crossword puzzle…

Speaker 2: Yeah, it was a crossword.

Speaker 1: [...] as a table, it was like, "can we think of the answers to it?" It was just a different kind of way of them making use of their time. Because at the beginning of the trip, each person was working individually on their crossword puzzle. And now it's a conversation at the group level.

[…]

Speaker 1: It makes me want to bring some new ideas about how to foster cohesion in the team. [...] I have to wrestle with how you help students to go through some experience together [...] this is making me think of that, because sometimes they may miss some of the benefits of the early experiences in their warm-up time.

These **observations** led the track leaders to wonder what they could do to bring about this kind of group cohesion earlier in the program. A similar conversation occurred on Track C, where the track leaders began to speculate about which experiences on their track had led to the eventual development of group cohesion:

Speaker 2: And then soccer yesterday too. You got a bunch of students who don't usually talk or who aren't as outgoing, and I mean, [Name] is cracking jokes and running all around, and seemed very comfortable in his skin finally. So that was cool.

Speaker 1: Yeah. Definitely felt like it opened up a new door of interaction for students with each other, with us.

Speaker 3: I think [cultural experience] did that too, because the show pushed them all out of their comfort zone a little bit. And so I wonder if programs building in that kind of discomfort early is a way to just break the ice for everybody.

Speaker 2: [...] And if you can get faculty also in that similar situation, then they can model how to construct learning from that discomfort with the students, in a way that is a collaborative learning experience for both faculty and students.

These track leaders built on the **conceptualization** that discomfort helped break the ice and helped students connect with each other to **propose experimentation** about how this approach could be used to intentionally build cohesion among students on the track. Similar conversations happened on other tracks, focusing on various conceptualizations about why students connected, why they broke into cliques, and what track leaders should do in response. Track leaders on several tracks **proposed experimentation** related to making adjustments to the pre-travel course to help build connections sooner, including holding out-of-classroom activities, casual interactions such as pizza parties, and in general breaking with the traditional hierarchy in the classroom setting.

A less frequent type of *Group Dynamics* conversation focused on cases where track leaders **observed** students taking care of each other in different ways. This often stemmed from cases where the track leaders had been concerned about particular students becoming isolated, but then other students stepped in to include those students. One such example occurred on Track B, where the track leaders said:

> *We saw a student who was flailing and trying to fit in. And the more he put himself out there, the more he got classmates rolling their eyes and so on. At one point we did wonder whether we should intervene. [...] And then there was a group of more extroverted students who did take him in. And interestingly, I think they'd seen [Other track leader] and my concern. [...] There's some incredibly mature and thoughtful individuals in the group who've really been very considerate of each other.*

Track leaders on other tracks discussed similar cases, where they observed students reaching out and connecting with other students. In these conversations, track leaders discussed **conceptualizations** about why students might or might not behave this way while abroad or back on campus (e.g., discussing the roles of parenting, power distance, and willingness to take risks). However, they tended not to move on to **proposing experimentation** as much in these cases as in the earlier examples where they were concerned about student behaviors.

Cultural Learning

The *Cultural Learning* theme describes conversations where track leaders explained their **conceptualizations** about how to help students engage effectively with a new culture. These conversations often took a troubleshooting

approach and focused on specific incidents that had occurred recently. Track leaders reflected on what happened, why they thought it happened, and what they wanted to try differently next time. In cases where multiple recordings were taken across the track, track leaders often returned to the same topics within this theme and reported on things they had tried since the previous conversation. Topics within the *Cultural Learning* theme included facilitating discussions after cultural experiences, responding to incidents where students acted in a culturally inappropriate way, and preparing students with cultural information before traveling to the international location.

Many conversations within the *Cultural Learning* track focused on how to encourage students to be open-minded about new experiences. One example is the following conversation between the Track A leaders, focused on helping students' shift their attitudes about U.S. culture:

> *Speaker 1:* Constantly comparing wherever you're at to the U.S., and not really opening your mind to what you're experiencing [...] How do you get them to really not fall into that trap of just comparing it to the U.S. – or always thinking the U.S. does it better?
>
> *Speaker 2:* Yeah, they're okay to compare, they're not okay to think that the U.S. always defaults to being the best one.
>
> *Speaker 3:* Yeah, exactly. I've been thinking about that a lot actually. One thing that I was thinking, maybe one day, when we do this again, create something like a "No Complaining Day." So today, you're not allowed to say negative things about the country, you just need to find all the things that are good, that they are doing better. Not even better, because better also...
>
> *Speaker 2:* Different.
>
> *Speaker 3:* Just the things that they are doing that are really good. And you are not allowed to complain or find out negative things today.
>
> *Speaker 1:* Even if it's different, what are the valuable parts of what they're doing?

This conversation starts from **observations** of the tone in students' conversations, leading to a **conceptualization** that students tend to respond to a new culture by constantly comparing it to the U.S. culture, often in a negative

way. The track leaders then **propose an experiment** for how they could help students move beyond that approach to support better cultural learning.

In other conversations about *Cultural Learning*, track leaders reflected on specific situations and determined if further response was necessary. For example, in the following conversation, the leaders of Track E reflect on how they could respond to an incident that occurred while students were visiting a sacred space:

> *Speaker 1:* I think sometimes when they're going into either religious or historical spaces, I think sometimes in their head it doesn't switch from – do not act the same way you are acting at "X" when we walk into "Y." […] Even when we were walking in the cathedral, even if you're not religious this is a space in which you should be – less making jokes, but I don't know if it necessarily dawns on – I mean, some of them realize it very quickly, but I don't think some of them do.
>
> […]
>
> *Speaker 2:* What's hard I think is they are American students and we don't have anything that old. […] When you go see the redwoods or something people are pretty careful of those because it's so obviously a unique thing, like at Yellowstone National Park people are – I guess our natural stuff people are more careful of.
>
> *Speaker 1:* And also, they say don't touch the animals, like those messages. I think here that is just non-existent.
>
> *Speaker 3:* Yeah. We should have a conversation about that. We have a long bus ride tomorrow, so we can do it then.

This excerpt is from a much longer conversation where the track leaders go back and forth with a variety of **conceptualizations** about why a specific incident at a cultural site happened. After deciding that they could provide students more context and support in interpreting visits to these types of locations, the track leaders suggest several **proposed experiments**, eventually landing on trying to use national parks as a potentially familiar comparison point. These two conversations provide examples of how the *Cultural Learning* conversations tended to focus on how a new **conceptualization** about students' engagement with culture should inform track leaders' teaching approaches,

either within the same track or on a future program. Other similar conversations conceptualized the roles that a student's discomfort, pre-trip preparation, or reflection might play in their behavior at a cultural site.

One surprising finding related to this theme is that track leaders from only two of the international tracks had conversations about *Cultural Learning*. However, both of these tracks discussed this topic extensively and returned to the topic frequently. These two tracks are notable because they traveled to the countries that are the most culturally different from U.S. culture (as discussed in Davis & Knight, 2021). It may be that on these tracks, *Cultural Learning* was more of a pressing issue for track leaders to discuss because there were more frequent incidents where students were struggling with cultural engagement. This is not to say that there was no *Cultural Learning* on the other tracks, but perhaps that this topic was not a notable source of stress or reflection for track leaders in the other locations.

Discussion

This paper presents a unique real-time perspective on program leader learning and experiences during study abroad programs. Through the use of audio recorders, we collected data via *autonomous focus groups* where program leaders reflected about their experiences and discussed how to approach ongoing challenges. We analyzed these conversations through the lens of Experiential Learning Theory and found that program leaders' conversations regularly followed the cycle described in this theoretical model (Research Question 1). We also focused in additional depth on the Conceptualization stage of the cycle to identify themes in program leader learning during their time abroad (Research Question 2).

Our first research question explored how program leaders describe their real-time experiences leading a study abroad program. We found that program leaders' descriptions of their experiences followed an adapted version of Kolb's experiential learning cycle as they worked together to process the experience of leading a study abroad program. In particular, we regularly observed program leaders describing specific student behaviors (observation), speculating about the reasons for these behaviors (conceptualization), suggesting potential actions to take in supporting or adjusting these behaviors (proposed experimentation), and in some cases, implementing these actions (active experimentation). The conversations we captured highlight the types of challenges and decisions study

abroad program leaders may face as they lead a program and emphasize the uncertainty that often comes in navigating these situations. The tracks for which we had multiple conversations demonstrated how certain topics recurred over the course of these programs. In response to Research Question 1, our data suggest that the experience of leading a study abroad program can be characterized as a constant state of reassessing and adopting new approaches based on observations.

Prior research exploring the role of program leaders in study abroad programs has primarily focused on listing the responsibilities of leaders during these programs. Our findings expand on this perspective by characterizing the *process* by which these responsibilities are carried out. For example, cultural mentoring has been identified as an essential aspect of promoting student learning abroad (Engberg et al., 2016; Spenader & Retka, 2015; Vande Berg et al., 2009). Our data provide real-time snapshots of what cultural mentoring can look like during a short-term study abroad program. Although the topics of conversation in our study aligned in some ways with the cultural mentoring behaviors described by Niehaus et al. (2018), most notably *Setting Expectations* and *Facilitating Connections*, our results suggest that cultural mentoring can be characterized by more than the topics of discussion. The *process* of cultural mentoring involves responding to each unique situation as it arises, and is reminiscent of Sawyer's (2011) descriptions of teaching as a balance between structure and improvisation. Similarly, through our autonomous focus groups, we gained insights into the *process* program leaders followed in navigating personal interactions with students and facilitating positive group dynamics. Our results align with Coryell's (2011) suggestion that a short-term study abroad program can form a community of practice where formal and informal interactions with peers and instructors are central to student learning and engagement. This earlier study presented students' perspectives on the importance of these interactions; our study complements their findings by shedding light on the instructor experience. By illuminating the real-time experiences of study abroad program leaders, we provide more nuance to earlier statements about the "shifting responsibilities" (O'Neal, 1995) and "intense" nature of leading a study abroad program (Rasch, 2001). These insights can guide the development of program leader training.

Our second research question focused in-depth on one phase of the experiential learning cycle to explore the conceptualizations program leaders

develop about students while leading study abroad programs. In contrast to traditional classroom environments, the study abroad experience presents an opportunity for leaders to be with students for long periods of time and in less structured learning situations. This context gave track leaders new perspectives on both their own interactions with students (*Student-Leader Interactions*) and how students interacted with each other (*Group Dynamics*). These ongoing interactions provided insights into student learning, including *Cultural Learning* specifically and students' decisions to engage with learning more generally (*Student Engagement*). Within the autonomous focus group discussions, track leaders built on these conceptualizations about students to suggest how they could adjust their behavior during their current program, in future study abroad environments, and in more traditional classrooms.

These findings support earlier research on the opportunities for program leader learning while leading a program abroad. A number of studies have identified ways in which faculty bring lessons from experiences abroad into their traditional classrooms (Davis & Knight, 2020; Dooley & Rouse, 2009; Ellinghaus et al., 2019; Loebick, 2017). Through our use of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory as a lens, we were able to go beyond capturing the program leader's ideas for their classrooms, to understand the conceptualizations that the leaders developed about students. For example, the most common topic across our autonomous focus groups were discussions of *Student Engagement*, where program leaders speculated about why students engaged in learning in some cases and did not in others. Traveling on a study abroad program gave program leaders more opportunities to observe and interact with students than in a traditional classroom, which in turn provided more experience from which they could develop conceptualizations about students (Kolb, 1984). Our study both supports the general claim that this learning process can occur for study abroad program leaders and identifies several themes around which their conceptualizations about students may focus.

Implications for Practice

Our study suggests several implications for how study abroad program leaders can be prepared to engage with the process of leading a study abroad program. First, we believe that new program leaders will be better prepared if they receive an accurate description of what leading a study abroad program looks like in practice. Training available to study abroad leaders varies, but often focuses on logistical and educational topics rather than process or skills

development (Goode, 2007). Our findings suggest that the process of leading a study abroad program is uncertain and improvisational, even when the program itself is logistically going according to plan. Making program leaders aware of this fact up front is a first step in setting them up for success. Further, future program leaders could be provided with opportunities to develop the skills necessary to facilitate this type of learning environment. For example, training sessions could include conversational role plays or improv workshops to help faculty learn to think on their feet. New program leaders may also benefit from mentorship from experienced leaders, which could allow for sharing of best practices in how to facilitate difficult conversations and set expectations with students. Overall, presenting new program leaders with opportunities to develop relevant skills before leading a program could improve both their experience and the student experience.

Second, program leaders in short-term study abroad programs can be better prepared by suggesting that they think of their student group as a community of practice. Program leaders in our study spent a lot of time reflecting on their relationships to students, the students' relationships to each other, and how all of these interactions influenced students' experiences. These types of connections are more significant in programs abroad as compared to traditional classrooms, so it would be helpful to prepare program leaders for this environment. Teaching in a community of practice can take more of an apprenticeship approach rather than presenting information in a top-down manner. Students learn from the example of leaders and then take on increasing levels of participation in the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Program leaders could be prepared for this type of educational environment through the role-playing conversations mentioned earlier. They could also be supported in designing programs that offer clear opportunities for this kind of mentorship (e.g., meals, housing choices, group discussions). Finally, program leaders could be encouraged to simulate the less structured group dynamics and the lower faculty-student power distance in their pre-travel orientations and courses by moving some activities outside of the classroom, or by bringing guest speakers into the classroom.

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