

The Cultural Adaptation Process During a Short-term Study Abroad Experience in Swaziland

Nathan W. Conner¹ and T. Grady Roberts²

Abstract

Globalization continuously shapes our world and influences post-secondary education. This study explored the cultural adaptation process of participants during a short-term study abroad program. Participants experienced stages which included initial feelings, cultural uncertainty, cultural barriers, cultural negativity, academic and career growth, feelings throughout the program, and cultural growth. The findings from this study should be used to design and implement short-term study abroad programs that infuse cultural learning with academic learning and focus on experiential learning practices.

Keywords: globalization; study abroad; cultural adaptation

The world has seemingly become a smaller place in which people interact with people from all over the world (National Research Council, 2009). Globalization is evident through population changes in the United States. Simultaneously, “globalization of markets has led to more multinational enterprises, exponential growth in foreign trade, the creation of an increasingly diverse consumer base, and extended efforts at international marketing” (Clark, Flaherty, Wright, & McMillen, 2009, p. 173). Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, and Perraton (1999) described globalization as the interconnectedness of the world’s economy, cultures, and all other aspects of life. Despite societal changes due to globalization, Gorki and Niesenbaum (2001) recognized that faculty at universities have not updated their undergraduate curriculum to reflect globalization. University faculty should work as a unit to internationalize the curriculum in order to showcase the significance globalization has on the entire department (Gorki & Niesenbaum, 2001; Navarro & Edwards, 2008). Training students to effectively operate within a global community presents a plethora of challenges (Zhai & Scheer, 2002) and to compound the challenges, Wingenbach, Boyd, Lindner, Dick, Arisoe, and Haba (2003) asserted that agricultural education students were narrow minded when it comes to perspectives on international agriculture and culture. Study abroad programs have become a popular method of exposing students to international perspectives (Zhai & Scheer, 2002). However, Anderson (2003) found that students need guidance when recognizing cultural traditions and often view short-term study abroad programs as glorified vacations rather than learning experiences.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore how undergraduate students in a college of agricultural and life sciences experienced cultural adaptation during a short-term study abroad

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program in Swaziland, Africa. This study is needed in order to gain an understanding of how students adapt to the culture during a short-term study abroad program. The knowledge gained from this study will help short-term study abroad facilitators develop programs that will allow students to positively adapt to the culture. The specific objectives of this study were to describe how undergraduate students experienced culture throughout a short-term study abroad program and were affected by their cultural surroundings and to propose a conceptual framework of cultural adaptation for undergraduate students on a short-term study abroad program.

Conceptual Framework, Theoretical and Epistemological Perspective

The following three theories of cultural adaptation were used to guide this study: The U-Curve of Culture Shock (Oberg, 1960), the Dynamic Model of Culture Confusion (Hottola, 2004), and the Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1986, 1993, 2004). The U-Curve of culture Shock and the Dynamic Model of Culture Confusion were selected to guide this study due to their focus on international traveling and experiencing other cultures (Oberg, 1960; Hottola, 2004). Additionally, Bennett's (1986, 2004) Model of Intercultural Sensitivity was selected to guide this study due to its focus on cross-cultural adaptation. The U-Curve of Culture Shock depicts the cultural adaptation model that tourist experience (Oberg, 1960). The stages are depicted in the figure below and consist of euphoria, disillusionment, hostility, adaptation, and assimilation.

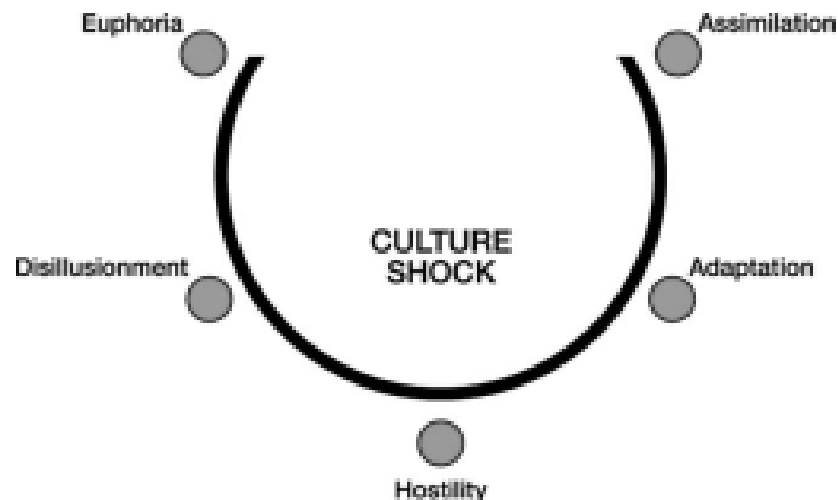


Figure 1. The U-curve of culture shock (Oberg, 1960).

The Dynamic Model of Culture Confusion (Hottola, 2004) is a modified version of Oberg's (1960) U-curve of Culture Shock. Hottola claimed travelers' experience stages that help the individual navigate between initial cultural confusion, adaptation, and opposition of culture.

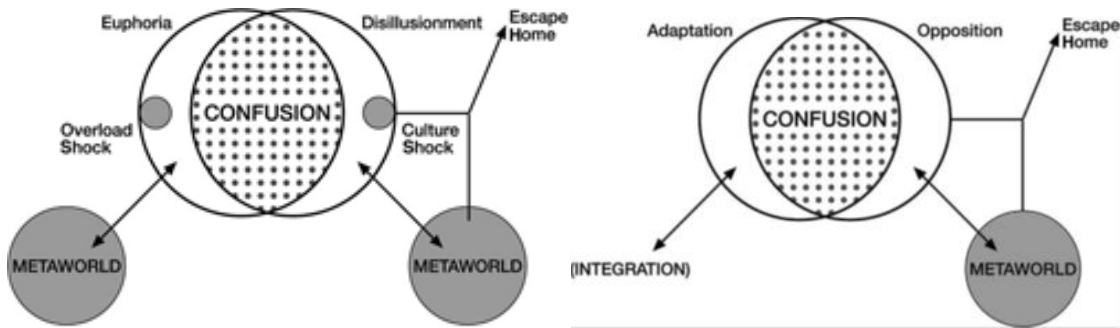


Figure 2. Initial culture confusion and adaptation/opposition (Hottola, 2004).

Additionally, Bennett (1986, 1993, 2004), developed the Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. Bennett’s model has been used to explain how an individual handles cross-cultural experiences. The model consists of a continuum that includes denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. Bennett’s Model also depicts the progression from ethnocentrism to ethno relativism (1993). Ethnocentrism was described as accepting one’s personal culture without further questioning and ethno relativism was described as viewing one’s beliefs as only one possible reality (Bennett, 2004).

Table 1

A Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1993)

Ethnocentrism			Ethno relativism		
1	2	3	4	5	6
Denial	Defense	Minimization	Acceptance	Adaptation	Integration

Constructivism was the theoretical perspective used to develop this study. According to Crotty (2004), a theoretical perspective is used to guide the methodology of the study and to provide a solid context for the study. According to Lambert (2002), constructivism is the foundation of learning in which individuals construct meaning based on their experiences. The construction of meaning based on experiences is the core of constructivism (Fosnot, 1996; Steffe & Gale, 1995). Additionally, constructionism was used to as the epistemological perspective (Crotty, 2004). In accordance with Crotty, the epistemology is “the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretic perspective and thereby in the methodology” (p. 3). Constructionism posits that individuals give meaning to reality through interactions with the external world (Crotty, 2004). The short-term study abroad program provides the external world and the participant constructs meaning from the interactions.

Subjectivity and Methods

According to Glesne (1999), the subjectivity statement provides an opportunity for the researchers to share any personal bias that may impact the study. Researcher one has experience educating secondary students from multiple cultures in the area of agriculture, has taught secondary school students in Belize, and has traveled to 6 additional countries. Researcher one has also conducted research in the area of agricultural teacher preparation, as well as international

agricultural extension and development, and has been involved in two different study abroad programs. Researcher two was raised in a military family and lived abroad for a portion of childhood and has continued to travel internationally. Researcher two is formally trained as an agricultural educator and has developed a graduate level study abroad program.

The case study approach was selected for this study because it allowed for a bounded system to be studied (Creswell, 1998). The data collected allowed the researchers to vicariously enter the event being studied and to examine the event holistically (Creswell, 1998). The short-term study abroad program for this case study was entitled *African Savannah Wildlife Ecology* and was conducted in Swaziland, Africa. Permission was granted from the Institutional Review Board before beginning the study. The study abroad program was purposively selected because it consisted of 15 undergraduate students in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Florida and lasted 19 days. The participants consisted of thirteen females and two males. Four of the 15 participants had previously traveled outside the United States. The countries those students had traveled included Belize, France, and Switzerland. None of the participants were classified as International students. The participants were studying wildlife ecology and conservation and had aspirations of obtaining employment in the field. The program took place in the summer of 2012 and was led by an Assistant Professor of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation. The faculty member that led the short-term study abroad program was familiar with Swaziland and the culture associated with Swaziland due to leading the short-term study abroad program once before.

Data-collection methods included pre-travel questions, post-experience reflection questions, and reflective journaling. Bennett's (1986, 1993, 2004) Model of Intercultural Sensitivity was used as a conceptual frame work when developing the questions used for data collection. Pre-travel questions gave an opportunity for students to think about future learning and to prepare for later experiences (Jones & Bjelland, 2004). This study used four pre-travel questions to encourage the students to begin thinking about the culture they would experience in Swaziland, and to allow the researcher to understand the students' perceptions regarding culture in Swaziland. The pre-travel questions were modified from existing pre-travel instruments (Wingenbach, Chmielewski, Smith, Piña, & Hamilton, 2006; Edgar, Egar, Briers, & Lawver, 2006; Dooley, Dooley, & Carranza, 2008). The pre-travel questions consisted of the following:

- 1) What are your initial attitudes/beliefs about visiting Swaziland? Please describe your pre-trip thoughts about Swaziland, while concentrating on and describing your top five attitudes/beliefs.
- 2) What are your initial attitudes/beliefs about Swaziland culture? Please describe your thoughts in terms of your top five attitudes/beliefs about cultural (language, customs, etc.), social, economic, or political issues.
- 3) How do you expect the culture in Swaziland to affect you during your experience?
- 4) How do you think the culture in Swaziland will influence your thinking both personally and professionally?

The pre-travel questions were administered face-to-face during a pre-session meeting. Fourteen of 15 students were present at the meeting and completed the pre-travel questions. One set of pre-travel questions were given to the faculty instructor to give to the missing student at a later date. The missing student did not return the pre-travel questions.

Post-experience reflection questions were given to the students at the end of their program, prior to returning to the United States. All of the participants completed the questions. The questions allowed the researcher to understand how the students' thoughts and perceptions had changed due to the short-term study abroad program. The post-travel questions were modified from existing post-travel instruments (Wingenbach, Chmielewski, Smith, Piña, & Hamilton, 2006; Edgar, Edgar, Briers, & Lawver, 2006; Dooley, Dooley, & Carranza, 2008).

The post-experience reflections questions included the following:

- 1) What are your post-experience attitudes/beliefs about visiting Swaziland? Please describe your thoughts about Swaziland, while concentrating on and describing your top five attitudes/beliefs.
- 2) What are your post-experience attitudes/beliefs about Swaziland Culture? Please describe your thoughts in terms of your top five attitudes/beliefs about Swaziland cultural (language, customs, etc.), social, economic, or political issues.
- 3) How did the culture affect you experience in Swaziland? Describe the emotions that you experienced during your trip and how you dealt with cultural differences.
- 4) Did your cultural experiences in Swaziland influence your thinking both personally and professionally in the way that you anticipated it to?

Additionally, reflective journaling was used to allow for an opportunity for individuals to analyze and document their feelings (Russell & Vallade, 2010). The following two reflective journaling questions/prompts were used:

- 1) What were your observations about the culture in Swaziland?
- 2) What activities of the day had the greatest significance to you? Why?

Due to the time commitments associated with journal writing, it was decided that the participants would not write in their journals on a daily basis. Participants made journal entries every other day for a total of 7 entries. Journaling was not done during travel to and from the country. Participants used field journals to hand-write their entries. All of the participants completed the reflective journaling and turned in their responses to the instructor of the program. Responses were then given to the researchers. The journal entries were transcribed verbatim by a hired transcriptionist.

In an effort to identify patterns, similarities, and differences in the data, the constant comparative method was used (Dooley, 2007). More specifically, a grounded theory analysis was used (Koro-Ljungberg, Yendol-Hoppey, Smith, & Hayes, 2009). Corbin and Strauss's (1990) grounded theory analysis method was used and included open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In agreement with Glaser (1978), line by line coding was selected in order to categorize each individual data line. Line-by-line coding allowed the researcher to categorize based solely on the data and not preconceived notions (Glaser, 1978). In order to avoid preconceived notions, the researcher conducted open coding as quickly as possible (Charmaz, 2006). The second stage of coding was axial coding, allowed for categorization of the pre-existing codes (Grbich, 2007). The final stage, selective coding, allowed for further delineation of categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

In order to achieve trustworthiness, the following four areas were considered throughout the research study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was addressed through triangulation and referential adequacy materials. Three data collection methods were used to triangulate the data, to help ensure credibility. Reflective journals were used as referential adequacy materials because of their unobtrusive ability to collect data in the context of the study. Transferability was achieved by the use of thick descriptions throughout the case study (Dooley, 2007). To address dependability and conformability, a methodological journal was used to record methodological decisions, in order to provide a dependability audit and a confirmability audit (Dooley, 2007). It is important to note the potential limitations of this study. All three data collection methods provided only self-reported data and the absence of participant observation data from the researchers' may have skewed or altered the results and the conclusions.

This study aligns with priority area four of the National Research Agenda for Agricultural Education (Doerfert, 2011) focusing on active learning in all areas of agricultural education and in all learning environments. Specifically, the focus is on short-term study abroad programs in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at the University of Florida with special attention given to the cultural adaptation process.

Findings

Findings are presented in the form of quotes and summaries from participants. Each statement includes which participant made the statement (e. g. P-1) and when the statement was made (pre-experience, day #, or post-experience).

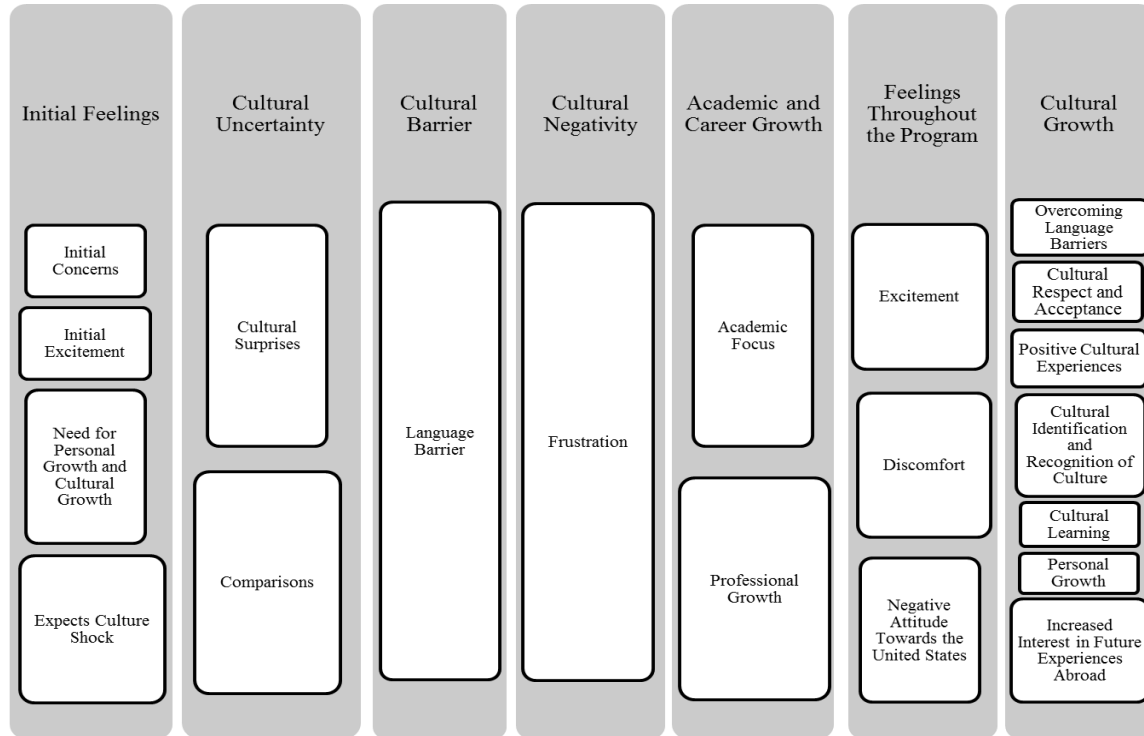


Figure 3. Cultural Adaptation stages and sub-stages for the African Savannah Wildlife Ecology short-term study abroad program.

Initial Feelings

Initial Concerns. Many of the participants experienced feelings of concern while preparing for this study abroad program. Nervousness abounded, because of the long airplane flight and navigation through the airports (P-12, Pre-experience). P-2 (Pre-experience) was “nervous about traveling internationally so far away from home” and P-13 (Pre-experience) expressed concern over cultural differences he believed he might experience. The fact that he was visiting a part of the world for the first time made him nervous because of his unfamiliarity with Swaziland (P-13, Pre-experience). There was also concern about political turmoil in Swaziland (P-6, Pre-experience). Participants were also concerned with interacting with locals in a way that would not be offensive (P-4, Pre-experience). P-12 (Pre-experience) expected to feel increased anxiety and to be unsure how to appropriately interact with locals.

Initial excitement. Before leaving the United States, many of the participants experienced great excitement at the prospect of the upcoming study abroad program. Participant P-5 (Pre-experience) said, “I’m very excited to experience a new culture and country.” Participant P-4 (Pre-experience) said, “I have never traveled to a place out of my comfort zone so I’m excited about that.” Anticipation was building at thoughts of interacting with children and giving them gifts (P-4, Pre-experience). Expectations of friendly people in Swaziland were prevalent (P-3; P-6; P-8; P-13, Pre-experience). Participant P-1 (Pre-experience) said, “I’m so excited! I look

forward to being in the village mostly, interacting with the people. ” Overall there was genuine excitement about traveling internationally in an effort to widen personal views (P-12, Pre-experience). Additionally, participants were excited about the academic focus of this study abroad program. Participants were very excited about working in the field, and viewing wildlife (P-1; P-2; P-3; P-15, Pre-experience). Excitement about viewing wildlife in its natural habitat was experienced before leaving the United States (P-1; P-3; P-15, Pre-experience).

Need for personal growth and cultural growth. Participants of this study abroad program expressed a need for both personal and cultural growth. There was anticipation of the culture influencing the participant and allowing the participant to keep an open mind, in an effort to grow as a person (P-7, Pre-experience). Interactions with the people and culture of Swaziland enhanced the participants’ cultural knowledge and allowed them to enhance their world view (P-8; P-9, Pre-experience). P-9 (Pre-experience) said, “I think the culture in Swaziland will help bring me out of my American bubble” and “. . . it will help me be aware that different cultures have different customs. ” However, P-1 (Pre-experience) acknowledged her lack of understanding of other cultures and wanted this program to positively challenge her as a human being. P-13 (Pre-experience) aspired to learn from the experience and become a more balanced person. One participant wanted to experience emotional changes from exposure to the people and culture of Swaziland (P-14, Pre-experience). P-6 (Pre-experience) felt she could be shut off to others and hoped this program would help her become more aware of the needs of others. Cultural differences were considered when deciding how to react to the surrounding culture (P-7, Pre-experience). Participants also felt a need to make friends with the Swazi people (P-3, Pre-experience) and learn about the country, to expand their world view (P-2; P-15, Pre-experience).

Expects culture shock. Participants anticipated experiencing culture shock upon entering the country. P-15 (Pre-experience) said, “It will probably be a bit of a culture shock.” The culture shock was anticipated, but welcomed by some of the participants (P-14, Pre-experience). P-14 (Pre-experience) said, “I am excited to experience another culture and environment. I really want to meet people and learn about their way of life. I believe it may be a bit of a cultural shock for me and I’m actually really excited about that. ” The cultural customs of Swaziland were discussed before the trip, but the participant did not believe learning about the culture before the program would ease the culture shock experienced once entering the country (P-9, Pre-experience).

Cultural Uncertainty

Cultural surprises. Throughout the program, participants had experiences that were unexpected and different than their preconceptions. P-1 (Day 5) expected the indigenous people to dress differently than Americans. She thought that the dress would be unique to the location. However, P-4 (Post-experience) was surprised by the traditional culture, ceremonies, dances, clothes that were observable throughout the region. A Participant also noted that the people of Swaziland enjoy music that is or has been popular in the United States (P-7, Day 16). Additionally, cell phone technology common in developed countries was also present in Swaziland (P-2; P-11, Day 4; Day 11). P-11 (Day 4) said, “I found it odd that the houses and communities were so old/had few technological items yet most of the citizens could be seen carrying cell phones.”

P-2 (Day 3) focused on the behaviors of the people and was surprised how friendly the children were. The children were eager to wave to the group and say hello (P-2, Day 3). Once participants began a conversation with Swazi college students, P-13 (Day 6) realized that Swazi college students knew much more about Americans than he anticipated. P-13 (Day 6) said, “It is interesting to hear their views on things. They actually know quite a bit about American culture, which was surprising to me.” When learning about the people of Swaziland, P-8 (Post-experience) was surprised when she learned about the treatment of women and that “women aren’t really treated equally in Swaziland which I found surprising.”

Comparisons. While participating in the study abroad program, participants continually compared Swaziland and the United States. P-6 (Post-experience) said, “Many parts of Swaziland reflect a mixture of traditional Swazi and non-traditional Western influences.” The people of Swaziland cherish traditions and emphasize their customs while integrating Western influence into their culture (P-10, Post-experience). Comparisons were made among styles of clothing worn in each country (P-1, Day 4). P-11 (Day 4) felt that the culture in Swaziland was both similar and different than American culture. However, P-5 (Post-experience) felt there was a vast difference between urban lives in the United States compared to urban life in Swaziland. P-1 (Day 7) noted the lack of large vehicles parked in driveways. Comparisons were made regarding the friendliness of Americans versus Swazis. Participants felt people of Swaziland were much friendlier than people in the United States (P-13, Day 8). Friendliness prevailed even though P-9 (Post-experience) felt “the people in Swaziland have a lot less than the States, the towns are pretty run down.” That in mind, the people of Swaziland assumed all Americans were wealthy (P-11, Post-experience). Additionally, P-9 (day 14) compared the custom of looking each other in the eye when communicating to one another. She stated, “It was hard for me to not look Swazis in the eye while talking to them because it is the complete opposite for our American culture”.

Cultural Barrier

Language barrier. Participants did not report many issues with the language barrier. However, several participants admitted that the language barrier presented challenges when communicating with locals (P-5; P-13; P-14). P-5 and P-13 felt the Swazi language was difficult to learn (Post-experience). The language patterns were difficult for participant P-13 (Post-experience) to master and he believed the Swazi language would be challenging to learn. P-14 (Day 8) said,

Today I finally felt the awkwardness that comes with lack of a common language when a group of students and I rode in the back of a pickup with a group of Swazi construction workers. We had only learned greeting thus far and I don't think the men knew more than greeting in English.

Cultural Negativity

Frustration. Frustration was experienced throughout the study abroad program. Two female participants, P-1 and P-8 (Post-experience), were frustrated with the polygamist lifestyle present in Swaziland. P-8 (Post-experience) said, “I don't really like their polygamy views-it kind of disrespected women.” Additionally, P-12 (Day 4) was frustrated by the cultural meanings of body language. She expected the meaning of body language to be universal and she discovered it was not. Frustration added to the difficulty of interpreting body language (P-12, Day 4). One participant seemed frustrated with the way organizations come to Swaziland and provide aid (P-1, Post-experience). She felt the handouts were stifling economic growth in Swaziland and that was frustrating to her (P-1, Post-experience).

Academic and Career Growth

Academic focus. Participants focused on academic content throughout this study abroad experience. Participants spent time in the field conducting wildlife research (P-13, Day 8) and learning about native wildlife. Conversations with locals seemed to focus on wildlife or wildlife conservation. P-6 (Day 6) discussed poaching with the locals, to better understand the issues that go along with poaching. Exploring protected conservation land and the non-protected land allowed P-2 (Day 17) to visually observe the importance of setting aside land for conservation to

protect wildlife. Visiting nature reserves allowed them to learn about the wildlife and the issues that come with protecting wildlife (P-4, Day 17). P-13 (Post-experience) learned that “Swaziland lifestyles clash with wildlife-modernization is leading to habitat destruction and fragmentation, similar to everywhere else.”

During the program, participants learned about native birds. P-8 (Day 14) said, “I really enjoyed going out with the bird group and learning some calls.” P-12 (Day 9) said, “I am starting to recognize a few of the bird species. . . .” Participants also learned to identify and track wildlife based on feces and tracks (P-9, Day 6). Excitement was shown toward the field exam. P-9 (Day 6) said, “The activity that has had the most significance to me was actually taking our field exam, because I didn’t realize how much I have learned! It wasn’t stressful and I felt confident in what I had learned.”

Professional growth. Professional growth was experienced by many of the participants during this program (P-6; P-7; P-10; P-11; P-13). Experiencing the culture of Swaziland allowed P-7 to learn about a different way of life and to become more aware of other people and their personal beliefs (Post-experience). While working within the communities, P-10 (Post-experience) realized the importance of gaining the respect of the people in the community and becoming accepted by that community. It is also important for local people to be involved in conservation work, for the community to buy into the project (P-13, Post-experience). The experience in Swaziland allowed participants to realize the need for international conservation work and helped them realize they want to have a role in future conservation efforts (P-6; P-11, Post-experience).

Feelings throughout the Program

Excitement. Excitement was felt after interacting with the people of Swaziland (P-6, Day 4). P-6 (Day 4) said, “I’m excited to meet more Swazis, and learn about more of their culture.” As participants interacted with locals, they built relationships. P-6 (Post-experience) was excited about the relationships she formed during the study abroad program. The experience in another country encouraged her to graduate as quickly as possible, to get a job working in countries similar to Swaziland (P-6, Post-experience).

Discomfort. Interactions with people in Swaziland allowed participants to come out of their comfort zone and experience discomfort (P-3, Post-experience). P-3 (Post-experience) said, “Swaziland has enhanced my belief that coming out of your comfort zone is the greatest way to live life to the fullest.” Discomfort when interacting with locals was minimal, because of the friendly people of Swaziland; but discomfort was still present when interacting with people (P-12, Post-experience). P-4 (Post-experience) was removed from her comfort zone and forced to relax and let her guard down when visiting the villages (P-4, Post-experience). Another participant felt discomfort when the men in the village continued to stare at the women and offer cows for the women (P-2, Post-experience). P-2 (Post-experience) also felt uneasy about the amount of trash present in the village and the presence of sick children leaking bodily fluids. Experiences in the village made P-10 (Post-experience) say, “You’re constantly pulled out of you comfort zone and you have to adapt to a situation quickly.”

Negative attitude toward the United States. P-7 (Day 11) was impressed with how people in Swaziland held onto cultural traditions. She felt that Americans do not value traditions in the same manner and upholding cultural traditions is something Americans should do (P-7, Day 11). As some of the participants learned more about the culture in Swaziland, participants’ attitudes about the United States changed and became negative (P-1; P-7, Day 11).

Cultural Growth

Overcoming language barriers. Throughout the study abroad program, participants worked on overcoming the language barrier, to effectively communicate with the people of Swaziland. Participant P-12 (Day 10) stated,

I think it was really neat to watch the Swazi children and ourselves overcome the language barrier. We managed to convey “let me open that,” “what do you want,” “look,” “good job,” and several other phrases through facial expressions and gestures. I even made a poorly-molded play-dough cow and managed to convey that it was a cow by making it walk and “moo.”

Efforts were made to communicate by any means necessary, even if it was not with verbal language (P-12, Day 10). However, attempts were made to learn and speak the Swazi language. The Siwati language was considered unique and this made P-9 (Post-experience) interested in learning the language. P-13 (Day 6) learned common Siwati phrases in an effort to communicate with the locals.

Cultural respect and acceptance. Participants were subjected to many cultural traditions and customs different than in the United States. Cultural respect was shown throughout the program when the participants showed they were willing to embrace the local customs. A group of Swazi women wanted to dance with some of the participants and instead of being shy or embarrassed, a participant showed respect for the Swazi women and took turns dancing with them (P-8, Day 9). Acceptance of the Swazi’s traditional marriage ceremony was also mentioned by Participant P-8 (Post-experience), “I liked their marriage ceremony. It lasts for multiple days, involving many family members and was a huge celebration.” Participant P-4 said (Post-experience) “They are very traditional people that don’t seem to be open to changing to a “Western” civilization, not that they should.” Similarly, Participant P-1 (Post-experience) accepted the traditions of the Swazi people and felt that they should continue.

Positive cultural experiences. Positive cultural experiences throughout the study abroad program led to cultural growth of the participants (P-2; P-3; P-7). Visiting villages allowed participants to experience friendly people, happy people, and another way of life (P-2; P-3; P-4; Day 3) and the interactions with children were positive experiences. P-3 (Day 7) helped to teach the children of the village to play a game using empty soda cans. Another positive cultural experience was visiting the markets. P-7 (Day 14) said, “I was impressed by the amount of things to buy: so many stalls for food, crafts, fabric—everything! So much culture in one place! It was so cool!”

Participants were able to interact with college students from Swaziland. The conversations turned into a positive experience and allowed participants to realize they were similar to the Swazi students (P-6, Day 10). P-12 (Post-experience) said, “Speaking with Vesi and Maps, two students that joined our group, really increased my understanding of Swaziland.” Additionally, visiting a school in Shewela was a positive experience because it allowed participants to see the disparity between schools in Swaziland compared to schools in the United States (P-2, Day 9). Participants appreciated all their cultural experiences and did not believe the program would have been as meaningful without the experiences (P-8; P-13, Post-experience).

Cultural identification and recognition of culture. Participants were continuously identifying and giving recognition to the cultural traditions that surrounded them. From the beginning, participants noted that Swazis were social people who focused on relationship building (P-3; P-7, Post-experience). The people were welcoming and friendly toward the participants (P-2; P-3; P-4; P-5; P-8; P-10; P-11, Post-experience). However, it was noted that men and women do not socialize much (P-5, Post-experience) and that “men are considered superior to women” (P-11, Post-experience). The practice of polygamy is present in Swaziland and exacerbates gender inequality (P-12, Day 19). Despite the poverty many Swazis live in, the people of Swaziland seem happy (P-11, Post-experience). “Swazi people might be poor and the

age of death is very low but they are very happy people with a real sense of community and family values” (P-4, Post-experience). Participant P-8 (Post-experience) said, “Swazis don’t have much money, but seem to have a positive outlook on life.” The cultural traditions of Swaziland are passed from one generation to the next (P-11, Post-experience) and can be seen in everyday life (P-13, Post-experience).

Cultural learning. Cultural learning took place throughout the study abroad program and helped participants gain a better understanding of the culture in Swaziland. Cultural learning started at the beginning of the program when the students were visiting the villages. P-12 (Day 10) learned that the Swazis valued family and lived in close proximity to their extended family. Swazi children are highly prized and viewed as a blessing no matter how many children are in the family (P-9, Day 6). Swazis were unconcerned about whether the family could provide for the children (P-9, Day 6). If the family could not feed their children, they would send the children to eat at a community daycare (P-10, Day 9). The food habits of the Swazis provided another opportunity for cultural learning. P-9 (Day 8) said, “One thing I have learned very well about Swazi culture is that mealy pop is the main cultural food dish.” Meals are often consumed as an entire family out of one bowl. The family used their fingers to consume the meal (P-4, Day 8). Participants also learned about traditional Swazi wedding ceremonies. Younger Swazi college students do not want a traditional Swazi wedding (P-10; P-11, Day 6).

Personal growth. Personal growth took place throughout the study abroad experience (P-1; P-2; P-4; P-7; P-9; P-11). The study abroad program helped broaden the world view of participants (P-1, Post-experience) and increased their personal confidence, so they could become more independent (P-2, Post-experience). P-2 (Post-experience) said, “This trip made me grow tremendously as an individual.” Interacting with the people of Swaziland allowed four participants to gain a sense of appreciation for what they have in the United States and to be thankful for their lives (P-4; P-7; P-9; P-11, Post-experience). Additionally, P-1 (Post-experience) enhanced her listening skills and P-3 (Post-experience) discovered the importance of cultural interactions.

Increased interest in future experiences abroad. The experience in Swaziland made many of the participants decide that they want to travel internationally again. P-6 (Post-experience) said, “Being in Swaziland made me feel very refreshed, I realized just how unique this country was, and unique even for Africa. I love the warmth of the people and the beautiful mountains and I can’t wait to come back.” Similarly, P-9 (Post-experience) was interested in returning to Swaziland, because of her positive experience. Future international travel was not limited to tourism; P-12 (Post-experience) wanted to travel in a professional capacity to help other countries.

Conclusions

The findings from this case study provide a conceptual framework of how students experience culture during a short-term study abroad program in Swaziland and are depicted in Figure 4.

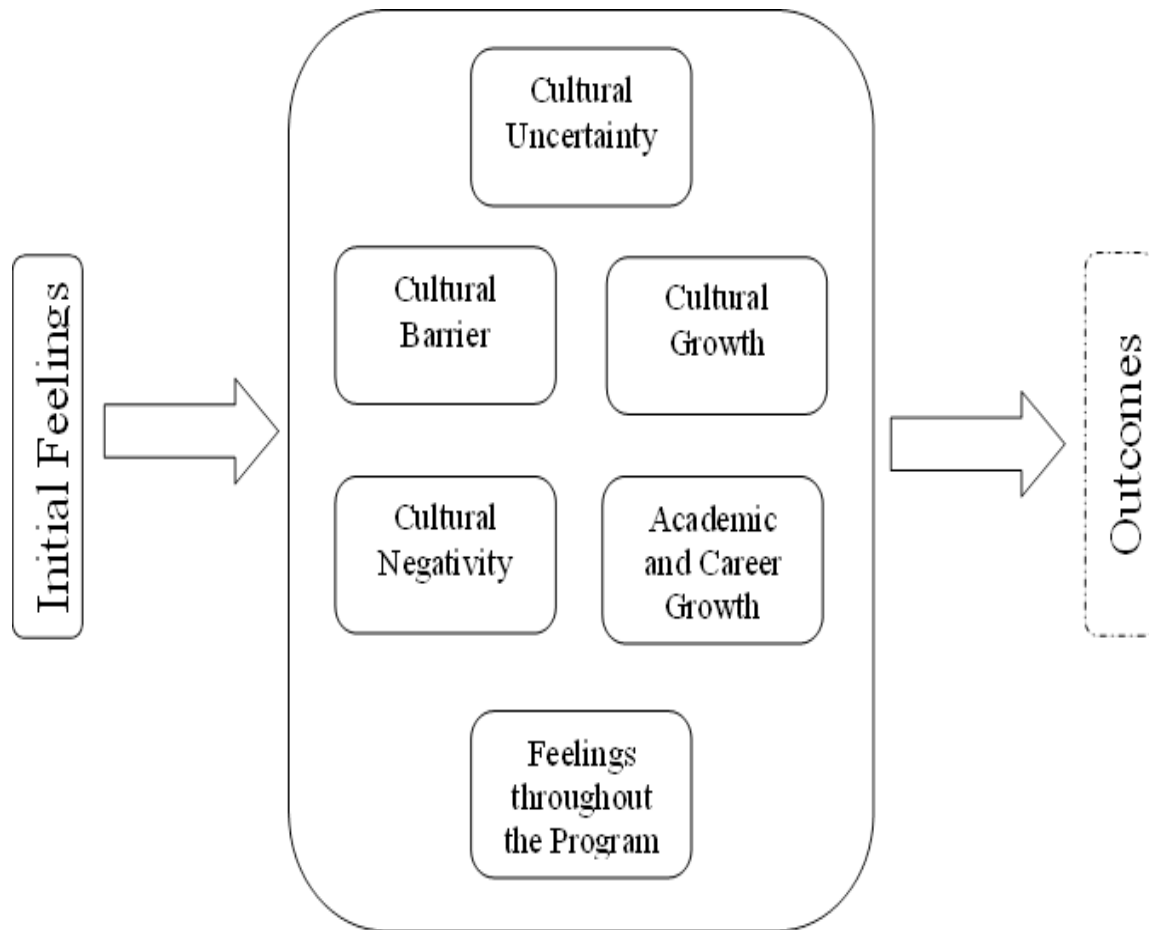


Figure 4. The cultural adaptation process of agricultural and life sciences students on short-term study abroad program in Swaziland.

The participants experienced a plethora of feelings prior to leaving the United States and the concern for safety was expressed through the concern of political turmoil. Despite the concern of traveling overseas and to a potentially hostile environment, participants exhibited excitement towards the study abroad program. The Swazi people were viewed as friendly people who would be delighted to see Americans. Additionally, participants were excited to track wildlife and learn about the wildlife habitat in Swaziland. The excitement towards interacting with Swazi’s and gaining academic experience contradict Anderson’s (2003) assertion that students view study abroad as vacation instead of an academic experience.

Participants expressed a need to learn about different cultures and to enhance their worldly view. The continuous exposure to people from around the world (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2005; Boyd et al., 2004) may have contributed to the participants expressed need to enhance their world view. Participants in this short-term study abroad program

expected to recognize the culture of the country and in turn learn from the culture in order to broaden their worldview, grow as human beings, and learn about cultural differences. However, participants expected to experience culture shock upon entering Swaziland. This anticipation of experiencing culture shock immediately upon entry to the country goes against Oberg's (1960) assertion that travelers would initially experience euphoria on entering the country. However, the anticipation of culture shock when entering the country is similar to Hottola's (2004) initial stage of cultural confusion on entering the country. It is important to remember that, at this stage in the short-term study abroad program, it is only anticipation of culture shock and not necessarily what happened.

Cultural surprises took place throughout the program, but did not have a major impact on the participants. Participants did not retreat into Hottola's (2004) metaworld, disillusionment stage, or any other stage in the model. However, participants did spend time comparing their personal culture to the culture represented in Swaziland. According to Bennett (1986), cultural comparisons are prevalent in the minimization stage in which an individual recognizes cultural differences, but does not consider them important. Participants recognized the challenges associated with learning an African language. The findings contrasted Ingram's (2005) assertions that students participating in study abroad programs have an increased interest in learning a foreign language. The participants of this study did not indicate any interest in learning the Swazi's native language after the completion of the program. Frustration was also experienced by the participants, but to the extent that Oberg (1960) describes in his U curve of culture shock model. The participants did not reach the stage of hostility to warrant entering Oberg's hostility stage.

In accordance with Bennett's (2004) reversal of the defense stage, some participants gave a higher value to the culture and values of Swaziland than their American culture and values. Experiences during the program may have encouraged participants to critically analyze the experience in the host country and to form negative beliefs and attitudes toward the United States. In an effort to overcome the language barrier, participants experienced cultural growth and fit within Oberg's (1960) and Hottola's (2004) adaptation stage. Positive cultural experiences helped the participants reduce cultural uncertainty (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988) and adapt to the culture. Additionally, the participants showed an interest to travel abroad in the future. However, future travel plans do not always indicate that the individual is moving closer to Bennett's (1986, 2004) stage of cultural integration.

Recommendations

In an effort to globalize the undergraduate curricula (Navarro & Edwards, 2008), short-term study abroad facilitators are recommended to structure their programs in a way that allows for learning experiences to take place before arriving in the host country, while visiting the host country, and upon returning to the home country. Connecting cultural traditions and cultural learning to the academics will enhance participant learning. The academic focus should not be separated from the focus on cultural learning/cultural growth. Learning activities conducted before leaving the home country should aim at preparing participants to experience cultural growth while in the host country. Learning activities while in the host country should focus on cultural traditions and connect with what the participants discussed prior to traveling.

A fine line exists regarding how much cultural information and foresight short-term study abroad facilitators should provide to participants before entering the host country. Cultural preparation will allow participants to be more comfortable in the country and to positively focus on the culture and the academics of the program. However, if the program lasts multiple weeks, facilitators should tell the participants less about the cultural traditions and stereotypes before entering the host country than they would on a 7 day program. Facilitators should allow the participants to experience the culture for themselves instead of extensively informing the

participants about cultural traditions. However, it is important to allow participants to briefly explore their preconceptions of the cultural traditions before entering the host country.

Short-term study abroad facilitators should also discuss cultural acceptance with the participants during each part of the program. This will help the participants understand what it means to accept the culture. The activities may also be designed to encourage and promote cultural acceptance. The facilitator should make sure to allow time for reflection and generalization in order to help participants handle culture shock in a positive manner. Reflection should take the shape of group and individual reflection. Individual reflection may take place through reflective journaling. Prior to departure, guest speakers may be used to discuss culture and to answer the participants' questions. Additionally, it is recommended that facilitators assist the participants in language development in order to help the participants learn common words and phrases. Learning commonly used words and phrases should be done before entering the host country and while in the host country, in order to help the participants positively adapt to the culture around them.

Throughout the entire short-term study abroad program, the facilitator should educate the participants about the various cultural adaptation models and include the models in discussions and learning activities. Reflecting about the cultural adaptation models may help participants to understand what they are experiencing. The entire program should be based on learning experiences provided before entering the host country, while in the host country, and upon returning to the home country. For experiential learning to take place, the facilitator must allow time for reflection and generalization (Roberts, 2006). Reactions of the facilitator throughout the experience may influence participants and help determine how participants move through the stages of cultural adaptation.

Recommendations for Future Research

In order to make comparisons between the short-term study abroad program in this study and other short-term study abroad programs, replication of this study is recommended. Future studies should purposefully select the short-term study abroad program based on program type and geographic location. Exploration of programmatic differences and facilitator qualities/differences should be examined in order to further understand factors that influence cultural adaptation.

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