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Structured Support Advances Extension Educator Intercultural Development During a Short-Term Study Abroad Experience

Abstract

Extension educators need intercultural competence to communicate with international audiences and facilitate dialogue in diverse domestic communities. Although many Extension professionals have traveled abroad, experience abroad does not necessarily lead to intercultural competence without intentional intercultural development support. We describe a novel program designed to develop Extension educators' intercultural competence by involving them as mentors in an undergraduate agriculture study abroad program. Statements by the participating educators support increased ability to recognize and adapt to multiple frameworks, increased self-reflection, and enriched interactions and programming for their diverse communities.

Keywords: [diversity](#), [intercultural competence](#), [intercultural communication](#), [reflective journaling](#), [study abroad](#)

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Introduction

Over the past decade, many have called attention to the need to develop intercultural competence among Extension educators (e.g., Fabregas Janeiro, Kelsey, & Robinson, 2012; Strong & Harder, 2011). Agricultural Extension professionals play a significant role in global agricultural production (Sundermeier, 2006). Today's U.S. Extension professionals not only have international reach but also work with diverse populations in their own communities (Strong & Harder, 2011). However, despite favorable attitudes toward inclusivity and diversity, Extension professionals have struggled to develop the skills needed to successfully work in diverse environments (Fabregas Janeiro, Fabre, & Nuno de la Parra, 2014; Fabregas Janeiro et al., 2012).

Although Extension educators have access to a variety of university-sponsored study abroad programs to support intercultural development, many programs fail to significantly improve intercultural skills (Zhai & Sheer, 2002). Fabregas Janeiro et al. (2012) suggested that many study abroad experiences simply expose learners to diversity, failing to provide the intensive support learners need to actually develop intercultural skills. Like Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003), Fabregas Janeiro et al. (2012) suggested that study abroad programs must be accompanied by theory-based comprehensive support, including mentoring, small-group activities, and structured reflection.

Although theory-based study abroad programs have been shown to improve intercultural competence for various undergraduate and professional populations, to our knowledge, no work has assessed their

effectiveness with Extension educators (Briers, Shinn, & Nguyen, 2010). Extension educators have distinct experiences and needs shaping their intercultural development goals. They differ from undergraduate students in that they need to develop skills to work better with nontraditional audiences. Educators design and deliver educational programs to diverse audiences and work directly with the public to educate and collaborate on solving problems. Additionally, educators tend to be older than traditional undergraduate students and often have more life experiences. These experiences may affect the way Extension educators respond to pedagogies related to intercultural learning.

To support educators in developing intercultural competence, we, as the instructors of an agriculture-related course involving study abroad in Vietnam, invited them to participate in this short-term, university-affiliated study abroad program in which we incorporated theory-based support tailored to Extension educators' specific needs. Through this program, educators not only served as mentors to undergraduate student participants but also engaged in intercultural learning through dialogue, critical reflection, and direct experience of Vietnamese culture.

Objective

In the study we report here, we sought to describe the demographics and intercultural development of Extension educators involved in our short-term, university-affiliated study abroad program designed to support educators' intercultural development needs.

Participants

We recruited Extension educator applicants through email, Extension workshops, and word of mouth. Through a competitive application process, we purposively selected four educators to form a diverse sample varying in gender, years of Extension experience, area of specialty, and prior international experience. Extension educators participated in the program alongside 12 undergraduate college of agriculture students involved in the course. We facilitated all aspects of the course for both the students and the Extension educators.

Context

Our educator development program took place within a semester-long embedded study abroad course at a large land-grant university in the spring 2019 semester. Throughout the on-campus, domestic portion of the program, the educators mentored students through semester-long course activities centered on food security and environmental challenges in Vietnam. As well, the educators participated with students in a 9-day experience traveling through Vietnam during week 10 of the 16-week-semester course. While in Vietnam, participants immersed in Vietnamese animal agriculture by visiting production facilities, companies, and a university.

Intercultural Learning Activities

We provided educators structured support in the weeks before, during, and after traveling to Vietnam. We allowed educators to complete activities prior to traveling either in person or remotely. During Week 1, educators completed the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a 50-item questionnaire measuring intercultural sensitivity. The IDI is a valid and reliable measurement of intercultural competence that does not contain cultural bias (Hammer et al., 2003). This questionnaire provides each test taker a profile report

detailing his or her current developmental orientation (DO) on a continuum of developmental stages from ethnocentric (denial, polarization) to transitional (minimization) to ethnorelative (acceptance, adaptation) (Hammer, 2012). After viewing and reflecting on his or her IDI profile reports, the educator designed a personalized Intercultural Development Plan (IDP). With the assistance of an IDI Qualified Administrator, the educator identified appropriate activities to systematically advance his or her individual intercultural development from its current stage. The IDP allows for self-reflection and assists the individual in understanding patterns of differences and commonality between one's own and other cultural groups' practices. Each IDP outlines 10 intercultural learning activities, and we asked that each educator track progress on three of these activities throughout the semester. The process of completing the IDP was a critical step in the program because it provided the educators with a space to self-reflect and identify targeted developmental learning opportunities to support their intercultural competence growth.

While in Vietnam, Extension educators participated in group activities, group discussion, and critical reflective journaling (Nagata, 2004). Extension educators were challenged throughout the program to reflect on how the experience was relevant to their careers. Discussions occurred in small groups consisting of just the educators and allowed the participants time to reflect on challenges and relevance that differed from the undergraduate perspective. Daily in-country activities such as tours, meetings, and social events offered plentiful opportunities for authentic engagement in Vietnamese culture. In each daily journal entry, educators wrote three to five paragraphs responding to reflective prompts on general aspects of their experiences.

After returning to the United States, the Extension educators participated in reflective and evaluative activities to assist them in abstracting meaning from their experiences abroad. Educators again completed the IDI in Week 15 of the semester. Finally, the program culminated in a reflective sharing night, during which student, faculty, and Extension educator participants gathered to watch student- and educator-created videos about Vietnamese culture and agricultural issues.

Data Collection

Our university's institutional review board approved all methods for our research. Learning artifacts from program activities served as the data for our mixed-methods study. In addition to quantitative IDI results, we assembled a portfolio for each educator containing all written assignments: IDP, log of intercultural learning that occurred before the trip, and in-country journal entries. Combining the survey assessment and portfolio afforded us a more holistic view of educators' intercultural development throughout the program (Griffith, Wolfeld, Armon, Rios, & Liu, 2016). We analyzed qualitative portfolio data using the thematic coding procedures outlined by Maguire and Delahunt (2017). In the next section, we provide representative quotes to illustrate the three broad themes that emerged from portfolio assessment. The quotes are representative of responses from all four participating educators.

Results and Discussion

Demographics

Educators represented diverse gender and Extension experience (Table 1). All Extension educators had prior international experience through short-term (<6-week) volunteering, study abroad, or leisure travel. One educator had lived abroad for 3 years. None of the educators in our study had significant prior experience with

Vietnamese culture.

Table 1.
Demographics of Extension Educators Involved in Short-Term Study Abroad Program

Educator	Gender	Years in Extension	Total experience traveling/living outside U.S.
1	Male	>15 years	>1 year
2	Female	0–5 years	2–4 weeks
3	Male	0–5 years	4–8 weeks
4	Female	>15 years	2–6 months

IDI

All four educators showed progression in their DO from pretest to posttest (Table 2). DO increases for two of the four educators were meaningful based on a 7-point difference (Bennett, Bennett, & Allen, 2003). These results provide preliminary quantitative support of the program's effectiveness, although we note that quantitative results are limited by the small, nonrandomized sample.

Table 2.
Pre- and Postprogram Intercultural Development Inventory Developmental Orientation Results for Extension Educators Involved in Short-Term Study Abroad Program

Educator	Preprogram	Postprogram	Preprogram-to-postprogram change
1	123.02	126.77	+3.75
2	95.18	114.45	+19.27*
3	85.94	95.40	+9.46*
4	80.68	86.49	+5.81

Note. An asterisk indicates a significant increase according to 7 pt. difference criterion recommended by Bennett et al. (2003).

Self-Awareness and Capacity for Critical Reflection

The educators' journals revealed richly personalized reflection on cultural identity and intercultural experiences. Importantly, the educators commented that program activities caused them to expand and revise their interpretations of prior international experiences. The following quotes from two of the educators illustrate this perspective:

I feel that I have achieved my goals through deep reflection and understanding of myself, my culture and other cultures; as well as how I viewed each experience. The learning opportunities really forced me to dive into other cultures by not just learning about them, but also experiencing them personally.

Through each learning opportunity, I have continued to learn more and more about other cultures, as well as my own. . . . In the past, I have always been aware of cultural differences, but never truly

considered how the differences affect my surroundings and life. One skill I developed was the ability to reflect insightfully and decipher how my own attitude and behavior affect those of other cultures.

As Deardorff (2009) points out, intercultural competence is not a static endpoint. Rather, it involves a lifelong process of reflective practice that is facilitated by specific and teachable metacognitive skills (e.g., self-assessment, self-monitoring, planning, reflection) (Lane, 2009). Although most Extension educators have traveled abroad (Selby, Peters, Sammons, Branson, & Balschweid, 2005), prior international experience does not necessarily correlate with intercultural competence, particularly in the absence of structured reflection (Hammer, 2010). Educators in our study appeared to make substantial gains in metacognitive skills through the structured reflection facilitated in both personal and group settings during the program.

Holistic, Dialectical Thinking Capabilities

Several educators described experiencing cognitive shifts during the program that expanded their capacity for systems thinking and perspective taking. For example, two educators commented as follows:

I think I am better able to view situations and experience from new vantages . . . I feel more open to other cultures and am able adapt to different situations.

I developed an ability to take a step back to see the picture and the system. I don't focus on what seems right or wrong from a personal approach but look at the system . . . I really tried to see what could be adapted in or from the systems to improve the whole.

These educator statements illustrate developments in cognitive flexibility, an intercultural skill allowing individuals to accommodate and adapt to multiple frameworks of understanding (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003; Endicott, Bock, & Narvaez, 2003). Two educators also specifically called attention to the program's effects on their ability to understand agriculture as a global system:

I think it is really easy to read about agriculture on the global scale and learn about production practices in other countries but it doesn't always stick well. Getting to see things first-hand and experience things really helps grasp the real picture of the agriculture . . . here we get to see and feel the Vietnamese side of the market place; really get a look to understand their issues. This is the big picture of agriculture.

I got a better understanding of the whole food system, and the many parts that keep it all working. I tend to only think locally when it comes to the "ag sector," and I do not realize it is truly a global system.

The developments noted by the educators are parallel to the observations of Treadwell, Lachapelle, and Howe (2013), who concluded that a 9-day Extension international exchange program enhanced the ability of Extension professionals to relate local and global agriculture issues. Hassell (2007) suggested that intercultural sensitivity can help educators understand the cultural and epistemological assumptions underlying the diverse forms of knowledge they encounter through Extension's teaching, research, and engagement functions.

Practical Knowledge and Capacity for Agentic Engagement

Finally, all educators stated intentions to apply what they had learned through the program to inform and enrich their interactions as Extension professionals. Two educators expressed confidence that raised cultural consciousness would allow them to adapt Extension programming to meet the needs of diverse populations:

In the future, my experiences with this program will enhance how I interact with those of other cultures, as well as those within my own culture. I feel I now have a better understanding of how I can better educate my clients and ensure Extension is meeting their expectations.

I am more aware of how my words, actions, and teaching style may be viewed by those attending programs. This will help me adapt behavior to improve learning experiences with people from different cultures.

According to Ludwig (1999), although most Extension educators are interested in updating local programming to reflect a more global perspective, they perceive lack of expertise as a limiting factor. In the study presented here, intercultural engagement not only developed educators' expertise but also validated their commitment to actively applying intercultural skills toward improving their local communities.

Conclusions

Interculturally competent educators are vital to Cooperative Extension's mission to provide inclusive, culturally responsive programming that reflects a global perspective. Extension educators can benefit from short-term study abroad programs that provide intercultural development support specific to their unique needs. Through position-specific preparation, meaningful intercultural experiences, dialogue, and reflection, Extension professionals can develop confidence and capacity for continued intercultural learning and active contribution to their communities. As federal and state funding tightens, Cooperative Extension can most effectively meet needs for intercultural development through short-term international programs offering substantive support specifically geared toward educators' goals.

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