FEATURE

Study Abroad: School Librarians Go Global

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Gaining professional experience for pre-service school librarians is essential and can be accomplished through curriculum requirements such as practicums, internships, or field experiences. These experiences are designed to prepare school librarians for active professional roles by providing an environment in which they can put classroom theories into practice and encounter the realities of interacting with a diverse set of students and student needs.

Incorporating study abroad experiences extends this professional experience by offering cultural opportunities around the globe that deepen and enhance professional and personal growth. Study abroad options include:

- **Exchange programs**: allow students to spend a semester or full year at a partner university; grades earned abroad are applied as transfer credits.

- **Affiliate programs**: allow students to participate in programs held at the university or the institute associated with the affiliate university.

- **Faculty-led programs**: allow students to take one or two 3-credit courses, usually during the summer or winter interim sessions.

For school librarians, it can be challenging to locate a study abroad program suited to their interests. However, exploring options for problem solving, computational thinking, design thinking, and collaboration contribute to the development of new media skills that librarians of all types are expected to facilitate through their programs and services. Universities with school library programs typically offer study abroad programs, and it's worth investigating the options for opportunities to broaden professional and personal experience.

Service-Learning Study Abroad

Since 2002 the University of North Texas (UNT) Department of Information Science's School Library Certification Program has regularly offered a service-learning study abroad program. Service learning, according to Robert G. Bringle and Julie A. Hatcher, is "a credit bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs" (1996, 222). For school librarians this involves engaging in a two- to three-week service-learning project designed to meet the goals and objectives of the host international school library. The program offering is designed not only to give students exposure to librarianship but also to give them a chance to expand their cultural acuity. The course objectives include building student competence to:

1. Assess the needs of the library community for library access.

2. Identify and address the cultural competencies for the context of the clientele.

3. Assess the school library collection.

4. Prepare a comprehensive library work plan.

5. Prepare recommendations for a dynamic library program.

6. Present the library policy to stakeholders.

7. Reflect and discuss the impact of a multicultural experience.

The study abroad program has evolved from its first offering in 2002 when a professor in the school library program was asked to assist a small school library in Jamaica to set up a circulation system and catalog its collection. Each subsequent project responded to an invitation extended by a school director and school librarian, internationally situated, to provide a variety of services and assessments related to school library programs. These projects have offered library students an unprecedented opportunity to add to their academic and personal growth by broadening their world experience, meeting people from different backgrounds, and interacting with people who may hold different perspectives.

The formal project invitations have been initiated by students within the program who have contacts working abroad, students in the certification program working in an international school library, and school librarians who learned of the projects and approached the department based on positive feedback from schools and school librarians where the program had previously been delivered. To date, the service-learning study abroad program has been delivered in twelve locations including Jamaica (2002); Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, and Phuket, Thailand (2003, 2004, 2005, 2006); Tirana, Albania (2008); Kyiv, Ukraine (2010); Cusco and Urubamba, Peru (2011); Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russia (2012, 2013); Stuttgart, Germany, and Karlovy Vary, Czech Republic (2014); and Hamburg, Germany (2016).

The projects have involved a range of participants with as many as thirty students working in three schools in Peru and as few as ten students working in the first project location in Jamaica. Participants ranged in age from twenty-three to sixty-five, and reflected a range of experience working in libraries, from novice librarians with a strong desire to be a professional to full-time

school librarians working towards their certification credential.

So far, all project schools were English speaking, with the exception of establishing the first school library in Urubamba, Peru. Spanish-speaking students comprised the majority of team members for this school and facilitated the introduction of the automation system and the design and delivery of the school library space and collection (courtesy of Capstone Publishing).

Timing of the project depends on the coordination of the university semester with the host school schedule. The ideal time to start on site is between the end of the UNT spring semester (mid-May) and the beginning of the UNT eight-week summer session (early June), and coincides with a time in the host school library's schedule when school is in session and administrators, teachers, and the school librarian are available for inclusion in the project. This schedule means that

project team recruitment, selection, and orientation take place during the months prior to departure when students are focused on other coursework. The timeframe for the study abroad program of coursework extends beyond the dedicated time on site to meet the requirements of a standard eight-week summer session. In most cases, after the on-site project has been completed, an additional three to four weeks remain in the session, allowing for completion and submission of the personal assignments associated with the study abroad coursework.

Students fund their own participation in the study abroad projects. Airfare arrangements are left to the students, with a coordinated schedule of instructor departures and arrivals, and a specific time to meet at the project location. Each student has been assessed a program fee that includes shared accommodation, transportation on site, and some special events. Students are free to meet non-program companions

after the project concludes, but the time on site is restricted to UNT students in the program.

Before departure and on site, all students receive an orientation to the project, project schedule, and safety requirements. Safety is a primary concern addressed with a "rule of three" that precludes individual exploration. This rule encourages students to reach out to at least two others to join in the pursuit of an individual interest, while ensuring that no student is outside the reach of immediate assistance if needed.

To maximize the contribution, the projects are designed to operate as a set of teams assigned to various aspects of the project; each team has the responsibility to actively share and contribute information to all teams. Each project strives to include all constituents, and throughout the project meetings with administrators, teachers, and library personnel are requested as convenient to the staff of the host school. At the

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end of the project a detailed final report with recommendations is provided to the host school.

So far, school library services and assessments included cataloging new materials, classroom sets, and/or textbooks; designing and/or assessing the library space; preparing library work plans, performance plans and policies to support the school library and the school curriculum; introducing, assessing, or optimizing the library automation system (both open source and proprietary systems); assessing and recommending information technology; assessing the collection, often with emphasis on the science collection; and teaching school librarians and teachers how to use technology, including automation systems.

The focus for each project depends on the needs of the individual school library, and always involves the introduction or assessment of an automation system and the impact of technology. Participating UNT students earn credit for two courses (six credit hours), with one course focused on *Managing Library Automation Projects* and the second course focused on *Information Resources and Services for Special Clientele*. Applicants from all library disciplines, regardless of their progress through their program's coursework, have been encouraged to experience the range of library programs and services in a fully contained setting. This means that school librarians work alongside academic librarians and public librarians, all focused on meeting student needs in an international setting.

A Multicultural Experience

Outside of the host school, emphasis is placed on a cultural experience that includes, whenever possible, tours of public and/or academic libraries, museums, art galleries, and local sites of interest; individual time to explore with a minimum of two others; and cultural events such as plays, operas, theater, or dance. For example, during the three-week visit to Russia participants visited Red Square, the Kremlin and its Armory Museum, the Russian State Library (formerly the Lenin Library), the Russian National Public Library for Science and Technology, the State Hermitage Museum, the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, and the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library. The project team was hosted at the Google offices in Moscow and at the Yeltsin Presidential Library in St. Petersburg by the Russian School Library Association (RUSLA), which offered participants the opportunity to exchange presentations and learn from one another.

Students were assigned a photo journal that was guided by "challenge" questions designed by the instructors to provoke a focus on the multicultural elements of the experience, to collect learners' thoughts and photos that represented their experience throughout the on-site experience, and to be shared with everyone at the end of the course. These journals were often published as books that provided tangible evidence of participants' varied responses to these learning experiences.

Evaluating the Experience

Project evaluation includes formative assessments during the project with instruction and follow-up by the instructors, and summative assessments of the photo journal, peer assessment of individual contributions to the team process using the project team evaluation form, and an understanding of the project process as expressed in a thousand-word written paper that identifies individual learnings, discusses the project process, identifies what worked, what didn't work and why, and identifies what could be done differently.

Organizing and delivering the service-learning study abroad project is an intense undertaking that involves attention to pedagogical goals, multicultural experiences, and safety concerns. Such a project requires detailed planning, dedicated resources, and unflagging enthusiasm.

The program has been studied from the perspective of cultural competency (Walczyk 2010). Although some aspects of cultural competency development were identified, what the analysis showed was a deeper understanding of the culture and professional nature of librarianship. This preliminary research showed that students definitely learned something beyond skills as a result of their participation.

The program was further assessed through a doctoral research study (Walczyk 2016) designed to identify what the participants learned both culturally and professionally from the 2012 Moscow and St. Petersburg experience. Tine Walczyk's study used Patricia Montiel-Overall's definition of cultural competency: "a highly developed ability to understand and respect cultural differences and to address issues of disparity among diverse populations competently" (2009, 176). The study looked at the service-learning program in the context of Montiel-Overall's model of three domains that influence the development of cultural competence: cognitive, interpersonal, and environmental. As people's understanding of a culture at these three levels improves, their cultural competence matures. The Walczyk study showed that even

though cultural competency, library cultural competency—which the researcher defined as "the development of library specific cultural and professional competencies through interacting with different library settings" (2016, 65)—and personal growth were germane to the success and perceived value of the experience, participant attributes had an effect on the results. Cultural competency was categorized into awareness developed, expectations challenged, and differences observed. Specific findings from Walczyk's 2016 doctoral study follow:

- All three categories of cultural competency were observed in participants who had either travelled internationally before, were in an older age group, or were farther along in their LIS program. These participants expressed a greater focus on learning deeply from the experience.

- Those who had been in the profession six to ten years experienced the greatest amount of awareness of the new culture.

- A participant's point in their LIS program affected whether they identified their development of library cultural awareness or

focused on the differences in library cultures. Those farther into the program concentrated on awareness of how they could integrate the processes of the host library culture into their work world. In contrast, those earlier in their program's studies fixated on the differences, e.g., "They aren't doing it right."

- The attribute that appeared to make the most difference in participants' responses to the experience was whether they had worked with people from other countries; those experiencing colleagues from other countries for the first time reflected deeply on the interchanges.

- Those younger than thirty expressed development of greater flexibility as a result of the experience.

- Students reflected on how their work world would be impacted, e.g., teamwork and office communication skills, rather than their personal lives.

- Students appreciated the opportunity to gain hands-on experience in many of the different tasks a librarian may be asked to perform.

- The international aspect of the experience provided participants with a fresh look at how librarianship roles can be performed and challenged their expectations regarding what they think libraries should do and how they should operate.

- Participant impressions of the overall experience depended on their initial expectations and attitudes towards its being a service-learning project instead of a purely cultural trip. Those participants who expressed their expectations of "seeing more and working less" reported less overall value in the experience. Participants who were excited for the work experience were more engaged throughout the trip.

Are there challenges and disappointments? Yes, of course! That's all part of the learning experience and the evolving process of continuous improvement—for the students and for the program. One of the biggest challenges was project scope creep. Regardless of the initial needs stated by the host school, expanding the scope of what could be handled invariably occurred. While this is a credit to the impact that a team of librarians can make, it was also a significant challenge to contain. Finding an appropriate balance between the needs of the host school library and the needs of the visiting team of librarians was an ongoing test of flexibility and constraint.

Although there are challenges in developing and executing a service-learning study abroad program, this program has had resoundingly positive anecdotal feedback every year. With the examination of the program through a research lens, the program has continually improved by incorporating student and host library feedback where possible.

Summary

Organizing and delivering the service-learning study abroad project is an intense undertaking that involves attention to pedagogical goals, multicultural experiences, and safety concerns. Such a project requires detailed planning, dedicated resources, and unflagging enthusiasm. The rewards are enormous for instructors, host educators, and pre-service librarians alike!

By situating the project within a school library, students are exposed to a broad range of facets of librarianship. Further, with this experience being placed internationally, students also obtain an appreciation for how other countries implement library services. With attention to student selection, site selection, project orientation, project goals, and cultural opportunities, the program can result in significant gains for the host school and individual participants.

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