

Identifying Post-Pandemic Gaps In Intercultural Development During An Undergraduate Short-Term Study Abroad

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Abstract

Deficiencies in intercultural insight amongst American youth have led to an increased focus on globalization within institutions of higher education. To remedy this need amongst undergraduates, which has been exacerbated since the pandemic, short-term study abroads have been developed with the goal of enhancing these skillsets through application-based curriculum. New pedagogies have resulted so that students can be adequately exposed to true intercultural experiences along with tools to quantify this learning. This study identified and assessed intercultural learning gaps during a recent trip abroad.

Keywords-*intercultural competencies, American expatriate, intercultural development inventory, global awareness, short-term study abroad*

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I. Literature Review

America's comparative geographic isolation from the rest of the world has led to a deficit in global intercultural capabilities, as typified by high failure rates among American expatriates during international work assignments. More Americans than ever are working abroad, as "the 21st century is one of unremitting globalization" (Mendenhall et al., 2008, p. 3), but they commonly face similar challenges in adjusting to the new culture. Lowe (2005) suggested that the job performance of American expatriates often suffers as a result of not feeling comfortable in their new environment, while Breiden et al. (2004) found those who adjust well to the new culture also tend to be more committed to the organization. There has been a great deal of research about how to best integrate American expatriates into a new global culture (Jackson, 2008; Moore & Mehlenbacher, 2009; Tang & Chao, 2010; Reish, 2011; Charles & McNulty, 2014; Deardorff, 2015; McNulty & Selmer, 2017). While intercultural competencies are traditionally difficult to quantify, consumer behavior literature related to travel pedagogies has focused on measuring growth in intercultural learning from tourists' experiences during their global journeys (Lantz-Deaton, 2017).

Post-pandemic trends indicate that intercultural awareness and experiences are sought after by Generation Z and millennials. Exacerbated by the pandemic, young people have a sense of feeling isolated in an increasingly digital social world, which is why connectivity with the world and new environments outside of their normal comfort zone are appealing. During the pandemic, global travel decreased by 72% (UNWTO, 2020). Still, millennials average more travel per year than other generations (Magennis, 2023), and travel has been the #1 activity that young generations want to engage in after the pandemic. Further, generation z wants their travel to be more global compared to prior generations (Baratti, 2021). To best fill this demand, travel and its marketing have been strategized to combat post-pandemic loneliness among young people (Lu et al., 2022; Stankov et al., 2022). As such, there is excitement throughout the tourism industry due to the massive opportunities to engage new, willing travelers (Corbisiero et al., 2022).

Millennials, the generation who grew up during the advent of the internet, are said to have a generational and cultural gap that causes them to face more organizational challenges as compared to other Americans, especially Baby Boomers (Freedlander, 2021; Petersen, 2021). In fact, American Millennials' ability to integrate with other generations of coworkers (even within their home culture) remains a "widespread concern" (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010, p. 225). While Americans in general tend to have a difficult time assimilating in an organizational setting abroad, new assignments have been especially challenging for

millennials because of the digital divide, by which a lack of access to modern technologies connecting these employees to the home office of organization tends to inhibit organizational success (FIDI, 2017).

In their efforts to prepare American youth to excel in global environments, Bates and Atef-Rehal (2017) noted that “higher education practitioners and educators should prioritize intercultural competency education” (p. 43). As such, US colleges have been integrating intercultural curricula into their coursework and study abroad programs in attempts to provide opportunities to remedy this lack of experience in immersion into unique international cultures.

Badstübner and Ecke (2009, p. 41) noted that “cultural understanding is acquired most effectively” while being immersed in a study abroad environment, and Barkley and Barkley (2013) stated that true intercultural experiences are an important ingredient of any short-term study abroad. Numerous other scholars have noted that students can gain true intercultural insight from a short-term study abroad if curricula are embedded appropriately (Chieffo and Griffiths, 2004; Martinsen, 2011; Vande Berg et al., 2012), and Teichler and Steube (1991) surmised that the planned excursions of these trips will make or break students’ experiences.

II. Methodology

To measure intercultural skillsets and track development, especially during short-term trips, study abroad often embed strategic intercultural competency pedagogies into their programs, using assessment tools that have been developed to measure students’ intercultural capabilities (Anderson et al., 2006). Pedagogy in higher education has increasingly utilized these to gauge students’ intercultural development and understanding (Lokkesmoe et al., 2016; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2017; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2018; McConlogue, 2020; Alt & Raichel, 2021). These instruments allow academic practitioners to better understand and nurture global awareness and intercultural capabilities in order to create curricula that best facilitate true intercultural learning. These intercultural measurement tools have taken on a variety of forms. The AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge & Competence Value rubrics identify criteria for a variety of outcomes (University of Michigan, 2021). The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity is a framework created to assess reactions to differences in culture (Bennett, 1993; Sinicropo et al., 2007; Anderson and Lawton, 2011). The Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES) was derived from an assessment of intercultural effectiveness by Hammer et al. (1978) “to determine an individual’s ability to acclimate and function in another culture” (Portalla & Chen, 2010, p. 47); it pinpoints competencies found to be most important when interacting with those from different cultural backgrounds.

The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) is another commonly used barometer to gauge cross-cultural competence (Paige et al., 2003; University of Michigan, 2021). The IDI places orientations towards individual cultural skillsets along a continuum from monocultural attitudes in categories such as denial and polarization to more global mindsets such as adaptation, by which students are able to bridge cultural differences in application more easily. Per the IDI, the adaptation stage is indicative of the abilities to shift one’s own cultural perspective towards communities that are more diverse and thus navigate cultural differences through actual behaviors rather than through a theoretical lens.

Intercultural competence is measured based on three over-arching intercultural skillsets: *Perceived Orientation (PO)*, *Developmental Orientation (DO)*, and *Orientation Gap (OG)*. PO shows how the individual rates his/her own intercultural competence, whereas DO represents the real or actual level of intercultural ability. OG is calculated as the difference between PO and DO: a gap of seven points or more displays a meaningful difference, with a larger gap being more indicative of an underestimation of perceived intercultural competence as compared to actual intercultural competence. The OG is a go-to method of measuring by how much a person overestimates or underestimates their level of intercultural competence (Hammer, 2012), and can be utilized as a benchmark to assess changes in intercultural development for this study.

This study will utilize cumulative, anonymous data from the IDI to assess intercultural gaps in current American undergraduate students, considering a post-pandemic social structure, to examine tendencies in intercultural development. The sample set is 24 undergraduate students from a public higher education institution (which is a member of the Association of American Colleges & Universities) who participated in a 3-credit study abroad trip that took place over the course of 14 days in May 2022, traveling through four cities in three Central European countries (Munich, Germany; Prague, Czech Republic; Hamburg, Germany; Rotterdam, Netherlands), all of which were listed among the top 32 European cities for Millennials to live and work (Bloom, 2017).

III. Results/Reactions

The summary output and graphical exploration via scatter plots for the pre- and post-IDI data can be seen below for the categories PO, DO, and OG.

Figure 1.
Pre-and post-survey scores of PO



Figure 2.
Pre-and post-survey scores of DO

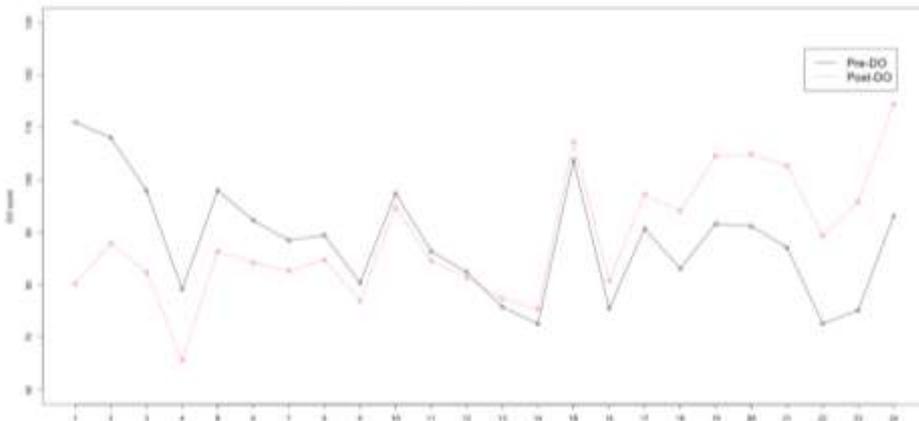
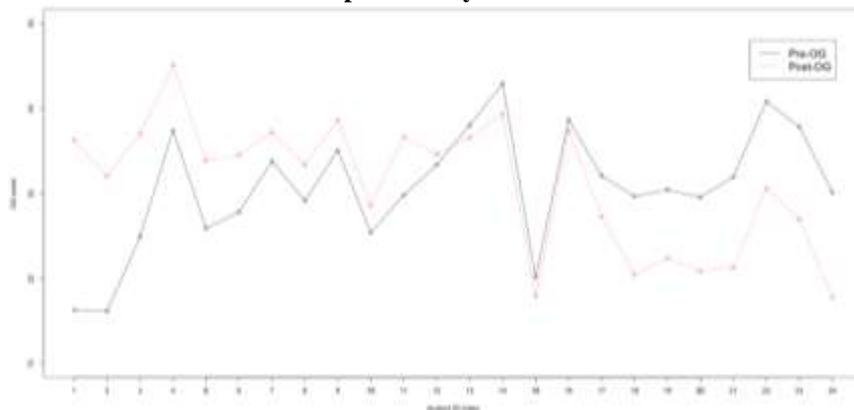


Figure 3.
Pre-and post-survey scores of OG



Several students demonstrated changes in scores from their pre- and post- surveys. For example, the scores for one student, depicted on y-axis index 24 on the PO graph, increased between the pre- and post-surveys, leading to a coinciding change. The question that saw the most change was “I attend events where I might get to know people from different racial backgrounds”, with a cumulative change of 14.0 and an average

change of .54. Based on this finding, delving further into some of the individual questions and/or individual student changes in scores might produce additional insight.

The Shapiro-Wilk test was performed to check the normality of the PO, DO, and OG cumulative data to choose which statistical test to then pursue. Table 1 shows the results from the Shapiro-Wilk test; all p-values were larger than a 0.05 significance level. As such, the null hypothesis was not rejected for any tests, and therefore the data all follow normal distribution.

Table 1.
Shapiro-Wilk test for IDI survey

Variables:	Test Statistics:	P-values:
Pre-PO	0.9258	0.0787
Pre-DO	0.9623	0.4861
Pre-OG	0.9628	0.4965
Post-PO	0.9831	0.9447
Post-DO	0.9662	0.5741
Post-OG	0.9271	0.0841

After confirming that all cumulative scores follow normal distribution, to further verify that there were no conspicuous changes between the pre- and post-survey scores, the paired *t*-test was utilized (see Table 2), and thus the study was unable to reject the null hypothesis in all cases since the *p*-values are larger than the significance level 0.05. Therefore, based on the test results, the study was unable to conclude that there were any significant changes between the pre- and post-scores. However, this allows confidence that students took the surveys seriously since their scores were consistent in the pre- and post-surveys.

Table 2.
Paired t-test for IDI survey

Variables:	Test Statistics:	P-values:
Pre-PO and Post-PO	-0.9474	0.3533
Pre-DO and Post-DO	-0.1947	0.8474
Pre-OG and Post-OG	-0.2214	0.8267

Table 3 shows the summary statistics of the three variables from the pre- and post-surveys. The results are consistent minus major changes occurring during the trip or as a result of faulty survey taking. The gap of 31.13 was higher than the pre-OG gap of 30.73 and is indicative of the difference between how the students view themselves versus their actual score. A gap of larger than 7 is deemed to be significant. This large gap is indicative that students overestimated their theoretical intercultural sensitivity versus their actual intercultural competencies, or the difference between subjective and objective in regards to intercultural understanding. In fact, the increased OG after the trip merits additional scrutiny.

Table 3.
Summary statistics

Variables:	Min	Max	Average
Pre-PO	112.7	127.3	119.2
Pre-DO	72.54	110.97	88.45
Pre-OG	16.19	42.93	30.73
Post-PO	110.7	132.2	120.1
Post-DO	65.56	114.39	88.98
Post-OG	17.8	45.09	31.13

Although there was no significant change in the pre- and post-survey scores for the three variables PO, DO, and OG, Table 3 shows the averages for pre- and post-survey scores for the three variables rose slightly, which is indicative of movement on the IDI continuum towards adaptation, or an indication of intercultural development by which someone is better able to navigate cultural differences through actual behaviors and not through a theoretical lens. The group increased its PO slightly from 119.2 to 120.1, designated as being at the acceptance area of the IDI continuum. Their DO also increased slightly from 88.45 to 88.98, designated as being at the minimization area of the IDI continuum.

Since the IDI developers find that it is quite common for students to overestimate their understanding of intercultural competencies, the high cumulative OG scores may not be surprising. Hammer et al. (2003) note that people rarely have a realistic perception of their own intercultural competence. Studies have indicated that a decrease of the OG is indicative of a more realistic view of their world view or cultural perspective (Snodgrass et al., 2017). This increase from the pre-IDI might be analyzed relative to pre-pandemic OG scores in order to ask if perceptions of the world became less realistic due to the several years of pandemic lockdown,

and potentially away from intercultural opportunities. Perhaps the isolation brought on by COVID-19 prompted a more limited worldview or a silo-feel to one's personal environment that surprised them once they ventured outside of their own comfort zone. This increase might suggest the need for a focused shift in pre-trip curriculum to acclimate them to the fact that things are different as they venture outside of their comfort zones and the country.

The need to use unfamiliar metro maps and the complexity of travel logistics such as tight train schedules may have prompted students to realize that their view of the world was less realistic than before they traveled abroad. Curaj et al. (2015) and others found similar pre-pandemic increases in OG scores from pre-trip to post-trip. The finding that this 2022 group of college undergraduates perceived a more exaggerated level of intercultural competence by the end of the trip might prompt organizations to increase their training and expectations before a global position is truly undertaken. Pre-trip curriculum might better help students to know and comprehend the vast differences in cultures that they will encounter. Generally, it is common for humans to feel as if they are more effective in various capacities than they actually are (Epps, 2022). Beyond the education context, awareness of this orientation gap can motivate organizations to engage more thorough intercultural competence development training for potential expatriate employees in advance of their assignments.

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