Student Perspectives on Intentional Design of Study Abroad Programs

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Introduction

Across the globe, universities consider study abroad programs to be fertile grounds for higher education students to develop "intercultural skills, cosmopolitan outlooks and potential labour market advantage" (Dall' Alba & Sidhu, 2015, p. 721). Programs of one or two semesters in duration provide students with the opportunity to live and study in another country and be challenged by the experience of self-management away from usual support networks. Indeed, international study has long been characterized by its transformative, life-changing possibilities (Landon, et al., 2017). There are multiple studies on study abroad outcomes and impacts that demonstrate the benefits of studying internationally, including academic success, intercultural competence and global citizenship, personal and social development, career direction (Potts, 2016), and employability (Oguro & Mueller, 2020; Potts, 2018). As a body of research, these studies frame perceptions of study abroad as a high-impact educational practice (Heinrich & Green, 2020).

Despite the plethora of studies on outcomes and impacts, the study abroad experience has been critiqued for its lack of clear, concrete, and measurable student learning outcomes (Vande Berg et al., 2012) and the difficulties students often face when trying to articulate what they have learned (Forsey et al., 2012; Thomas & Kerstetter, 2020; Wong 2015). A growing body of research has seen a new focus on exploring the dominant discourses of study abroad and the troublesome trends these discourses have created (Pipitone, 2018), including a singular focus on the global (Jakubiak & Mellom, 2015), veneration of immersion and adventure (Doerr, 2012), and the emphasis of personal growth over cultural interaction (Barbour, 2012). Privileging tourism over education (Michelson & Valencia, 2016) and a lack of acknowledgment of the impact and value of study abroad to host communities may make the experience seem extractive (Pipitone, 2018). While these discourses merit further exploration, much of the prevailing language surrounding the study abroad experience perpetuates an individualistic approach. As an example, the Australian *Good universities guide* (2021, para. 19) lists on its study abroad webpage the value of the experience to participants, including experiencing life in another country, language skills, educational benefits, and it "looks great on your resume." This framing of the study abroad experience may influence how participants make meaning from their experiences, particularly where there is a lack of curricular structure to guide the learning process. This lack of structure is explored in this study, through investigating student perspectives on the concept of intentional design of study abroad programs, from their experiences of a program that was not designed beyond the students' selected credit-bearing subjects

Informal and incidental learning from study abroad experiences

In the Australian context, study abroad programs are managed as a "transactional exchange of academic credit" (Potts, 2015, para. 6). Students usually study for one or two semesters at a host institution involved in an exchange partnership with their home university. Study abroad has a structured curricular component as students can count the subjects studied in the host university towards their program in Australia. Universities, however, "do not appear to help students grasp the broader implications of their activities overseas" (Forsey et

al., 2012, p. 136). As noted by Thomas and Kerstetter (2020, p. 95), scepticism over the value of education abroad (EA) has led scholars and practitioners to make considerable gains towards demonstrating the integrity of the experience, however, study abroad is "still plagued by criticism" of a shallow educational experience, evidenced by "students' indiscriminate description of their EA experience as 'awesome.'" This may be because universities are unable to clearly articulate intended outcomes beyond the rhetoric of life-changing experiences and global citizenship. Moreover, with little or no structure to the program beyond the formal curricular component, students are left largely to their own devices when it comes to translating their experiences into learning.

In an earlier study by Forsey et al. (2012, p. 129), the authors asserted that the "lofty" rhetoric that surrounds the study abroad experience may not align with reality. A 2017 study by the Forum on Education Abroad (2018) found that 40% of educators were still concerned with how to support study abroad students to maximise their experience. Thomas and Kerstetter (2020, p. 95) contend that study abroad is still "highly misunderstood" and a "more nuanced understanding of how students perceive or make sense of their experience is necessary to reduce the knowledge gap regarding experiences that have educational value." Students often undertake their study abroad experience with personal learning intent (Reid, 2020), but learning is usually unstructured and self-directed and can occur through happenstance or as the by-product of another activity. This makes study abroad an informal and incidental learning opportunity (Watkins et al., 2018). Everyday experiences provide the basis for informal and incident learning, thus creating experiential learning (EL) opportunities where experience is placed at the heart of learning (Lin & Lee, 2014). Experiential learning is generally accepted as a step-wise process that is characterized by mental processes within the learner that create individual cognitive change (Seaman et al., 2017; Tomkins & Ulus, 2016). Researchers have worked to address canonical conceptions of EL (e.g. Kolb, 1984) that fail to acknowledge the socio-cultural dimension of learning, to account for the role of context, place, and time (Fenwick, 2000; Morris, 2020; Pipitone, 2018). Indeed, Marsick and Watkins' well-known model of informal and incidental learning has been reconceptualized to include the effect of social context on learning (Watkins et al., 2018). Despite the critiques, in formal curricular contexts, EL approaches allow educators to design rich learning experiences to support the learning process (Heinrich & Green, 2020). In the study abroad context, emerging discourses around informal and experiential learning theories stimulate questions around how to address some of the problematic discourses of the international study experience and claims of its outcomes and impacts.

Given the informal nature of much of the study abroad experience, the issue of intentional design warrants exploration. Heinrich and Green's (2020, p. 216) work suggests good learning design is needed to "leverage an essential relationship between experience and reflection." Around the globe, study abroad programs differ in terms of intentional design, ranging from credit transfer to programs that utilize some of the principles of EL (such as having students create learning contracts) to those that fully embrace EL theory in the program design (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002). One of the criticisms of international study is the "lack of intentionality among programmers" (Strange & Gibson, 2017, p. 86). This criticism matters, because the design of the international study program has been shown to have a crucial impact on its outcome (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002; Strange & Gibson, 2017). If learning outside the formal curriculum is informal and incidental, how students learn what they 'should be' learning seems a valid question to ask.

It also pays to investigate ways to tackle potential issues in the context of the informal nature of study abroad given emerging discussions of the problematic nature of the dominant discourses surrounding the experience (Pipitone, 2018). There seems to be some difficulty in balancing intended outcomes (and less problematic ways to frame the experience) with the informal nature of study abroad and its lack of intentional design. Exploring the practice of intentional design of EL programs like study abroad presents an opportunity to address these issues. This study investigates participant perspectives on the concept of intentional design of study abroad programs and what these perspectives suggest for structuring experiences outside of the formal curricular component.

Study Design

This article reports on findings from a larger study on the significance of study abroad to participants. The aim of this part of the study was to explore student perceptions of the intentional design of study abroad, given there is no formal structure to the experience outside of the academic component. The study reflects a commitment to continuing conversations about the nature of the study abroad experience and experiential learning pedagogies.

A qualitative case study was conducted with returned participants in an outward-bound program offered by an Australian metropolitan university. The study abroad program is centrally administered and designed to provide students with one or two semesters of study in an overseas host university that is part of a formal exchange partnership with the home university. Learning is largely left to students, although they can attend a voluntary workshop to unpack their experiences and they must submit a reflection on their experience to count it as part of the university's employability award.

Participants

The study adopted a single case with embedded units design (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The units of analysis were 14 students who participated in the university's study abroad program during 2016 and 2017. A purposeful sampling approach (Merriam, 2009) was used to recruit participants, through an invitation by email to be interviewed. All students who responded to the recruitment email (14 of 450 total invitees) were interviewed. The sample is representative of the typical study abroad cohort. Two participants studied abroad for two semesters, five were enrolled in the Bachelor of International Studies and, overall, the Social Science disciplines are strongly represented. The 14 students studied abroad across the globe in Canada (2), the USA (2), England (2), Europe (5), Asia (2), and South America (1). The study was approved by the relevant institutional human ethics committee.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study sought to explore and understand the informal learning nature of the study abroad experience from the perspective of those who have lived it using a constructivist approach (Harrison et al., 2017). Semi-structured interviews (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017) and a supporting mind map were used to shape the students' meaning-making work to understand and articulate the significance of their study abroad experiences (Reid et al., 2020). These findings are not reported in this paper. Students were also invited to consider the issue of intentional design of study abroad programs. They were asked whether they thought study abroad should have a curriculum, i.e. be designed with a set of learning objectives that would be assessed. Students were also asked for their perspectives on what the learning objectives might be if they were set for a study abroad program. These questions related to the informal and incidental learning part of the experience. Data were analysed using the thematic analysis approach advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006) which sought to describe the patterns in the data that represented the students' perspectives on intentional design that were coded and then thematized. The author acknowledges that the study has a small sample size; however Charmaz (2014) contends that a small interview sample is acceptable if theoretical saturation and strong themes emerge from the analysis.

Findings

Four themes emerged from the data analysis process: (i) study abroad is a personal learning journey, (ii) all experiences are valid, (iii) learning objectives would not add value to the experience, and (iv) formal assessment of learning is artificial. These themes highlight the participants' perspectives on the individualized nature of the study abroad experience. This paper reports on these four themes.

Study Abroad is a Personal Learning Journey

The students were united in their belief that study abroad is a personal learning journey, where participants have their own motivations for undertaking the experience. As a result, their goals are deeply personal and could not be captured in pre-determined learning objectives. One student said that "people who do go have their own learning objectives. I think no matter who you are and what reason you're going on exchange for, you have some goals set, whatever they

may be… Definitely everyone sets goals for the exchange, even if they don't realize it." This student felt that "individual goals is the way to go" as "everyone wants something different out of their exchange." Another student emphasized the individual nature of learning goals, saying they would "have to be really personalized," noting the difficulty of this approach "considering how many people go on exchange and because everyone has different things that they want to get out of an exchange." This student also felt that personal learning goals may change, commenting that "even when you're on exchange, those things that you want to get out [of the experience] may change." Other students made similar comments about the diversity of individuals and the personal nature of the study abroad experience. As one student explained, "not everyone's the same. It's putting us together as one group. [They're told], 'Students on exchange must learn something.' Some people may not want to, some people may have different experiences and they don't learn something from it while someone does."

Along with the common feeling that study abroad is personal experience, the students also felt that educational outcomes are shaped by the individual's efforts to take something meaningful from the experience. One student felt that "the meaning that you get out of it is kind of what you put into it." This speaks to the idea of whether learning should be in the hands of the individual. One student referenced the notion of being guided to capitalize on the learning potential of study abroad:

> The university focuses on the academic side, and most people, they'll find their way to the social, to the party side, one way or another. Very few people just totally withdraw from the experience. Then, those who totally withdraw, a lot of it is because it's their own choices.

Similarly, one student felt:

> If people don't get anything out of their exchange, if they go and party the entire time or watch Netflix the entire time, that's their choice. In the end, when it comes down to getting a job, when the employer says, "How was your exchange?" and they'll respond, "I just sat in my room all the time"… they'll regret it anyway.

Another student expressed that anyone willing to study in another country away from the familiar and usual support networks and putting yourself "into this completely out of your comfort zone experience" is "definitely motivated enough to get the best out of their exchange that they can."

All Experiences are Valid

Further emphasis on the students' perspectives that study abroad is an individual experience was found in the theme of the validity of all experiences. One student said that, "Just because you don't do your experience like everyone else, doesn't mean that it's not a valid experience and it doesn't mean that you haven't gotten anything out of it. It's subjective." They did feel, however, that study abroad "shouldn't just be about partying," which held no personal value for that student while also acknowledging "that's not for me to say it wasn't of value to someone else. Maybe for those people who do… party… maybe that's because they need something like that to develop and realize either if that's what's important to them." This student also expressed that they would not be "comfortable assessing someone's situation as not being meaningful because I don't understand how it was meaningful to them. That's my problem with the whole expecting people to get something in particular out of an experience." The idea of the validity of all experiences framed students' arguments against intentionally designing study abroad programs.

Related to the findings on the validity of all experience is the notion of the subjective nature of experiences. One student, who articulated that learning to be independent was an important part of their study abroad experience said, "Everyone's experience is different and perhaps other people don't value independence as much as I do. Perhaps they value something else. Perhaps they value [language] fluency more than I did." In addition to valuing different things, one student recognized that even if "somebody could be in my exact life in [host city] and not get out of it the same things that I got out of it." They also said, "I think it's up to the personal experience because stuff I find meaningful, my other friends might not have." Another student picked up on the idea that "people can respond differently to situations." These responses from two students to

the question of designing learning objectives sum up the shared perspective of the interviewed students: (i) "it's a really hard question because exchange is very individual," and (ii) "everyone's journey will be very different." These findings again demonstrate students' framing of the study abroad experience as individualized and the personal meanings that students place on the experience, even where they may have experienced similar situations or studied in the same host city or institution.

Learning Objectives Would Not Add Value

The participants made specific comments about the use of learning objectives to shape the study abroad experience, revealing that they did not see their value. Two students queried what the learning objectives would be. One student, in referencing the development of intercultural competence, questioned "what constitutes" that outcome. Another student felt that learning objectives would be "difficult to measure" and "it's not something that is quantifiable." A student who studied abroad in Canada asked: "What would the things be that I'd have to achieve? As in, what would other people expect you to be? I think it would be…not what I've written down [on their mind map of significant experiences]." One student who studied abroad in the United States asked, "how could you measure whether or not I am aware of [the host country's] culture?" This student found backpacking and couch-surfing in the US to be personally meaningful. When referring to having set learning objectives, the student said, "Could you imagine the university structuring a program where it involves the guy sticking his thumb out on the road and getting a ride for free?" Another student felt that learning objectives were personal and having set ones would not work, largely because "it just sounds so unenforceable." Similarly, another student said that study abroad is "very individual and it depends on the person because if you have a student that just wants to go overseas to go partying, that's what they're going to do and there's nothing you can really do to stop them."

The students shared the perspective that program learning objectives might be artificial and would create a sense that they "would just tick the box." One student admitted to being "really sceptical of any kind of structure telling people we have to do something." Similarly, another reasoned that learning objectives would create an "artificial framework":

> If you put in a series of objectives to be met, all that you would have at the end would be students filling out a checklist without really putting any thought into it. It might tick a box or it might meet some bureaucratic standard.

Another used the phrase, "social engineering" when discussing learning objectives. They referenced tolerance as a potential learning outcome, saying that if becoming more tolerant is a learning goal, "You're making a value judgement and assuming that tolerance is a good thing. Not all people feel that way." They also felt "forcing people into a particular predicament" by setting learning objectives "restricts the person from actually forming their own identity."

There was also a sense that learning objectives would not improve the quality of the experience as the value of study abroad lies in its unpredictability and happenstance learning. As one student commented:

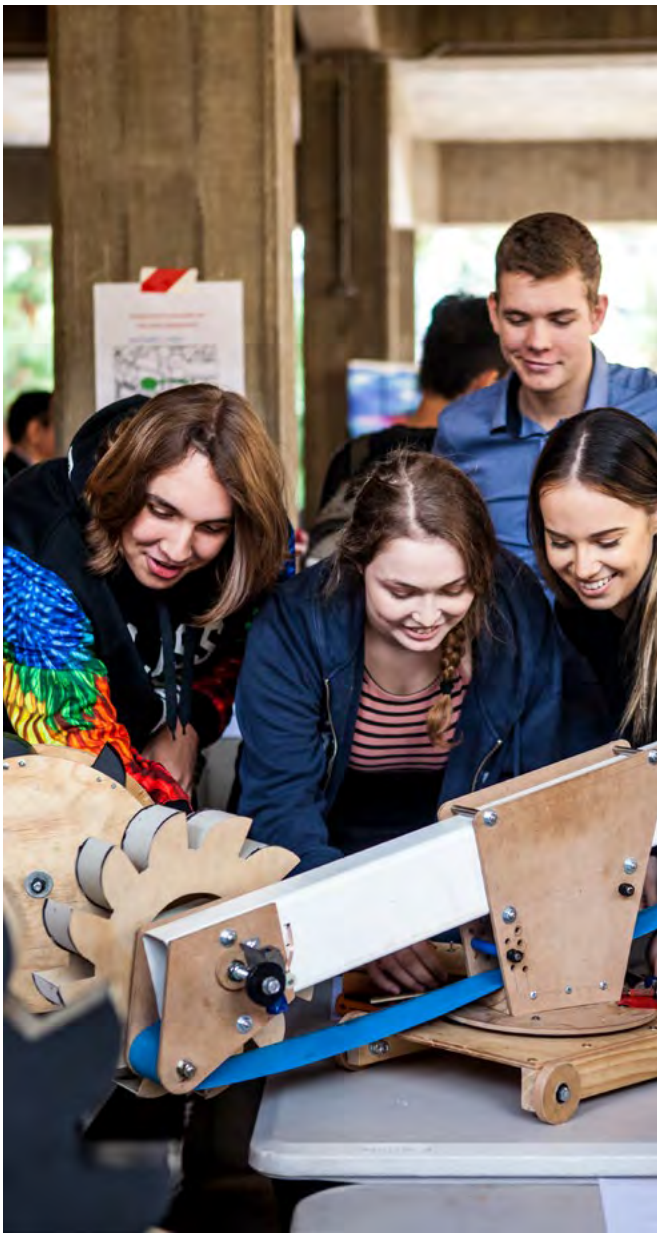
> I don't like the idea of learning because you have to learn something. I think I wouldn't find it as enjoyable or want to do it as much if I knew that I had to learn, like I'm going out and making friends because it's on my learning objectives.

Similarly, another student commented, "I think it would just make the experience a lot more stressful if you have to think about that and... whether you're being marked on that, as well as all the other things that you have to do." One student explained that they "don't like having too much structure because I think if the university was to structure my program, none of this [their significant experiences] would have ever happened because... I just did things on the fly." Another student said:

> All these things which happened, they happened because I did them. I think that if we send people off and tell them that this is what you have to know and you have to realize about yourself by the time you get back, that's just going to colour people in a certain way.

One student even suggested that "it's not a realm that the university should be responsible for or that they really could be," and another student felt that "it's the self-learning process will outweigh anything that the university tries to do."

Only two students spoke positively about intentional design through learning objectives and that was in a non-compulsory way. One student said that learning objectives as "opt-in might be valuable" but then commented that too much structure might mean students would "start… to pull away from the program or find ways to get away from that," One student felt that learning outcomes could be articulated "in recommendatory fashion," or "if you do this, this, and this, this is how you can benefit."



Formal Assessment of Learning is Artificial

Some of the students commented on formal assessment of their study abroad experiences, revealing that they found this practice to be artificial and inauthentic. These students in our sample were part of the Bachelor of International Studies, where one semester of study abroad is a compulsory component of the program. They commented on the return home essay that is part of the assessment for the course attached to the study abroad experience. One student felt they had "made stuff up because my life wasn't matching what they [course coordinator] wanted to hear," therefore having assessable learning objectives would be "just like something that you have to do… I don't feel like most people would be taking it too seriously." Another of the Bachelor of International Studies students had a similar view of the set assessment. They felt that "instead of thinking about the experience itself, and in depth, and how it affected me," they were focusing on the structure of the assignment and "how I have to make it interesting." They felt there is more value in thinking, "this is my experience. This is how it changed me. This is how it made me feel. This is how I feel now."

Study Limitations

The study is limited to one study abroad program in a single university within the scope of the author's research on the personal impact of the participants' experiences. The participants volunteered to be part of the study and were passionate about the value of the experience and how much it meant to them, even when they discussed the challenging aspects of living and studying abroad (Reid, 2020). They were clear on the value of the personal learning journey the experience created and these views were evident in their perspectives on the lack of support for international design. The program experience that framed the participants' responses to the research questions has no intentional design beyond the credit-bearing formal curriculum, therefore this study's findings would have limitations in generalizability to programs with intentional design.

The author acknowledges that the study was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Travel

restrictions during the pandemic meant that education abroad experiences were suspended, as educators were "caught off guard" and some were left with questions as to how to proceed in the field (Dvorak & D'Agostino, 2022, p. 198). Chan (2020) also notes that higher education research during the pandemic was focused on online learning and the impact of the pandemic on student mobility and international education. As we emerge from the pandemic and travel resumes, Dietrich (2020, p. 8) notes that the field still has much to do to investigate how to make study abroad more "inclusive, equitable, decolonized, indigenized, resilient, flexible—in short—relevant" and how these goals will be evidenced. In a post-pandemic world, the value of education abroad to participants and how EL practices can be used to uncover this value are still pressing issues (Thomas & Kerstetter, 2020).

Discussion

The author has a background in curriculum and learning design and was interested in exploring the concept of intentional design of the study abroad experience at their institution, where students are largely left to their own devices to make meaning of the informal aspect of the experience. The author was surprised to learn, however, that the students seemed to value the personal learning gained from study abroad without intentional design to guide the learning process, giving ongoing critiques of the value of intentional design and continued calls to support students in better articulating their learning gains (Thomas & Kerstetter, 2020; Wong, 2015). Their perspectives on intentional design and the personal nature of the study abroad experience aligned with the other findings in the study (Reid, 2020) that showed students' meaning making from the experience focused on strengthening their independence, resilience, and self-awareness. These skills came from living away from their usual support structures and testing their capabilities in an unfamiliar environment while learning to appreciate different perspectives. This meaning-making work arose out of reflections on the unplanned nature of the study abroad experience outside of the students' formal studies (Reid, 2020).

All the students interviewed in this study felt that structuring the informal and incidental element of their study abroad programs with pre-determined, universal learning objectives would not be desirable. The students were united in their perspectives on study abroad as a deeply personal experience and that all experiences are valid, irrespective of the educational outcomes that the multiple stakeholders expect from the opportunity. They felt that intentional design would create an artificial framework of "ticking a box" that would not enhance their experience. They also felt that learning objectives would be difficult to measure, would be unenforceable, and would work against individual motivations and learning intent. The students spoke about meaningful learning as being highly individual and questioned the value judgments that would be placed on each student's experience if there were set learning objectives.

Experiential learning practices can play a vital role in finding a balance between creating an appealing experience and supporting meaningful learning. While the study abroad field continues its work on assessing outcomes to evidence student gains beyond personal satisfaction with the experience (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2018), program designers and administrators—particularly of short-term programs—are often concerned with making the experience fun for students. This concern with the "fun" nature of studying and living in another country may lead to the perception of study abroad as a "non-academic activity" (Doerr, 2022, p. 116), where informal learning may lead to shallow learning gains. One of the challenges is operationalizing, measuring and assessing informal learning experiences, where learning objectives are not clear and there is no standard against which to evaluate learning (Watkins et al., 2018). Repositioning the study abroad experience as a "field trip" that includes academic readings prior to and following the experience supports students to undertake a theoretical analysis of their experience (Doerr, 2022, p. 125). This EL strategy may create a balance of affording participants the chance for personal learning that is deepened by an understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of participants' personal learning journeys. This strategy may ensure the experience is still attractive to students yet sufficiently structured to intentionally support transformational learning.

There are valid concerns expressed by researchers such as Pipitone (2018) around problematic trends in study abroad discourses, where there is work to

be done to create stronger connections with place. Addressing these trends may require some intentional design to reframe the study abroad experience to account for place as pedagogy and support students to engage more meaningfully with their host environments (Pipitone, 2018). Experiential learning practices can inform the design of study abroad experiences, particularly longer programs, to encourage meaning-making from informal and incidental learning opportunities (Reid, 2020; Thomas & Kerstetter, 2020) and still address the call for the experience to be more rigorous in its learning gains. Educators play a vital role in facilitating learning, particularly around encouraging students to experiment and to stay open to trying new ways to solve problems (Isaak et al., 2018). As found by Thomas and Kerstetter (2020, p. 113), "awe" is a powerful emotion experienced during study abroad, but often this can lead to an "inability to articulate the meaning or significance of an experience." Utilising meaning-making frameworks (Reid, 2020; Thomas & Kerstetter, 2020) may allow the balance between intentional design and student autonomy to be achieved. This study shows that students perceive study abroad as a personal learning journey that they wish to be free to engage with according to their learning needs. Placing educators in the study abroad experience to support the meaning-making process does not have to mean student autonomy is lost, particularly as learner choice is something that is championed in experiential learning practices (Isaak et al., 2018). As the study abroad experience finds its way back in a post-pandemic world, it is vital that work continues to better understand how to balance a personally fulfilling experience with intentional design to encourage a range of transformational learning outcomes. ■

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