

“You Learn How to Experience Yourself”: A Photo-Cued Investigation of Empowerment in Study Abroad

Kayla M. Johnson^{a,*}
“McGill University, Canada

*Corresponding author: Email: kayla.johnson@mcgill.ca Address: McGill University, Quebec, Canada

Introduction

As in broader society, empowerment has become a focal point in the education community. The 2018 March for Our Lives event organized by the students of Stoneman Marjorie Douglas High School and the #NeverAgain movements are clear examples. Founded in Paulo Freire’s (1970) ideas on power and liberation, research on empowerment in education has highlighted the importance of student empowerment as an outcome of schooling. For example, empowered individuals take greater responsibility for their lives, value their passions, recognize their needs and goals, and have the capacity to exercise their power (Zimmerman 1995). They also have a greater sense of self-efficacy and belonging (Hurtado, Alvarado, and Guillermo-Wann 2015). When students feel empowered, they become more engaged in their lives and in their learning, which contributes to positive and improved learning outcomes (You 2016).

Although research suggests the importance of student empowerment in educational contexts, little research exists on how various educational experiences contribute to empowerment of students and what that empowerment looks like. Study abroad is one type of educational experience that warrants investigation. Because empowerment is a critically important outcome of education, research that elucidates the empowering effects of educational experiences, like study abroad, is important (Bryson 2016). This paper uses photo-cued interviewing (PCI; Johnson 2017; 2018) to examine student empowerment resulting from study abroad programs, and responds to the following research question: *How are students empowered through their experiences in study abroad programs?* Secondary questions include: 1) *What does student empowerment look like?* 2) *How does student empowerment occur?* and 3) *In what ways can photo-cued interviewing be useful for understanding student empowerment?* This research has implications for scholarship and practice relating to student learning, empowerment education, outcomes research, and study abroad program design.

Conceptual Framework

Empowerment Theory

Empowerment is a psychological concept and a sociological phenomenon. The way it is defined and enacted is highly context-dependent, relating closely to cultures, circumstances, and individuals (Adams 2008). Empowerment can be viewed as a learning process and as a learning outcome of that process—people can learn to become empowered and people can enact their empowerment. As a process, empowerment involves “the mechanism by which people... gain mastery over their lives” (Rappaport 1984). As an outcome, empowered people have “the capacity...to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals” (Adams 2008, 6).

Empowerment, whether as a learning process or learning outcome, is understood through the application of empowerment frameworks. Empowerment frameworks generally focus on identifying strengths instead of weaknesses, or competencies as opposed to deficits (Zimmerman 2000). Such positive perspectives are enhanced when individuals or groups “discover or create and give voice to” narratives that positively portray their experiences (Perkins and Zimmerman 1995, 796). This paper views empowerment as both process and outcome; it seeks to address how study abroad empowers students and what their empowerment looks like.

Student Empowerment and Study Abroad

The current body of student empowerment literature focuses heavily on empowerment as a liberating practice; empowering students means to address inequities in power, self-efficacy, capacity, or voice (e.g., Horn 2015; Perez 2015; Seale et al. 2015; Simmons, Graham, and Thomas 2014). Thus, educators play a key role in the empowerment of students. Educators in empowering settings seek to engage students. They promote a sense of community; they collaboratively define goals and make decisions together; and they create quality educational activities centered on exploration, relationship-building, and self-determination (Cargo et al. 2003;

Freire 1970; Jennings et al. 2006; Maton 2008). The relationship between student engagement and student empowerment is reciprocal. In higher education in particular, students who are engaged in class and on campus are often empowered to achieve more positive outcomes (Astin 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Likewise, students who are empowered—whether by various forms of capital (Bourdieu 1977) or other “inputs” (Astin 1993)—are often more able to be engaged. This paper assumes the former; the latter is acknowledged and discussed in the limitations section.

Study abroad (an umbrella term used in this paper to refer to many types of international educational travel programs) is a High Impact Practice (Kuh et al. 2010), or an educational experience that makes a “significant difference to student persistence, learning outcomes, and student success” (Lee and Green 2016, 61). Thus, students engaging in study abroad are likely to become empowered in some way. Given the connections between empowerment and learning and well-being, scholars, practitioners, and students would benefit from understanding empowerment in study abroad. However, little research has focused on empowerment as an outcome of study abroad programming. Some studies have examined the empowerment of study abroad host communities (e.g., Fisher and Grettenberger 2015; Scheyvens 1999). Although important, focusing on the empowerment of host communities and not the students enrolled in study abroad programs has left a critical gap in student empowerment literature.

Research on empowerment in study abroad, both the process of empowerment and empowerment as an outcome, can make a significant contribution to higher education and international education scholarship and practice. Empowered individuals take greater responsibility for their actions, value their passions, recognize their needs and goals, and have the capacity to exercise their power (Zimmerman 1995). These are worthwhile skills and behaviors for postsecondary students, as they are associated with greater economic prospects and a better quality of life (Farrugia and Sanger 2017; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Renn and Reason 2013). Thus, studies exploring whether and how study abroad can yield student empowerment can contribute to knowledge on practices and programs that support students’ success in, and beyond, formal education.

Methods

This paper is part of a larger study on social-emotional learning in study abroad and uses interpretive qualitative methods.

Sample

In this paper I highlight the experiences of high school and university students who participated in various short-term study abroad programs, including embedded faculty-led courses, adventure-tourism programs, service-learning, and traditional exchanges. My connection with this eclectic group of programs stems from my work as a research consultant in the study abroad field, where I have studied student learning on short-term programs since 2015. I chose to study short-term programs because they have the fastest growing participation rate (Open Doors 2017) and because they have been critiqued for facilitating limited learning (Charbonneau 2013; Marklein 2004).

Sixty-two students (43 high school, 19 university) participated in the larger study. The inclusion of both high school and university students allows for an understanding of how age may impact student learning, but it was also a practical decision; much of my consultant work is with organizations that serve high school students. The students in this study traveled to nine different countries throughout North America, South America, Western Europe, and Southeast Asia, for 7-35 days. They were 16-30 years old, with most students between the ages of 17 and 21, approximately the age of traditional-aged college students (18-24; Renn and Reason 2013). The students represented a mix of demographics, though the vast majority were American, and white, which I discuss in my limitations section. Students’ individual identities have been withheld; all names are pseudonyms.

Method

Participants shared their experiences during a photo-cued interview or focus group (Johnson 2017; 2018). Students who had traveled on the same program were invited to participate in a focus group as opposed to an interview. The use of focus groups was both an analytical and practical decision. Analytically, focus groups allow for participants who travel together to reflect together, elucidating more complex understandings of experiences and meaning making. Practically, focus groups allow me to collect data from more students in a shorter amount of time.

I developed the photo-cued interviewing (PCI) method specifically for studying learning in study abroad (see Johnson 2017 for more on method development). Similar to photo-elicitation (Collier and Collier 1986) and photo-interviewing (Hurworth 2004), PCI uses participants’ photos and discussions around those photos to understand how meaning is made from experiences. Rooted in phenomenology (Van Manen 1990) and ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Spradley 1980), PCI acknowledges the

subjectivity of experience, the importance of reflection, and the power of photography for stimulating memories. PCI is highly appropriate in the study abroad context; today's students are digital consumers (Levine and Dean 2012) and photo-taking is common when studying abroad. In addition to investigating student learning outcomes abroad (Johnson 2017), the PCI method has been used to investigate power dynamics in assessment practices (Johnson 2018), and is currently being used to explore identity development with marginalized student populations (research forthcoming).

Data Collection

Around one month after the conclusion of their program (which gave students the time to adequately reflect upon their experiences; Van Manen 1990), I asked each student to select three to five photos they took that “represented something meaningful or significant” about their time abroad—something fun, something insightful, something confusing, something intriguing, something moving, etc. This open-ended approach elicited images that represented moments that were meaningful and significant *for the students*, and not necessarily images that represented moments they thought I (an educator/researcher) would be looking for specifically.

I have collected 209 images at the time of this writing, a vast collection that reveals the subjective experiences of the 62 student-participants. The students' photos, which included images of their favorite meals, people they met, objects, events, etc., served as cues, or prompts, during individual interviews and focus groups, which I conducted either in-person or via Skype. The photos helped open dialogue surrounding students' experiences and allowed for discussion and interpretation that was visually grounded in the experience itself (Johnson 2017). Using a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendices A and B; Spradley 1979) I asked students to reflect upon their experiences, using their photos as prompts, to understand what they found meaningful, the situations through which these experiences arose, and what they learned. Interviews lasted 33-135 minutes (avg. 62). Focus groups lasted 54-151 minutes (avg. 93). Discrepancies in length depended upon student availability and the number of photos shared by each student (e.g., one versus five).

Data Analysis

Interviews and focus groups were transcribed and inductively coded using an open and emergent coding scheme, informed by empowerment literature. A conceptual framework of empowerment-related outcomes of study abroad emerged from my analysis. I

used the constant comparison method of grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2015) to construct categories of how students explained feelings of empowerment that arose from their international experience. When necessary and appropriate, I conducted member checks to ensure that my interpretations and conclusions were supported by the students' perspectives, and to identify and limit researcher bias (Maxwell 2013).

Ethical Considerations

Because this study involves human participants and includes photography from and of human subjects, several ethical considerations were taken into account. Student participants were all informed of the study purpose and what their involvement would entail. In the case of students younger than 18, parents were also sent information regarding the study. Informed consent was obtained before any data were collected. Students were asked to avoid sharing photos that showed other people, or their own faces if they wished to remain anonymous. While some students did share photos that included faces, I have blurred them to maintain participant and subject anonymity.

Findings

The experiences detailed below represent the cultivation of student empowerment—which was a term coded *in vivo*—due to experiences on study abroad programs. Three themes emerged, which were also coded *in vivo*: finding strength, letting go, and living in the moment. The stories below are representative of these themes, which were present throughout many interviews and focus groups.

Finding Strength

This theme includes descriptions of experiences that made students feel stronger and more confident in their abilities. For example, Angela, a 28-year-old graduate student from New York who traveled to Sweden on a 10-day university faculty-led embedded program, explained that, as a student who had never before travelled abroad, the experience of navigating a new country was very empowering. Referencing another student's photo of Sweden's southern archipelagoes (Figure 1) Angela started the following conversation with her peers during a focus group:

Angela: Did anyone else leave [Sweden] feeling like a badass? Knowing you can catch trains and busses? And buy your tickets in a different language?!

Kari: Definitely. That was half of my bucket list.

Angela: And if you're from a rural area like me—I've never ridden a public bus, been on a train, a subway, absolutely none of that. Over there—ferries? Hell yeah. Busses? You got it. Metro? Sign me up. It was *empowering*.

FIGURE 1



Later in the focus group, Angela reflected on her photo of herself standing on a mountain (Figure 2) and continued to describe the pride she took in her successful navigation of Sweden on her own, despite the obstacles she encountered along the way:

FIGURE 2



Messing up and figuring out how to get on the right bus or this or that, that's showing all of our parents, and even me at 28, like look at us, we're over here

doing this! If I can handle Stockholm and Gothenburg and fly myself over there, I can surely figure out life in the U.S. when I get home. Aren't you proud mom and dad?

Because of her experiences abroad, Angela feels more confident in her ability to “figure out life” at home.

Catelyn, an 18-year-old from Ohio, traveled to Thailand for a three-week intensive service-learning program that only allowed students to bring a backpack's worth of clothing and supplies. She traveled to three remote villages and completed service projects alongside local community members. In one village in the region of Mae Hong Son, where she helped lay concrete for a primary school, Catelyn slept on wooden planks under a mosquito net. As Catelyn reflected upon her photo of the community toilet (Figure 3, top) and shower (Figure 3, bottom), she explained that it represented the strength that participating in this program cultivated for her:

I picked this program because I was scared of it and I wanted to do something that scared me. I did not think I would be able to do it. This whole trip has been a lot about me proving myself wrong. I'm going to take back that I'm *stronger* than I think I am.

FIGURE 3



Her photo(s) of the toilet and shower represented all of the obstacles—hauling gravel, mixing concrete, shooing away lizards and spiders at night—that she was

afraid of, yet was empowered to overcome throughout her program. She now feels stronger than she felt before.

Letting Go

The theme of “letting go” refers to how students felt able to relieve stress and anxiety and forget about things that usually worry them. Samuel, a 17-year-old student from Florida, travelled on a 15-day service program focused on critical issues in international education development in Cambodia. Samuel shared a picture of the famous temples at Angkor Wat in Siem Reap (Figure 4). He explained that, other than visiting Angkor Wat, the students did not know what they would be doing each day. Samuel talked about how this encouraged him to “let go” more often:

At home, I live by my schedule. Every minute of my day is planned out. But [in Cambodia] I would ask [the program leaders] what we were doing next and they'd just say, “You'll see.” It was really anxiety-inducing, but eventually I learned to just *let go* and see what happens. Hopefully I can start doing that more at home. Not being controlled by my schedule.

FIGURE 4



Rachel, a 21-year-old student from Pennsylvania on the same Sweden program as Angela, explained that the experience of being on her own allowed her to let go of stress that often encumbered her at home. Reflecting on a photo of herself smiling (Figure 5), she said:

I have a lot of family stress sometimes. And I think being on another continent and studying, I felt like I could focus more on my studies and be myself. I just felt safer and more like I could do whatever. I think a lot of it had to do with not having to worry about [things back home].

FIGURE 5



Rachel described her program as a type of escape from her usual stressors; being able to let go of her stress on the program empowered her to be herself.

Living in the Moment

“Living in the moment” refers to students’ descriptions of their newfound ability and desire to take control of their lives and to live as they wish. Reflecting on a picture of a pastry she had purchased while exploring the city of Gothenburg with friends (Figure 6), Kate, a 30-year-old graduate student from Georgia who traveled on the same Sweden program as Angela and Rachel, explained that her main takeaway from the program was the “recenter[ing of her] outlook on life”:

It reinforced how I want to live my life and be in the moment and enjoy things. I was there to learn new things, to have fun, and to enjoy new things. And I think that's what I did, and I didn't hold back on that.

FIGURE 6



Throughout her “downtime” in Sweden, Kate felt empowered by her ability to take control of her life, even in small ways like buying this pastry. She added that this ability to “be in the moment” and indulge herself when she can is something she plans carry with her in every aspect of her professional and personal life.

Discussion

Students’ photos provided visual documentation of empowering experiences and served as a springboard for conversations that elucidated what student empowerment looks like in study abroad. These students’ reflections upon their photos clearly demonstrate notions of empowerment resulting from their experiences. Students described finding strength within themselves, being able to let go of stress and anxiety, and cultivating the ability and desire to take control of their lives and live in the moment. These findings suggest that study abroad programming can be an empowering enterprise. In alignment with Robert Adams’ (2008) definition of empowerment as an outcome, these students demonstrated the ability to free themselves of forms of oppression (Samuel letting go of his rigid schedule), take control of their circumstances (Kate living life her way), and achieve

their goals (Angela navigating her way through a new country).

In addition to sharing what empowerment looked like for them, the students also shared important insights into the process through which empowerment can occur (Rappaport 1984). These particular students were empowered by the obstacles they faced and overcame (Angela and travel, Catelyn and the toilet/shower), and by embracing the freedom and flexibility of their programs (Samuel abandoning his schedule, Rachel leaving her family stress behind). This is valuable information for study abroad scholars and practitioners, as well as curriculum developers more generally. By understanding what student empowerment looks like in certain contexts and how students can come to be empowered, then future curricula can be more purposefully designed to facilitate similar student learning outcomes. These findings suggest that giving students time to navigate and explore cities on their own and designing activities that push students outside of their comfort zones can create potentially empowering spaces. Future studies should continue examining the impacts of such curricular decisions. In addition, reflective, critical, and iterative approaches to program evaluation and curriculum design are important educational practices (Banta and Palomba 2015). Using student-centered methods such as PCI is one way of undergoing this reflective work.

Using students’ photos to understand learning should not be limited to use by researchers; students should be actively encouraged to reflect upon their photos for their own learning as well. As learning requires reflection (Van Manen 1990)—a premise that provides the foundations for PCI—it is important to provide students spaces to reflect upon their experiences and realize their learning. Program designers and facilitators can work to include such reflective spaces in study abroad programs and post-program debriefing sessions, guiding students through the process of using their photos to come to deeper understandings about their own experiences.

It is also important to consider complicating factors to this analysis. For example, students came from different backgrounds. Catelyn, who discussed empowerment through her photo of the toilet/shower in Thailand, had traveled extensively, while Angela, who felt empowered by successfully navigating Sweden’s public transportation, had never been abroad before. This suggests that a student’s previous travel experience may impact how they are empowered when studying abroad. It is also difficult to disentangle the learning outcomes of educational experiences from

other external influences (Banta and Palomba 2015). For example, it is possible that the photos students chose and the ways in which students described or realized their empowerment had been influenced by the way others had perceived their experiences (for example, what family and friends had to say about various activities). However, the fact that students were able to point to specific programmatic experiences as spaces where empowerment was facilitated provides important insights into the impact of program activities.

Finally, it is important to note that not all empowerment is positive. For example, Elizabeth, who had traveled to Myanmar, shared that she felt empowered to “change the lives of poor people” (Figure 7). While Elizabeth’s newfound desire and ability to impact the lives of others is promising, her framing demonstrates a deficit model of thinking that can perpetuate oppressive power dynamics. Thinking about *how* we empower students and *what* we empower them to *believe*, *value*, and *do* must be part of the curriculum design and evaluation process.

FIGURE 7



Limitations

There are a few limitations to this research. First, these findings are context-bound as findings in qualitative research are not meant to be generalized (Denzin and Lincoln 2018; Guba and Lincoln 2005). However, the differences in the students and programs represented in this research highlight that these findings may be transferrable (Tracy 2010) to other study abroad programs and student participants. Future research should continue to investigate the extent to which study abroad can contribute to the empowerment of students, including investigations of student learning processes as well as outcomes.

Second, research suggests that learning outcomes often do not last long-term (Banta and Palomba 2015). This limitation is compounded when we consider that most outcomes research, particularly in study abroad, occurs shortly after the conclusion of programs.

Additionally, as experiences are pre-reflective (Van Manen 1990), efforts to assess learning so close to the conclusion of programs may not give students adequate time to reflect upon their experiences and realize their learning. Future research should include diachronic (Tobin 2014) approaches, examining student learning over space and time. Using PCI and bringing students back to their experiences via photos could prove a promising approach to understanding the lasting impacts of such experiences, or how meaning-making and learning changes over time.

Finally, it is important to note the homogeneity of my sample. National aggregate data (e.g., Luo and Jamieson-Drake 2015) shows that most students who participate in study abroad programming are white, affluent, and female. My sample largely mirrors this representation. So, study abroad can, in itself, also be seen as a problematic enterprise. If we think of empowerment as a way to mitigate inequities (e.g., Horn 2015; Perez 2015; Seale et al. 2015; Simmons et al. 2014), or to empower people to take control of their own lives (Adams 2008), then it is important to acknowledge that the students who might most benefit from these experiences are the least likely to participate. Likewise, some students who traditionally participate in study abroad are, in many ways, already empowered. Being able to engage in certain educational activities, like study abroad, relies upon certain “inputs” (Astin 1993), or kinds of capital (Bourdieu 1977) that make engagement possible. Thus, students without those inputs—resources like social networks, money, time, etc.—may be excluded from engaging in such activities. Future research should take considerable measures to include diverse students’ voices and depict their experiences abroad, and future practice should seek ways to better engage these populations.

Conclusion

This paper presents evidence from photo-cued interviews and focus groups (Johnson 2017) with students who participated in study abroad programs and highlights how students are empowered by their experiences on these programs. It also identifies PCI as a useful method for understanding empowerment—as a process and as an outcome—in study abroad. This research contributes to scholarship and practice relating to student empowerment, program/curriculum design in study abroad and related educational contexts and learning outcomes assessment. By recognizing study abroad as a potentially empowering enterprise, and by understanding what student empowerment looks like in

these contexts and how that empowerment occurs, scholars and practitioners can work to design educational experiences to more purposefully promote student empowerment in the future. At a time when notions of student empowerment are at the forefront of higher education rhetoric, this research provides a small path forward.

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APPENDIX A
Sample Interview Protocol

[Show photo]

Q1: Tell me about this picture.

Possible follow-ups:

- What is it of?
- When/where/why was it taken?

Q2: Why did you choose this photo to share?

Possible follow-ups:

- How does it represent what you learned?
- How does it represent what you found meaningful or significant?
- What about this particular experience impacted you, and in what way?

(Repeat for each photo)

Q3: Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in [location of study abroad program]?

APPENDIX B
Sample Focus Group Protocol

[Show photo]

Q1: Tell me about this picture.

Possible follow-ups:

- Why did you choose this particular moment to share with me?
- What makes this photo significant for you?
- Why is this photo so meaningful?

Q2: In what ways has this experience impacted you?

Q3: [To other participants] What are your thoughts on what [student] just shared?

Possible follow-ups:

- In what ways do you agree? Disagree?
- In what ways did your experience differ?

(Repeat for each participant)

Q4: Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in [location of study abroad program]?