

Abstract

In recent years, both the competency development as well as the intercultural experiences of students have moved more into the focus of higher education institutions. A semester abroad can contribute to reaching both goals. While some previous research has already identified the competency and personal development of students during a semester abroad, little research has been done to find out which experiences contribute to these changes. Based on experiential learning theory, as well as previous research on study abroad and competencies, this study addresses this gap with students from two different types of university. Combining results from interviews following the critical incident technique as well as a self-evaluation from students, several types of situations are determined in which competencies seem to develop. In line with previous research, this study identifies especially challenging moments as a source for competency development, but also notices the difficulties of students reflecting on their experiences. Based on the results, this study provides several recommendations for both practice and further research.

1. Introduction

Across higher education institutions, politics and the general public, more and more importance is placed on international and intercultural experiences of students (DAAD, 2020c; Lewin, 2009; Wanner, 2009). Some even call study abroad “one of the most important experiences students can have during their undergraduate years” (Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josić, & Jon, 2009, p. S41). The numbers of students going abroad support this trend. In 2015, 30 percent of all respondents to a national survey in Germany reported already having participated in a stay abroad, with an additional eight percent having attempted one, but had to cancel due to a variety of reasons (Woisch & Willige, 2015). In addition, 43 percent of students who had attempted a stay abroad and 31 percent of students who had not attempted a stay abroad planning to pursue a stay abroad (Woisch & Willige, 2015).

The motivating factors to go abroad for an extended period of time can vary from personal development (e.g. becoming independent and self-confident, meeting new people), first-time travel abroad, encouragement of faculty, staff, family and peers to course credit given for courses taken abroad (Messelink & Spencer-Oatey, 2015; Salyers, Carston, Dean, & London, 2015). When students were surveyed, personal development reasons such as experiencing something special or having an exciting, thrilling time were named before more methodological reasons like improving knowledge of the host language and reasons related to future employment (Woisch & Willige, 2015). However, a recent Erasmus study has found that “Erasmus students have better employability skills after a stay abroad than 70 [percent] of all students” (Union européenne, 2014, p. 14). The Association for the Promotion of Science and Humanities in Germany confirms that whoever would like to be professionally successful in German, must have international experiences and competencies (Schröder-Kralemann et al., 2015). In the U.S., surveyed employers stated that students who had international experiences showed traits regarding interacting with others who are different, adaptability, cultural understanding, and experiential learning more often than their peers without experience abroad (Gardner et al., 2009). In Australia, the increased employability after a stay abroad is also emphasized (Forsey et al., 2012). Another study of U.S. employers supported this finding, stating that students developed “a broad range of cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills” (IIE Center for Academic Mobility Research and Impact, 2017, p. 5). Students also self-report gains in intercultural and global competencies, following a

study abroad period more so than other international travel opportunities (Stebbleton, Soria, & Cherney, 2013).

Not only do employers find that students who had spent time abroad have developed competencies, there is also an increased focus on higher education to show the personal development of students throughout their studies. Across the globe, higher education is moving towards demonstrating the competencies that students develop during their studies, to ensure their employability post-graduation as well as meet the standards required by accrediting agencies (Chapman & O'Neill, 2010; Nodine, 2015; Wiepcke, 2009).

While some research has been done on the competencies that students show after the stay abroad, little research has been done to show what it is that happens during the stay abroad that encourages the development of the competencies. Using self-evaluations and interviews during as well as after the students' stay abroad, this study looks at the correlation between critical incidents the students master while abroad and the competencies that they gain. With competencies becoming a more and more important factor in the employability of students, knowledge on how competencies during a stay abroad are developed can be helpful in assisting the staff at the international center and the faculty of the home university to prepare students' study abroad experiences to promote student learning.

First the current literature related to learning from experience, study abroad, and competency development will be reviewed and the connections between the three topics will be drawn. Then the methodology used for this study, including information on the critical incident technique, will be explained. Following, the results from both the self-evaluation and the interviews will be presented before they are discussed and recommendations for both practice and further research will be made.

2. Literature Review

The focus of this study is on the study abroad experiences of students as they relate to their competency development. The current research on learning from experience will be highlighted, including an overview of different theories regarding experiential learning. One opportunity ripe for experiential learning is a study abroad semester in college. The history of study abroad as well as current research related to the impact of study abroad on personality development will be discussed. Finally, as specifically the development of competencies during the semester abroad is in focus, an overview of the theories behind competency development as well as the assessment options for competencies will be provided.

2.1 Learning from Experience

Dewey (1998) was one of the first in his 1938 text “Experience and Education” to place emphasis on the idea that learning not only takes place in the classroom but also through our everyday experiences. He cautioned though that “the belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other” (Dewey, 1998, p. 13). Based on his ideas as well as those of other scholars, scholars throughout the last several years have expanded their theories of experiential education to highlight how experiences can be best used in student learning. Especially in the mid-20th century, the principles of experiential learning have been adopted with two purposes in mind: To provide “criteria for awarding credit to adults on the basis of prior life experience” as well as the moral and social goal of developing students into active citizens (Seaman, 2008, p. 6). Based on these purposes new innovations such as competency-based undergraduate education, professional education, college programs for adult learners and prior learning assessment came about (A. Y. Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

Currently, experiential education is seen as a way to achieve some of the common goals of education, such as “a deeper understanding of subject matter than is possible through classroom study alone; the capacity for critical thinking and application of knowledge in complex or ambiguous situations; the ability to engage in lifelong learning, including learning in the workplace” (Eyler, 2009, p. 26). Experiential learning principles are applied in a variety of settings, such as study abroad, adventure-based education and many others (Montrose, 2002; Passarelli & Kolb, 2012; Seaman, 2008). They have also been used outside of

the higher education context and are popular in management education (D. A. Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2000; Vince, 1998).

The application of experiential learning theory is not restricted to a single subject or field of study, rather the research has been conducted interdisciplinarily (A. Y. Kolb & Kolb, 2017). “Experiential education complements traditional models of education as a method of teaching and learning that supports the individualized knowledge that occurs outside the classroom walls, and allows students to stretch in unique and creative directions” (Montrose, 2002, p. 2).

Experiential learning can be defined as “...the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (D. A. Kolb, 1984, p. 41). Others define learning in this context as “a process that involves the reconstruction of experience taking into consideration the ‘action’ of participating and working in a different environment and the ‘thinking’ or reflection about that experience and context” (Pagano & Roselle, 2009, p. 217). A third definition of experiential learning is “the change in an individual that results from reflection on direct experience and results in new abstractions and applications” (Itin, 1999, p. 93). Each of these definitions highlight that the experience must be transformed through reflection in order for learning to happen.

Boud and Walker (1990) clarify their definition of experience: “Experience can be seen as a continuing, complex series of interactions between the learner and the learning milieu, unified by reflective processes which assimilate and work with the learning potential of the environment, and can move the learner to take appropriate action within the experience” (p. 66). They further distinguish between the event – that which can be observed by onlookers – and the experience, which is individual to the person experiencing it and is influenced by their personal foundation (Boud & Walker, 1990). For example, while spending a semester abroad in a foreign country can be seen as an event, the experience each student has will be unique to their own circumstances and background and will not be the same for two students.

It should be noted that there are different meanings associated with experiential learning and experiential education. While experiential learning is focused on the process that the learner goes through, experiential education also involves the educator as well as the methodologies which can support the students in their learning (Gross & Rutland, 2017). When considering learning as “the process of change that occurs for the individual” it becomes clear that “experiential learning rests within the student and does not necessarily require a teacher” (Itin, 1999, pp. 91–92).