*Research Article*

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# Supporting Student Learning to Make the Most of Study Abroad

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## Abstract

Spanish and French majors at our small, private, Southern U.S. liberal arts institution must study abroad for an entire semester, yet students embark and return with widely disparate levels of language and intercultural learning. To more fully foster learning-laden semester-long study abroad experiences we changed the curriculum and now majors take a three-semester sequence of courses before they leave, while abroad, and upon return. In this pilot study we assessed students' intercultural competency using the Intercultural Development Inventory both pre- and post-study abroad experience. We also used their assignments to triangulate and contextualize the IDI scores. As a result of the data, we contend that intercultural learning a) must be scaffolded and supported throughout the entire language, cultures, and literatures curricula, and b) any results on indirect standardized scales need to be compared with direct assessments. Based on the data, we revised the three-course sequence to help students process their intercultural journey. Given the nature of the changing international education landscape, some implications, beyond our department, of the small pilot study are also provided.

## Abstract in Spanish

En nuestra universidad privada en el sur de Estados Unidos es obligatorio que los estudiantes especialistas en español y francés estudien en el extranjero para un semestre entero (típicamente cuatro meses). A pesar de tal, estudiantes van y vuelven con niveles de idioma y aprendizaje intercultural muy desiguales. Para

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fomentar que los semestres en el extranjero fomentaran más aprendizaje, nuestro departamento cambió los requisitos para la especialización. Ahora necesitan tomar un curso antes de que vayan, un curso en línea mientras están en el extranjero y un curso al volver. En esta investigación evaluamos el desarrollo intercultural de los estudiantes usando el Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), antes y después de sus estudios en el extranjero. También usamos sus tareas para verificar los resultados del IDI. Insistimos que el aprendizaje intercultural a) tiene que ser integrado durante toda la especialización y, b) los resultados de pruebas estandarizadas, como el IDI, se necesitan comparar con trabajos estudiantiles para comprobar tales resultados. Discutimos las modificaciones a los cursos que hicimos a base de este estudio e implicaciones que el estudio nos dio que pueden aplicar a otros departamentos e instituciones.

## Keywords

Assessment; curriculum design; IDI; intercultural learning; study abroad

# 1. Introduction

During and after the unprecedented times of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the ability to deal with ambiguity, navigate uncertainty, suspend judgement, and discern root causes of inequality—all core skills of intercultural learning—are now more necessary than ever. Language education has often held up study abroad or total immersion as *the* place where students get language acquisition, grammatical accuracy, ease of speaking/fluency, and intercultural competency. Seven percent of all U.S. students who study abroad are those studying foreign languages and international studies (Open Doors, 2019). Unfortunately, the COVID-19 global pandemic fundamentally altered the possibility of formal study away experiences, as travel bans, visa moratoriums, and social distancing sanctions were enforced and are slowly returning. Nevertheless, prior models of scaffolded, supported intercultural learning connected to study abroad experiences (Namaste & Sturgill, 2020; Twombly, 2012; Vande Berg et al., 2009; Vande Berg et al., 2012) have the potential to shape future curricular directions.

In light of recent research, the World Languages and Cultures (WLC) department at Elon University formally changed the French and Spanish curricula to more effectively scaffold the student learning outcomes of language proficiency, critical thinking, and intercultural learning throughout students'

course of study. While we teach nine languages in our department, we only offer majors in French, Spanish, and Classical Studies. French and Spanish require a semester-long study abroad experience in an approved program and have done so for decades. In 2017, we piloted a three-course sequence newly required for all majors and minors studying abroad for a semester to better enhance students' intercultural development. Students take a one-credit predeparture course, a one-credit online course in conjunction with their semester-long international experience, and a two-credit reentry course (our university courses are four-credit). The predeparture course helps them frame and plan their learning, the concurrent online course helps students document their experiences, and the reentry course helps them make meaning of their study abroad learning. We anchor all three courses on Paige's (2009) *Maximizing Study Abroad* concepts, with extra enhancement activities, discussions, projects, etc.

In this pilot study we assessed students' intercultural competency using the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) both before and after their study abroad experience. We also used their assignments to triangulate, verify, contextualize, and provide nuance to the IDI scores. As a result of the study, we argue that intercultural learning a) must be scaffolded and supported throughout the four-year curriculum since it is on-going and continuous and not only shaped by a singular experience (not even a full semester abroad), and b) any results on standardized scales need to be compared with assignments to fully see student growth. Furthermore, we argue that changes to courses and programs should be evidence-based, with mixed methods assessment being particularly useful.

## 2. Intercultural Learning and Study Abroad

Intercultural development, or the many other terms that are used (e.g., intercultural competency, cultural humility, transcultural proficiency), refers to a set of skills necessary to navigate effective communication and interaction among people of different cultural backgrounds. Darla Deardorff's (2009) definition is the most widely accepted and used: "the effective and appropriate behavior and communication in intercultural situations" (pp. 247-248), with "appropriate" being assessed by the receiver not the communicator. Moreover, with her own and others' work in *The Sage Handbook of Intercultural*

*Competence* (Deardorff, 2009), we now understand that intercultural competence:

> is a process – a lifelong process – there is no one point at which an individual becomes completely interculturally competent. Thus, it is important to pay as much attention to the development process – of how one acquires the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes – as one does to the actual aspects of intercultural competence and as such, critical reflection becomes a powerful tool in the process of intercultural competence development. (pp. 247-248)

Students' intercultural development needs to be intentionally mentored at *all* stages of their collegiate learning experience (Brewer & Cunningham, 2009; CEL, 2017; Sobania, 2015; Twombly, 2012); before, during, and upon return from study abroad are critical moments for intercultural development mentoring (Paige, 2009).

With the relatively recent studies conducted in international education in the past decade, particularly *Study Abroad in a New Global Century* by Susan Twombly (2012), *Student Learning Abroad* by Michael Vande Berg, Michael Paige and Kris Hemming Lou (2012), the Georgetown Consortium by Michael Vande Berg, Jeffrey Connor-Linton, and Michael Paige (2009) and *Developing Intercultural Competence and Transformation: Theory, Research, and Application in International Education* by Victor Savicki (2008), we now know that for learning abroad to be transformational it needs to be intentionally primed, scaffolded while there, and guided upon reentry. New research by Hinako Kishino and Tomoko Takahashi (2019) indicates that studies in global citizenship are replicating the aforementioned researchers' findings.

Study abroad has traditionally been seen as a key contributor to students' intercultural growth and linguistic proficiency, nevertheless, study abroad is not immune to fads or trends. As *Student Learning Abroad* (Vande Berg et al., 2012, ch. 1) explains, the "grand tour" model of study abroad centered on exposure to exemplars of Western Civilization, with a focus on modeling and imitating those exemplars. Then the "sink or swim" immersion model took hold, where students were sent abroad to live with host families, take courses with host national students, participate in activities organized by the study abroad providers (i.e., internships, service learning), etc. Both models perpetuate the myth that exposure to difference is enough to develop intercultural and target

language skills, particularly because proof centers around anecdotal evidence and students saying that study abroad was transformational. Unfortunately, the Georgetown Consortium project of almost 1,200 students and other research shows that neither of these models are sufficient. Vande Berg et al.'s (2012) research indicates that for learning to happen, particularly intercultural learning, intentional interventions are necessary before, during and after students' international study experiences.

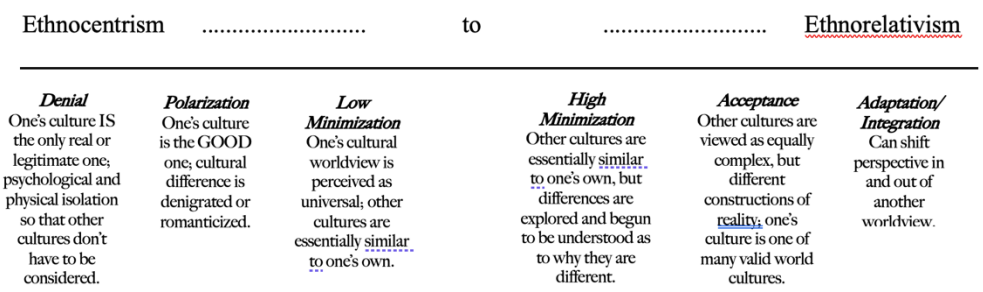
The current constructivist model, in contrast to the exposure or immersion model, asserts that since knowledge is constructed, particularly filtered through our individual and cultural lenses, students need to create their own meaning, negotiating with their perspectives, historical legacies, other individuals, etc. (Vande Berg et al., 2012, pp. 18-19). The four key aims of the constructivist model are helping students 1) increase their cultural and personal self-awareness through reflecting on their experiences; 2) increase their awareness of others within their own cultural and personal contexts; 3) learn to manage emotions in the face of ambiguity, change, and challenging circumstances and people; and 4) learn to shift frames and adapt behavior to other cultural contexts (Vande Berg, 2013).

Milton Bennett and Janet Bennett (2001) pioneered the study of intercultural development and provided a useful framework, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), through which to view this lifelong process. While the developmental process is not linear nor ever completed per se, Bennett and Bennett (2001) and afterwards Mitchell Hammer (2012) present various stages of development or frames of viewing difference. Individuals (can) move from ethnocentrism towards ethnorelativism, or a more monocultural view towards a more inclusive, intercultural, or global view of the world.

International education recognizes the difficulties of assessing and measuring intercultural development and has developed many surveys and instruments to capture learners' growth. For example, Braskamp's Global Perspectives Inventory (GPI), Personal Report of Intercultural Communication Apprehension (PRICA), the Assessment of Intercultural Competence (AIC), and the AAC&U Rubric for Intercultural Competence are used. As of late, the IDI, or Intercultural Development Inventory, dominates since there is increasing pressure to follow scientific and social science research standards with statistically valid and reliable tools *and* provide individual student diagnosis.

Importantly, David Wong (2015) has questioned the prominence and reliance of the IDI; researchers such as Darla Deardorff (2009, 2014), Madeleine Green (2012), and Mell Bolen (2007) have long championed the need to assess intercultural development in varied and multi-modal ways.

**FIGURE (1)**
MY OWN SUMMARY OF IDI STAGES/LEVELS OF DEVELOPMENT/ORIENTATION TOWARDS CULTURAL DIFFERENCE MAPPED ONTO SCALE OF ETHNOCENTRISM TO ETHNORELATIVISM




Again, guided interventions, reflection, and increased interactions with difference foster intercultural development on a continuum since we know that it is a life-long process that ebbs and flows via interactions with others. As stated, research indicates that for learning to happen, particularly intercultural learning, intentional interventions are necessary, as are varied assessments to track growth over time. In light of all this, Elon's World Languages and Cultures department changed its curricula and requirements for Spanish and French majors to better support students' intercultural learning during their semester-long study abroad immersion experiences.

## 3. The Three-Course Sequence

As part of the curricular requirements for Spanish and French majors at our institution students must study abroad in a Spanish or French-speaking country for at least one semester—a requirement that has been in place for decades. We thought that if students were going to become truly proficient, linguistically and interculturally, such could only be achieved via considerable time *in situ*. Unfortunately, over the years we anecdotally noticed that some students came back from their study abroad with much improved linguistic and cultural competency skills while many others did not; the inconsistencies could not be simply relegated to individual student differences. A decade ago, we went

through the process of devising and elucidating a departmental five-year plan in which we, as a department that teaches nine different languages, agreed upon three overarching student learning goals: 1) language proficiency, 2) critical thinking, and 3) intercultural competency. In the process we implemented changes to the Spanish and French major and minor requirements, which were approved by the university curriculum committee. The most substantive change to the curriculum was requiring all majors take a one-credit six-week predeparture course, a one-credit online course while studying abroad, and a two-credit reentry course upon return from their required semester-long experience. Minors can take the course sequence if they choose, but it is not required of minors who study abroad for a semester.

Since the course needed to be open to both Spanish and French majors (and any students studying abroad for a semester) the course was taught entirely in English instead of the target language, and could, in theory be taught by anyone in the department. The initial course sequence and cohort centered around students' research project that compared some cultural element in both the U.S. and target-county contexts (food, religion, work, school, etc.). Students researched a cultural topic in the U.S. and presented on it before studying abroad, collected materials regarding that cultural topic while they lived abroad, and once back compared the value systems underlying the cultural practices in the respective countries and/or cultures. In addition, students responded to particular reflection prompts while studying and living abroad and posted them weekly to our course management system.

After two cohorts' final presentations to the department, we decided that the purpose of the course wasn't to develop their research skills, which is what the research project assignment did, but rather to intentionally help them develop their intercultural competency skills and to help them better process, make sense of, and leverage their experience abroad. Thus, we improved the courses and now the three-course WLC sequence leverages critical reflection-based assignments to document students' thoughts, emotions, and experiences. The andragogical prompts help students process and analyze their intercultural developmental growth during these critical pre-, during- and post-periods, in an effort to galvanize transformative learning. During the third iteration of the course sequence, we decided to request special funding, which was granted, to actually assess and measure with the IDI our students' intercultural competency

skills predeparture, upon return, and six-months after returning from abroad. We wanted to take a data-driven approach to curriculum design changes, and verify if the three-course sequence had any impact on students' learning.

# 4. Pilot Study

While other assessments will need to be implemented to study students' change in language acquisition as a result of study abroad, this study was done to analyze students' intercultural competency skills before, right after, and 6 months after their immersive semester in a Spanish- or French-speaking country. At the beginning of the 2017-2018, predeparture course (WLC 301) students in both sections were told about the IRB-approved study and given consent forms. The students were informed that the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), would be the assessment that would be used with this particular cohort of the three-course sequence, along with their homework assignments (blog analysis, final guided reflection, and letter to next cohort, included in the Appendix). Students were asked to complete the assessment as part of the course, regardless if they decided to participate in the study or not, so they could receive the IDI scores and individualized coaching. It was not a graded component, but framed as a useful, formative tool for their own learning.

We used the IDI in this study because we wanted to evaluate if it was the best tool to measure and better understand our students' intercultural development, and whether or not it was a sustainable and viable assessment tool to be used with future cohorts. The IDI measures students' *perceived* level of intercultural competency (how interculturally competent they think they are) and compares it to their actual orientation or cognitive frame about interculturality. To combat this indirect nature of the IDI (students' perceptions of their skills), and to follow Deardorff's (2014) implorations, in our study we used students' written assignments as a means to gather more direct examples of knowledge, skills, habits of mind, and actions related to their intercultural development.

While Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) studies often rely on social science research methods, CEL (2014), Nancy Chick et al. (2012), Sherry Linkon (2008) and Karen Manarin (2018), among others, argue ardently that humanities faculty should use methods that are core to their fields. Disciplinary

methods in the humanities include close reading, textual analysis, finding themes, seeing how small details inform larger patterns and how larger patterns highlight small details, narrating the learning that occurs over time, etc. We cannot divorce our field and research methods from our SoTL studies, thus students' texts and the data from them, along with the IDI scores, provide the "thick narration," to use Sherry Linkon's term (CEL, 2015). Thus, this pilot study is based on mixed-methods research; the interconnection of the quantitative and qualitative data provide richness and nuance.

The two researchers, the three-course sequence instructor (for that cohort) and a data analyst, tallied the predeparture, upon return, and five-month post return IDI scores, and did limited statistical analysis, thus providing the quantitative data. Because of the low overall number of students (N=34) and nearly half (44%) of the students did not participate in one or two of the testing periods, the main analysis involving the IDI does not include any complex, inferential statistics. Analysis of IDI results consist mainly of descriptive statistics (scores, averages, percentages, score levels) and changes in these statistics over time.

We close read student assignments, stripped of names, and did a detailed textual analysis, providing the qualitative data. The three assignments used were 1) an analysis of the blog posts written while studying abroad, 2) a final reflection with guided prompts, and 3) a letter with recommendations for the following WLC cohort (assignment specifics can be found in the Appendix). Then, using a self-created intercultural learning rubric combining the AAC&U rubric and the IDI stages (included in Appendix) students' responses were categorized (Denial, Polarization, Low Minimization, High Minimization, Acceptance, Adaptation) based on the previously done close reading and textual analysis. Afterwards, we connected students' assignments and IDI scores to see if we and the rubric accurately categorized the level based on students' writing. As can be imagined, the qualitative data from the assignments demonstrated students' learning in more detail. Lastly, we analyzed the categorized students' responses in their IDI stage groupings to compare themes and ideas among students within similar as well as in different IDI developmental stage groups.

# 5. Intercultural Growth Measured with the IDI

To provide context with regards to the IDI scores, anything above a seven-point increase is considered statistically significant, even if that movement is within one stage (Denial, Polarization, Low Minimization, High Minimization, Acceptance, Adaptation). Apart from a change in developmental orientation (DO) score over time, the expansion or retraction of the gap between the perceived and the developmental score is another way to observe and track growth. Solely based on their IDI scores, for the vast majority of the 34 students in this particular pilot study (28 females, 6 males, 17 majors, 17 minors), there was a positive impact on intercultural competency as a result of study abroad and the WLC sequence of courses. There was either a change in developmental orientation or there was a better alignment between their perceived and developmental orientations, both of which indicate growth.

Regarding developmental orientation levels, when students took the IDI before their study abroad experience 29% of students were at the first two levels (Denial and Polarization). Two thirds (67%) scored in the next two categories (Low & High Minimization), although the largest proportion (46%) occupied the Low Minimization level. That left only 4% in the fifth level (Acceptance) and none in the sixth (Adaptation). Among this distribution there was no distinguishable relationship between developmental orientation level and any of the demographic variables (gender, year in school, or language major/minor).

As an intervention, study abroad does appear to have some correlation with increases in developmental orientation. Immediately after their study abroad experience results from the IDI indicate that 44% of students went up either one or two DO levels, with all students at the Denial level and three of the four Polarization students taking part in those increases. A similar percentage (41%) of students had no change in level, and all of these students were at either the Low or High Minimization level. Only 15% of students experienced a drop in one DO level. As a result, the overall distribution of DO levels became slightly more spread out with the proportion of the largest groups (Low & High Minimization) becoming more even.

Based solely on the IDI results, it does appear that the effect of the study abroad experience may not be entirely stable when students are away from the target cultural learning environment. Five months after the end of their study

abroad programs, students took the IDI for the third time and although 21% of students demonstrated an increase in DO levels (green text in blue column of Figure 2 on page 67), another 21% of students also showed a decrease (red text in blue column of Figure 2) with more than half dropping two levels (bolded red text in blue column of Figure 2). Of the 5 students that experienced a decrease in DO levels five months after the end of their programs, four had experienced an increase during their study abroad experience (the fifth did not take the initial IDI so no increase was able to be determined), illustrating that the increases were not strongly engrained (see red text in blue column of Figure 2). Of particular note, both students who experienced a two-level DO increase between the start and end of their study abroad experience (students 14 and 32), also had a two DO level decrease in the five months after their study abroad programs ended, which may indicate that large increases may be particularly unstable or unsustainable.

Looking at the difference in developmental orientation scores between the May before their study abroad program and the May five months after their programs ended, there do appear to be some students who experience an overall net increase in DO levels (orange column in Figure 2). As to be expected, the students who started at the lowest level improved the most on the IDI, and made larger leaps interculturally (students 7, 8 & 9 in Figure 2). For instance, for students who started in the Denial stage, the same-grouping and cultural isolation maintained in the U.S. prior to target language and culture study abroad was forced open by the semester-long experience; the students came back romanticizing and idealizing the culture of the host country. The growth in the students in the Denial stage, as a group, was marked and important. Again, although 10% of students experienced a net decrease of one DO level (red text in orange column in Figure 2), and 45% of students experienced no net change in levels (0 in orange column in Figure 2), 40% of students did experience a net increase of one DO level (green text in orange column in Figure 2) and 5% experienced a net increase of two levels (bold green text in orange column in Figure 2). More than half of these net gains were experienced by students in the two lowest DO levels.

**FIGURE (2)**

DEVELOPMENTAL ORIENTATION (DO) LEVELS AT EACH TESTING INTERVAL

| Student # | Before Study Abroad (N=28) | Immediately After Study Abroad (N=33) | 5 Months After Study Abroad (N=24) | Net Change in # of DO Levels from May 2017 to May 2018 (N=20) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | IDI DO level | IDI DO level | IDI DO level | Net Change |
| 1 | | Polarization | | NA |
| 2 | | Polarization | | NA |
| 3 | | Low Minimization | Polarization | NA |
| 4 | | Low Minimization | Low Minimization | NA |
| 5 | | Low Minimization | Low Minimization | NA |
| 6 | | Low Minimization | Low Minimization | NA |
| 7 | Denial | Polarization | Polarization | 1 |
| 8 | Denial | Polarization | Polarization | 1 |
| 9 | Denial | Polarization | Low Minimization | **2** |
| 10 | Polarization | | Low Minimization | 1 |
| 11 | Polarization | Denial | Polarization | 0 |
| 12 | Polarization | Low Minimization | **Denial** | -1 |
| 13 | Polarization | Low Minimization | Low Minimization | 1 |
| 14 | Polarization | **High Minimization** | **Polarization** | 0 |
| 15 | Low Minimization | Polarization | | NA |
| 16 | Low Minimization | Polarization | Polarization | -1 |
| 17 | Low Minimization | Low Minimization | | NA |
| 18 | Low Minimization | Low Minimization | | NA |
| 19 | Low Minimization | Low Minimization | | NA |
| 20 | Low Minimization | Low Minimization | Low Minimization | 0 |
| 21 | Low Minimization | Low Minimization | Low Minimization | 0 |
| 22 | Low Minimization | Low Minimization | Low Minimization | 0 |
| 23 | Low Minimization | Low Minimization | High Minimization | 1 |
| 24 | Low Minimization | High Minimization | | NA |
| 25 | Low Minimization | High Minimization | | NA |
| 26 | Low Minimization | High Minimization | Low Minimization | 0 |
| 27 | Low Minimization | High Minimization | High Minimization | 1 |
| 28 | High Minimization | High Minimization | | NA |
| 29 | High Minimization | High Minimization | | NA |
| 30 | High Minimization | High Minimization | High Minimization | 0 |
| 31 | High Minimization | High Minimization | Acceptance | 1 |
| 32 | High Minimization | **Adaptation** | **High Minimization** | 0 |
| 33 | High Minimization | Acceptance | Acceptance | 1 |
| 34 | Acceptance | High Minimization | Acceptance | 0 |

NOTE: GREEN INDICATES AN INCREASE IN DO LEVEL FROM PREVIOUS TESTING INTERVAL. RED INDICATES A DECREASE IN DO LEVEL FROM PREVIOUS TESTING INTERVAL. BOLDING INDICATES A TWO-LEVEL CHANGE

Another aspect that demonstrates learning is the reduction in gap or distance between the perceived orientation (PO) and the developmental orientation (DO). As seen in the yellow column of Figure (3) on the next two pages, students at the more ethnocentric orientations have a larger gap between perceived and developmental orientations and that gap gets smaller in the increasingly ethnorelative orientations. For instance, those at the Denial state have a larger gap (37-44 points) between perceived and developmental orientations, while those at the Acceptance state have a smaller gap (11 points). This indicates that students become more accurate in estimating their actual and perceived orientations as they interculturally develop. Of the students who had significant decrease (movement more than 7 points on the IDI is significant), almost half of the students who reduced the gap between PO and DO did so for the IDI taken right after study abroad (green column in Figure 3). Comparing the four columns of PO and DO gap in Figure (3), the students who started in Denial significantly reduced the gap between PO and DO while those who started at Polarization had large decreases followed by large increases and the changes were more volatile (students 4-8). The Low Minimization group were potentially the most disenfranchised because they were the largest group that did not complete the IDI five months after study abroad, making up more than half their group (blank cells in blue column in Figure 3). For High Minimization students, four out of six significantly decreased the gap right after study abroad (students 22-27, green column Figure 3); while the Low Minimization students' movement was volatile, of the 6 students that started at High Minimization 2 significantly decreased the gap and went up one DO level to Acceptance (orange column in Figure 3). Importantly, a third of the students reduced the gap between their PO and DO (orange column in Figure 3) over the course of the 12 months.

**FIGURE (3)**

PO-DO GAP AND CHANGES IN GAP OVER TIME

| Student # | Before Study Abroad (N=28) | | Immediately After Study Abroad (N=33) | | Five Months After Study Abroad (N=24) | | Before to Five Months After (N=20) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Initial DO Level | PO-DO Gap | PO-DO Gap | Change | PO-DO Gap | Change | May to May Change | Final DO Level |
| 1 | Denial | 44.40 | 33.99 | -10.40 | 35.83 | 1.83 | -8.57 | Polarization |
| 2 | Denial | 44.25 | 35.28 | -8.97 | 34.51 | -0.77 | -9.74 | Polarization |
| 3 | Denial | 37.34 | 37.00 | -0.34 | 27.33 | -9.67 | -10.02 | Low Minimization |
| 4 | Polarization | 35.64 | 29.96 | -5.68 | 41.65 | 11.68 | 6.01 | Denial |
| 5 | Polarization | 40.70 | 54.49 | 13.79 | 35.06 | -19.43 | -5.64 | Polarization |
| 6 | Polarization | 43.55 | 18.90 | -24.65 | 38.10 | 19.19 | -5.46 | Polarization |
| 7 | Polarization | 36.26 | | | 30.59 | | -5.68 | Low Minimization |
| 8 | Polarization | 40.91 | 27.51 | -13.41 | 34.14 | 6.63 | -6.77 | Low Minimization |
| 9 | Low Minimization | 31.07 | 33.66 | 2.59 | | | | |
| 10 | Low Minimization | 30.59 | 30.33 | -0.26 | | | | |
| 11 | Low Minimization | 33.11 | 33.00 | -0.11 | | | | |
| 12 | Low Minimization | 30.88 | 40.04 | 9.16 | | | | |
| 13 | Low Minimization | 27.18 | 23.08 | -4.10 | | | | |
| 14 | Low Minimization | 31.83 | 24.73 | -7.11 | | | | |
| 15 | Low Minimization | 27.99 | 35.79 | 7.80 | 35.02 | -0.77 | 7.03 | Polarization |
| 16 | Low Minimization | 26.34 | 26.37 | 0.04 | 25.60 | -0.77 | -0.73 | Low Minimization |
| 17 | Low Minimization | 30.33 | 31.76 | 1.43 | 30.00 | -1.76 | -0.33 | Low Minimization |
| 18 | Low Minimization | 29.78 | 28.94 | -0.84 | 34.87 | 5.93 | 5.09 | Low Minimization |
| 19 | Low Minimization | 33.85 | 20.66 | -13.19 | 27.99 | 7.33 | -5.86 | Low Minimization |
| 20 | Low Minimization | 28.39 | 29.71 | 1.32 | 17.00 | -12.71 | -11.39 | High Minimization |
| 21 | Low Minimization | 33.78 | 24.80 | -8.98 | 26.01 | 1.21 | -7.77 | High Minimization |

**FIGURE 3 (CONTINUED)**
PO-DO GAP AND CHANGES IN GAP OVER TIME

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 22 | High Minimization | 19.09 | 22.67 | 3.59 | | | | |
| 23 | High Minimization | 25.20 | 16.63 | -8.57 | | | | |
| 24 | High Minimization | 21.94 | 7.11 | -14.84 | 19.38 | 12.27 | -2.57 | High Minimization |
| 25 | High Minimization | 23.77 | 14.65 | -9.12 | 18.61 | 3.96 | -5.17 | High Minimization |
| 26 | High Minimization | 23.19 | 21.98 | -1.21 | 15.02 | -6.96 | -8.17 | Acceptance |
| 27 | High Minimization | 22.12 | 12.91 | -9.21 | 14.58 | 1.67 | -7.54 | Acceptance |
| 28 | Acceptance | 10.73 | 15.10 | 4.37 | 12.27 | -2.83 | 1.54 | Acceptance |
| 29 | | | 36.96 | | | | | |
| 30 | | | 37.36 | | | | | |
| 31 | | | 25.13 | | 42.38 | 17.25 | | Polarization |
| 32 | | | 27.62 | | 34.91 | 7.29 | | Low Minimization |
| 33 | | | 26.41 | | 28.10 | 1.69 | | Low Minimization |
| 34 | | | 34.80 | | 29.96 | -4.84 | | Low Minimization |

In sum, almost half of the students that went abroad experienced an increase in their developmental orientation levels (orange column of Figure 2). Although these changes were not entirely stable and fluctuated, there does appear to be a net overall increase in DO levels for a sizable percentage of students, especially those starting at the lowest levels (orange column of Figure 3). Importantly, the students that went down in score, or to prior orientations, were either at Polarization or Low Minimization; these students are at the highest risk of re-entrenching previously held stereotypes. The assignment responses provide clues as to the reasons behind lack of growth, and conversely why some growth is not captured in the IDI scores.

## 6. Assignment Analysis

Overall, the responses on assignments demonstrated students' increased self-awareness, increased cultural awareness and increased openness towards other cultures. The responses also explain and even contest students' IDI scores. Increased self-awareness could be anything from acknowledging their privilege and discomfort of newness to understanding the importance of their mental health and stress management strategies. Increased awareness was more often than not related to an increased cultural awareness, about how and why people

in the U.S. and host countries did what they did with regards to cultural practices. Increased openness towards other cultures was usually expressed via a new-found desire to study more cultures, but it was often a clueless openness — an enthusiasm to study others' cultures as if culture were this unidentifiable, exotic, only to be experienced thing.

When clueless openness was paired with increased cultural awareness – after analyzing their abroad writings, class discussions and activities, as well as course assignments – fortunately, that enthusiasm included a desire to engage with people they perceived as different; that engagement could then lead to powerful changes in actions. For example, a student who started at Low Minimization and moved to High Minimization stated a new-found openness:

> Studying abroad and analyzing my experiences in depth has allowed me to open my mind to a lot of new ways of thinking and different approaches to the way I can live. Living in another country for five months has shaped me to who I am today and has made me aware of the different cultures that exist. The U.S is a melting pot of cultures, so upon returning to the U.S, I am more open-minded and enjoy learning about the differences in culture that exist.

Phrases like "melting pot" instead of more contemporary metaphors that respect cultural distinctiveness over assimilation indicate that difference might be appreciated but not understood. Nevertheless, clearly a *self-perceived* perspective shift has happened as a result of the study abroad experience and the enthusiasm, and the desire to study cultures has been sparked; follow-up will be necessary to ascertain if any behaviors resulted from the perceived perspective change. In contrast, behavioral change was, indeed, noted in a student at Polarization who stated a newly gained openness and appreciation for others' cultures:

> Studying abroad and particularly living with a host family encouraged me to constantly go outside my comfort zone. I learned the importance of adapting to new situations. In addition, I gained the ability to see situations from other people's point of view. I am no longer narrow minded in my thinking. I approach each situation as a chance to learn more about the world around me. Living with a host family facilitated my immersion into the Spanish culture and my life in Spain. I learned not just tolerance, but to accept and appreciate cultural differences. […] Going outside your comfort zone can be challenging. It can be easy to

> judge the host culture and think of your home culture as superior. I know at times I thought "in America we do this better." I had to continuously remind myself that I was not in America and needed to change my expectations based on the cultural norms. It is important to value and appreciate the differences between cultures and not judge them and think of one as superior than the other.

The last few sentences, in particular, indicate an increased self-awareness, and *action* based on that self-awareness, to keep negative comparisons, judgements and stereotypes in check. It must be noted that such level of withholding judgement is not common at the IDI Polarization state and indicates that they are already bridging with Minimization orientations, which the scores themselves cannot indicate.

The scaffolded reflection and analysis, via the assignments, asked students to make visible the invisible aspects of culture in the host country, in the U.S. and in themselves. A student who started in Denial and moved to Low Minimization with a 23-point difference in pre- and post-scores commented:

> I plan on questioning other "typical" U.S. practices that I had not previously thought about in order to gain a better understanding why we (Americans) do what we do. Not only will I become more knowledgeable about my own culture, but it will also make it easier for me to observe these hidden cultural behaviors in my future travels to compare to the United States. I believe that all Americans should compare our U.S. practices to those of other countries so we can learn what customs are beneficial or what we should improve upon to increase the well-being of human lives.

The students' thinking warrants follow-up (particularly the "us vs. them" or the cultural superiority that could possibly underlie the comments), nevertheless the point of questioning and observing carefully the cultural context is an important leap. The drive to learn from other cultures and ways of being and doing, as well as noting the hidden nature of culture are other important leaps.

In some cases students' writing explains why there was not more movement on the intercultural development spectrum. One student acknowledged:

> It is clear in my blog posts that I did not put myself out there in a way that would allow me to make Spanish friends or push me out of my

> comfort zone on a daily basis. I think that this is especially evident when I talk about my experience with travel and because I was so focused on traveling I did not necessarily put enough time and energy into staying in Sevilla and connecting with the people in Sevilla.

Another stated:

> I am a huge coffee lover and really struggled with the instant coffee that was a staple in Argentina. Instead of drinking coffee regularly, mate is the drink of choice for most Argentines. The process of drinking mate is largely related to everyone sharing the drink in a cultural experience. However, due to my peanut allergy I could not partake in sharing mate with my friends of the locals. I left it at that. However, knowing how important it is to the culture of Argentina, I should have made a larger effort to partake in this huge component of the culture. I maybe could have bought my own mate and yerba. This is a moment where I hid behind my allergy and cultural norms, instead of thinking of a way to partake in a huge aspect of the Argentine culture.

The lack of engagement with the host country nor the people of that country explain why the first student started and ended at the same Low Minimization level with no discernable change in scores or why the second student stayed at the same Low Minimization level and decreased six points. That said, it is very important that the students were able to acknowledge and pinpoint examples of their lack of engagement with the culture, and does show growth in self-awareness and reflection. It also reinforces the need for *in situ* cultural mentorship to help students process the cognitive dissonance and disorienting dilemmas as they unfold; nevertheless, our online while abroad course model is one of documentation, not direct intervention.

According to one student who started in Denial and moved to 15 points to Polarization, the three-course sequence had a huge impact on developing critical thinking skills, which may explain a part of their intercultural growth: "This class has forced me to ask more why questions, forcing me to consider why things are the way they are and think about how that influences other aspects of life rather than just acknowledging the fact that there are differences." Based on the student responses, lack of engagement with the host culture limited their intercultural growth. Inversely, intense engagement with the host culture and the guided, reflective, and analytical aspects of the pre-, during-, and post-international semester-long experience positively impacted students' growth.

In some cases, students' writing contests the IDI scores or highlights that the orientation is for cultures with which they most feel comfortable. As noted in the Georgetown Consortium Project (Vande Berg et al., 2009), individuals may be at the highest level, Adaptation or Integration, with cultures they are familiar and comfortable with, but may move to other orientations when faced with cultures that are perceived as radically different, until the person works through their cognitive dissonance and actively transfers their skills to the new cultural context. In this pilot, for instance, one student increased their IDI score by 10 points during their semester abroad scaffolded experience and moved from Low Minimization to High Minimization. Nevertheless, they were unable to see the singular lens by which they were judging another culture, even with repeated implorations (via assignment feedback) to deeply analyze this particular issue:

> Week 9 in Morocco was a big turning point for me. It was my first experience in a country that is some 98% Muslim, and the blog post accurately reflects how I was feeling during the trip. Moroccan social culture made me realize how privileged I am to live in a country where gays aren't killed and women aren't oppressed. It modified my beliefs on immigration and made me question whether it is a good decision to bring in hundreds of thousands of people with dangerously regressive sexist and homophobic attitudes.

This example shows how familiarity and increased intercultural competency skills with one culture may not transfer to other cultures that are seen as too different. The students' inability to unpack a negative encounter, to acknowledge their bias, and to analyze their lens led to increased stereotypes about an entire country and religion despite the overall gains on their IDI which is, again, why we argue that assessment tools need to be triangulated with assignments to better guide and support student learning.

Meanwhile, another student who *decreased* nine points and regressed from Low Minimization to Polarization demonstrated an important shift in their perspective and engagement with the host country's culture(s):

> Within the text of my blogs, I have found that each blog shows a growth in my level of comfort with my life in Senegal. That is not to say that things were getting easier, I think I just learned to appreciate the difference and the challenge in dealing with these differences. [...] Understanding these different backgrounds and different lenses used to

> view history helped me to understand the thoughts and feelings of these Senegalese. My comfort level of being uncomfortable and having my feelings and personal culture challenged helped me to challenge the lens in which I view the world and helped me to understand the lenses of others.

The connection the student felt with the host culture and all the work they did to understand the Senegalese perspective along with the acknowledgement and understanding of those differences indicate a High Minimization level not just romanticization in the Polarization stage.

Another student reflected that their choice of research topic, and the research they did, shifted their frame and caused the student to delve much deeper than their Low Minimization IDI score indicated:

> I was initially interested in time management because of how much the lack of punctuality in Spain bothered me, as I am a very time conscious person. Instead of judging or drawing unfair conclusions about a society, I became interested in the "WHY." […] Understanding the "why" made me look at my frustrations in a different way. In fact, understanding why people in Spain are often late helped me to understand their culture in a deeper, more reflective way. Removing my frustrations from the equation I feel made me a better citizen on a global scale.

This students' desire to explore the 'why' of cultural differences, and the ensuing benefit of helping them regulate emotions, again indicates growth that is not reflected in their IDI score, and the important unpacking work done post-study abroad.

In sum, while the IDI scores are helpful to document students' growth, the quantitative scores cannot present a complete picture. Comparing the IDI data with students' course reflection-based assignments, which is a more direct assessment but not perfect by any means, is necessary and provides a more nuanced picture of the changes that occurred in students. Numerical IDI data needs to be parsed out and triangulated with students' writing (which we used) and ideally with field or observational notes *in situ* (to which we did not have access). Because our students study with various study abroad providers, in countries across the globe, and in differing contexts (some with host families, some in apartments, some with other international students), the pre-, during-, and post-study abroad course became the method by which we can support and

maximize learning. Most students in this particular pilot study cohort grew, and their reflection-based assignments brought to the surface areas of increased self-awareness, cultural awareness, and openness that the IDI scores alone cannot and did not display. Using the IDI scores in conjunction with the assignments provides a more nuanced view of students' learning and provides evidence to drive curricular improvements.

## 7. Caveats

There are clear limitations to this study, including sample size, attrition, and timing of the IDI, as well as original course design. As with many longitudinal studies, attrition is a hurdle: only 56% of students who agreed to participate in the study fully completed all three assessments (as a reminder, the IDI was encouraged as a formative tool, but not required of the course, and participation in the pilot study was voluntary). Also, due to timing (getting funds, ordering the IDI, sending it out, navigating login issues, etc.) particularly during the six-week predeparture course and the mere fact that we only had, at the time, two people IDI QA trained at the institution, the students didn't receive individual debriefs before studying abroad. All students received the predeparture and immediately upon return scores, with the accompanying 45-60 minute one-on-one debriefs in February, almost two full months after reentry. The students would have benefited, particularly the Polarization and Low Minimization students, from having the scores and a concrete plan as to what skills and behaviors they could intentionally practice while abroad, which is generated during the debrief session, *before* they left for their semester-long experience. The IDI, in its best capacity, is a wonderful tool for intercultural mentoring, but there are many issues such as staffing, timing, training costs, etc. that limit its ideal implementation. Additionally, if the IDIs had also been paired with language proficiency assessments before studying abroad, we could potentially see if there is a link between language and cultural proficiencies, which is the ideal model within language acquisition.

In addition, the reflection prompts and assignments, too, had limitations. The reflection prompts were not specifically designed to target, practice, and develop intercultural skills other than critical reflection broadly speaking. The reflection prompts were based on the work of critical pedagogues such as Brookfield (2011), Brookfield and Preskill (2005), and Freire (2000), and the

reflection assignments pushed students to greater self-awareness since such was the explicit intent. The reflections didn't ask students to intentionally practice the four core skills of intercultural competency: 1) bringing awareness to students' own way of framing and behaving, 2) bringing awareness to how others (individuals or groups) frame and behave in a given cultural context, 3) managing thoughts and emotions when confronted with cultural gaps between oneself and the culturally different other, and 4) bridging that cultural gap by moving towards the others' way of framing and behaving in that cultural context (Sentio Network, n.d.). According to Hammer (2012), "[b]uilding intercultural competence involves increasing self-awareness, deepening understanding of the experiences, values, perceptions, and behaviors of people from diverse cultural communities, and expanding the capability to shift cultural perspective and adapt behavior to bridge across cultural differences" (p. 116). While the reflections were successful at increasing self-awareness, they did not ask students to explicitly practice or demonstrate the other skills mentioned in Hammer's definition. What is clear is that if we want students to intentionally develop intercultural skills, our reflection prompts, guided actions, and assignments need to target such skills more explicitly, and be more rigorously rooted in a theoretical and evidence-based frame to be the most effective, developmentally-focused interventions we want them to be. Key to such is faculty development and training, to be sure.

# 8. Implications for Teaching

There are many implications based on the qualitative and quantitative data in this pilot study. Intercultural development is multi-pronged and complex since it is a life-long process, and it is clear that students benefit the most from intercultural development that is integrated throughout the entire curriculum (CEL, 2017) — at minimum it should be integrated throughout the entire Spanish and French majors' curriculum so that students can be constantly developing their skills instead of putting all our expectations into one semester-long, immersive experience. Nevertheless, the predeparture, during, and post semester-long study abroad sequence of courses is an important support for our students so that they can be intentional about their learning while abroad and reap the most linguistic, personal, intellectual, and intercultural benefits from their experience.

As a department we learned an enormous amount in the collaborative process of creating a five-year plan, developing our three departmental-wide student learning outcomes, crafting and implementing the three-course sequence of courses to support students' learning before, during, and post-study abroad, and doing a pilot study in which we gathered data and analyzed student assignments. Some of those take-aways include:

1. Assessment of student learning cannot rest on a single measure or tool, and any data must be triangulated for it to be nuanced and helpful (see Katherine Yngve's (n.d.) collection of 101 intercultural assessment tools).
2. Faculty development and support are essential in giving faculty the confidence necessary to teach it, and to advance their own intercultural development, since it is central to language and cultural learning. In fact, recent research indicates the vital importance of faculty intercultural development in fostering students' intercultural learning (Anderson et al., 2016; Gibson et al., 2023; Gillespie et al., 2020; Layne et al., 2020; Namaste et al., 2024; Yngve, 2019). Unfortunately, intercultural learning is not a core part of our disciplinary formation, but should be, thus the need for intentional intercultural training.
3. Faculty need intentional, sustained, and mentored training in how to be effective intercultural pedagogues, particularly with regard to stage-based pedagogy (Acheson & Schneider-Bean, 2019; Harvey, n.d.; Jones et al., 2020)
4. Intentional intercultural development needs to be interwoven throughout the entire four-year curriculum, at the university and in the department, especially for majors (CEL, 2017).
5. New implementations need to be rolled out with a convincing rhetoric and marketing of why such is best for student learning (to address initial resistance) (see Harvey, n.d., for good suggestions).
6. Students may resist and complain, but demonstrating their learning back to them combats resistance to increased university and field demands to prove student learning objectives with data-based evidence.
7. Students need to be part of the process of curriculum improvement so that they take ownership of their learning, particularly with regards to taking an active stance during their study abroad experience (see Cook-Sather et al., 2019; Mercer-Mapstone & Abbot, 2020; and "students as partners" literature such as CEL, n.d.).

8. Intentional, action-oriented interventions, like ours and others' (e.g., Bittinger, 2019), need to be designed to complement reflective and reflexive thinking prompted by assignments, activities, discussion, and the like.

Even though these are large scale lessons for our entire department, the pilot study prompted smaller lessons that will guide curricular changes for the three-course sequence. For instance, the study impels us to retool our reflection prompts to specifically target intercultural development (not just self- and cultural-awareness). We need to attend to the students who are excited about studying cultures but can't get to the reasons for cultural difference because we may unwittingly be pushing them towards entrenched stereotypes instead of away from such. Thus, we need to focus more heavily on developing self-awareness of students' *own* cultural lenses and of how ways of viewing the world are a cultural construction. We also need to explicitly teach the students that knowledge is *constructed* and that they need to actively negotiate and make meaning out of their experiences.

A core, fundamental piece of language acquisition is that culture shapes not only our use of language but also our perceptions and reality (Hall, 2012). And while intercultural learning may not be a fundamental piece of language education training or PhD programs in linguistics, literature, or cultural studies, we have a unique opportunity to move intercultural learning beyond study abroad and the language, culture, and literature classroom. Many other fields, such as engineering, as well as institutions such as Purdue University, have made massive inroads in transforming the ethos around intercultural learning and made it a central core of their students' studies. Furthermore, language and culture departments need to be instrumental in bridging with diversity and inclusivity efforts on campus, since intercultural learning is a key component of Justice, Equity, Diversity & Inclusivity (JEDI) work; we also need to bridge better with other departments that teach how cultures function, such as anthropology and sociology. By using data to guide curricular changes, by focusing on practicing, reflecting upon, and developing intercultural learning, and by advocating for intercultural learning to be woven into the larger collegiate experience, we can help *all* our students, and each other, understand the way in which culture both shapes and is shaped by individuals—and better navigate and actively address the complexities, uncertainties, ambiguities and inequalities in contemporary life.

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