Developing Cultural Intelligence Through Short-Term International Travel Experiential Learning

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ABSTRACT

The growing globalization of business, education, and other sectors has illuminated the need for institutions of higher education to prepare students to adapt, interact and perform effectively in culturally diverse work environments (Arnett, 2002; Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Williams et al., 2017). This qualitative, phenomenological, case study explored undergraduate students' perceived cultural intelligence (CQ) outcomes based on their participation in full semester courses, at a specific university, that embedded short-term (7-15 days) international travel experiential learning (SIT). This study delved into participants' perceptions of the role varied pedagogical elements of SIT played in their CQ development. Nine (9) phenomenological themes and multiple subthemes emerged across participants' recall of their lived SIT experiences using their own words, feelings, examples, and oral stories about their perceived CQ outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural intelligence (CQ) refers to "a person's capability for successful adaptation to new cultural settings, that is, for unfamiliar settings attributable to cultural context" (Earley & Ang, 2003, p. 9). CQ includes socio-emotional factors, such as attitudes, knowledge, skills, flexibility, adaptive behaviors, and communication required to successfully operate, interact, and/or perform within and across intercultural or pluralistic settings (Earley & Ang, 2003; Earley & Mosakowski, 2004; Mikhaylov, 2014; Putranto, Gustomo, & Ghazali, 2015). Past scholars have attempted to identify elements of CQ in an effort to better understand 'if and how' CQ may be developed through education, professional training, and other learning experiences (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Author, 2017; Deardorff, 2006; Earley & Mosakowski, 2004; MacNab et al., 2012; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013). The purpose of this study was to gain a holistic and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of CQ within the context of higher education experiential pedagogy by utilizing qualitative research methodology.

This study explored students' perceived CQ outcomes based on their participation in two different undergraduate courses that embedded instructor-led, short-term international travel experiences (SIT) at a specific university. SIT is a pedagogical model rooted in experiential learning theory that has gained attention in higher education (Kolb and Kolb, 2017; Mapp, 2012). SIT is a full-semester, credit-bearing course that embeds short-term (7-15 days) travel to another country. While abroad, students engage in experiential learning through active experimentation in different cultural environments in which observation, reflection, feedback, and interactions with local residents, peers, and instructors are key components of the experience (Frye, 2003). The research questions guiding this study included: (1) What are students' perceived outcomes of CQ based on their participation in SIT as a pedagogical application of experiential learning theory? and (2) What are students' perceptions about the role that varied pedagogical elements of SIT played in their attainment of CQ?

METHODS

The researcher utilized a qualitative case study approach to gain deeper insight into emerging themes across a small set of students' shared SIT experiences at a single university (Creswell, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The setting of this case study was X University (XU), a small, liberal arts university located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. XU was chosen to provide a depth and breadth of information due to its diversity of SIT offerings, including a variety of international locations, course content, instructors, and participants' academic majors (Creswell, 2011). The participants included 10 full-time undergraduate students who were currently enrolled at XU and had completed two different SITs – the first SIT took place during their first year at XU; the second SIT took place during the spring semester of 2019 (Table 1). The researcher utilized purposeful, snowball, and convenience sampling techniques to invite students to participate in this study (Creswell, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; McMillin & Schumacher, 2010). Purposeful sampling ensured that the participants represented a variety of academic majors, international course destinations, course content, and instructors, in an effort to recruit participants who were likely to be knowledgeable about the phenomena of interest and able to provide specific examples of their lived, cross-cultural experiences (McMillan & Shumacher, 2010). The researcher's interest in including participants who completed their second SIT in spring 2019 was for the likelihood of their accurate recall of recent experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

TABLE 1
Participants & SIT Locations

Participant Identifier	Gender Identity	Academic Major (Minor)	Current Class Ranking	SIT #1 Location (Year 1)	SIT #2 Location (Spring, 2019)	Individual Interview	Focus Group
P1	F	Health Admin. (Spanish)	Junior	Europe	Australia	Yes	Yes
P2	F	Actuarial Science (Economics)	Senior	Europe	Europe	Yes	Yes
P3	F	Education Studies (Sociology)	Junior	Asia	Africa	Yes	Yes
P4	M	Criminal Justice	Senior	Europe	Europe	Yes	No
P5	M	Business Admin. (Spanish)	Senior	Europe	Europe	Yes	No
P6	F	Biology	Senior	Europe	South America	Yes	Yes
P7	F	Psychology	Senior	Europe	Africa	No	Yes
P8	F	Biology (Chemistry)	Senior	Europe	Europe	No	Yes
P9	F	Health Admin.	Junior	Europe	Africa	No	Yes
P10	F	Psychology	Senior	Asia	Europe	No	Yes

Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree.

Data collection methods included individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews, a focus group, and review of course syllabi. The researcher asked participants to orally share specific examples from their SIT experiences, with a focus on their adaptive behaviors, communication, empathy, and flexibility (CQ outcomes) during the short-term international travel components of the course. Participants were also asked to share their perceptions of the role that varied pedagogical elements used throughout the entire course played in the process. Each individual interview was approximately 60-70 minutes in length and the focus group was approximately 45 minutes in length. The interviews and focus group were audio-recorded with permission from the participants, and transcribed confidentially by a research assistant. The researcher reviewed syllabi from five (5) different SIT courses for triangulation of data and credibility of findings (Creswell, 2011; Stake, 2010).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Nine (9) phenomenological themes emerged from this qualitative case study that reinforced and expanded prior quantitative research on CQ (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Author, 2017; Deardorff, 2006; Earley & Mosakowski, 2004; MacNab et al., 2012; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013). Table 2 provides a summary of the phenomenological themes and subthemes that emerged from participants' sharing of their lived experiences across different SITs through their own perspectives, words, examples, feelings, and oral stories (Gibbs, 1997; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Stake, 2010).

Findings from this study indicated that active experimentation, observation, interactions, reflective feedback, camaraderie with peers, emotional support from instructors and peers, and varied experiential pedagogical elements were instrumental in students' reporting a deepening of their attitudes of respect and increased knowledge and skills through SIT. These, in turn, led to increased flexibility, empathy, and adaptive behaviors and communication, consistent with Deardorff's model of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). Participants felt the SIT model allowed for unique and authentic exploration, reflection, and active experimentation within culturally different spaces (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Findings indicated that students' perceived CQ outcomes of flexibility, adaptability, and empathy led to an organic cycle of CQ in which they increasingly felt more confident in adapting their behaviors and communication within unfamiliar cultural settings. A focus group participant commented:

> *"I obviously knew that we were going to a difference place and behave in certain ways, but it doesn't actually hit you until you're on the ground…in that environment and you see how other people are acting, and you realize you have to adapt to someone else's home, and you have to respect them." (FG)*

TABLE 2
Phenomenological Themes and Subthemes

Phenomenological Themes	Subthemes that emerged across students' perceptions and sharing of SIT experiences
Attitudes of Respect & Curiosity	Desired to be perceived as respectful by local inhabitants Encouraged by peers and sense of camaraderie to try new things Motivated by curiosity and need for discovery
Cultural Self-Awareness and Knowledge	Increased awareness of American cultural norms Desired to avoid negative stereotypes and be seen positively Increased knowledge of inhabitants' cultural norms
Physical Presence in Learning Space of SIT	Provided multiple opportunities for skill development by listening to, observing, and reflecting on inhabitants' behaviors Observed and analyzed inhabitants' body language and non-verbal cues for immediate feedback in adjusting their behavior
Internal CQ Outcomes: Flexibility and Empathy	Increased flexibility in dealing with slower pace of local culture and unanticipated delays Empowered with confidence to handle unpredictable situations Enhanced empathy from engagement with local inhabitants (especially in impoverished environments)
External CQ Outcomes: Adaptive Behaviors and Communication	Actualized adaptive behaviors and communication during SIT Increased confidence in ability to adapt through successful interactions with inhabitants and unfamiliar cultural settings Developed new strategies for adaptive behaviors following unsuccessful interactions
Peer Camaraderie	Supported and encouraged by peers to go beyond comfort zones Emphasized unstructured free time as critical for forming connections and spontaneous interactions with inhabitants Emphasized that unstructured time was critical for spontaneous reflections, debriefing, and trial-and-error behaviors Provided continued support and motivation through new bonds, informal debriefings, and reflective feedback
Role of the Instructor	Alleviated students' anxieties and fears by communicating expectations, approachability, and fostering positive relationship Felt safer by instructor's prior experiences with location and topic
Varied Pedagogical Elements	Developed contextual framework through pre-travel pedagogy Facilitated meaningful connections between content and culture Included cultural activities in U.S. and abroad Instrumental in making multiple layers of connections
Short-term (7-15 days) International Travel Period	Provided significant opportunities for students to develop CQ through observations, reflections, and active experimentation during the short-term 7-15 days of being immersed in a culturally different international environment

Findings demonstrated that observations, reflective feedback, and interactions between the students and members of a culturally different community, inherent in SIT, created a synergy that resulted in students' perceived attainment of CQ outcomes. Participants indicated that being physically present in the 'learning space' of a culturally different environment enabled them to receive immediate feedback from local inhabitants and adapt their behaviors and communication accordingly (Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Lewin, 1951). Findings reinforced that SIT provided multiple opportunities for students to expand their cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills as they navigated through unfamiliar situations through a learner-centered approach that provided frequent feedback for growth (Frye, 2003). SIT created unique spaces that enabled students to recognize the connection between internal forces (i.e., flexibility and empathy) and external actions (i.e., adaptive behaviors and communication). One participant expressed that:

"[SIT] helped build my idea of what it means to be a 'global traveler.' It is important to see another country's history and identity; how they see themselves. To be in their shoes and to view why they do this, or why they see it as this, or why they talk about this over something else. To feel like a global traveler, you need to be able to do that; you need to be very open minded and be able to fill in their shoes and say, 'ok, they feel this way because this happened in their past' or 'they see themselves along this line over how we perceive them because this happened." (P4)

Findings indicated that the enriched experiences inherent in the SIT model pushed students beyond their own cultural comfort zones, while simultaneously pulling them in to process their experiences in genuine, meaningful ways. Findings illuminated the organic process of CQ, where CQ outcomes lead to a stronger foundation needed in subsequent culturally different experiences, creating a continuous loop of learning and adaptability (Argyris & Schon, 1974). Findings also reinforced the value of integrating SIT into higher education curricula to prepare undergraduate students to meet the demands of culturally diverse and/or global work

environments (Clawson, 2014).

LIMITATIONS

The findings were based on the self-reported lived experiences and perceptions of a small number of students who all attended the same university. While the participants represented a variety of academic majors, a larger sample would allow for a more robust generalization of the findings. The researcher included only currently enrolled students who had participated in two (2) different SITs while enrolled in XU. Thus, there was a limited number of SIT international locations and course topics. Expanding this study to other institutions of higher education who offer SITs may increase the sample size and variety of SITs for more generalized findings.

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