

Australia, The 51st State - Student learning and intercultural development

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Abstract

The IES MAP (Model Assessment Practice) for Study Abroad was created in response to the growing need for more effective program development and assessment in international education. The IES MAP focuses on four key areas: the student learning environment; student learning and the development of intercultural competence; resources for academic and student support; and program administration and development.

Whilst the development of students' intellectual abilities is the foremost concern of an academic program, the development of intercultural understanding is also significant, and desired. Many American students perceive Australia as being almost an extension of the United States. Off course they see Australia as 'different', but those differences are often anticipated as more 'cute', 'token' differences, rather than disparities that will actually have a significant impact on their time in Australia.

This paper explores the development of intercultural competence in American students studying in Australia using qualitative examples.

Key Words Study Abroad, intercultural competence, IES MAP©, Australia, U.S.

Introduction

IES Abroad was founded as the Institute for European Studies in 1950, and has been a pioneer and industry leader in the study abroad field ever since. In its 57 year history, the non-profit organization has grown into a truly global entity, known for its quality programs and emphasis on fostering cultural immersion. IES now incorporates over 70 study abroad programs throughout Asia, Australia, Europe, New Zealand and South America. The IES consortium is made up of over 165 leading U.S. colleges and universities, and sends over 5,000 students abroad each year.

IES started its first Australian program in 1991, and now operates three centres in Australia, and two in New Zealand. Australian programs are run largely in partnership with GO8 universities – with onsite staff in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide (now in its 17th year, and 34th student intake). New Zealand programs are also run with onsite staff, and operate in both Auckland and Christchurch.

In 1999, IES once again lead the industry in creating the first assessment tool for designing and evaluating study abroad programs – The IES MAP© (Model Assessment Practice) for Study Abroad. IES leveraged its substantial knowledge and experience in developing the MAP – utilizing a longitudinal study of 50 years of IES Alumni, with over 3,700 completed surveys (Dwyer, 2004a; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Dwyer, 2004b). The MAP

provides guidelines for standard 'hybrid' programs, where faculty are administered by the program onsite, as well as for the evaluation of 'Direct Enrolment' programs, where students register and complete all coursework at a partner university. For both program models, the focus of the IES MAP is on four key areas:

- 1) The student learning environment
- 2) Student learning and the development of intercultural competence
- 3) Resources for academic and student support
- 4) Program administration and development.

This paper will focus on the second facet of the IES MAP, and explore the intercultural development and cultural challenges that American students face when studying abroad in Australia. Qualitative examples are used to illustrate the theoretical framework.

Central to the development of intercultural competence, is an awareness that there is no one "normal" way of doing things, but rather that all behaviours are culturally variable (Liddicoat, 2000). Cultural Competence requires an implicit understanding that cultures are relative, and the IES Map provides a framework for staff working in the field to foster this development.

Intercultural competence is defined by the German Red Cross (2000) as, "*the overall capability of an individual to manage key challenging features of intercultural communication: namely, cultural differences and unfamiliarity, inter-group dynamics, and the tensions and conflicts that can accompany this process.*"

Universities and Governments around the world are realising that global interdependence requires interculturally competent citizens, and this is becoming an urgent educational priority. Specifically, citizens who can engage in informed, ethical decision-making when confronted with problems that involve a diversity of perspectives (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002).

The study abroad experience provides a gateway for students to understand, learn from, and collaborate with others from a variety of racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Australian universities are multicultural hubs, many with international student enrolments at over 25% of the total student population, and often drawn from over 70 different countries.

On a simplistic level, one could argue that study abroad students (simply by being placed in this dynamic environment), should return home from their abroad experience with an ability to interact and relate appropriately and effectively in various cultural contexts. Just placing students in this environment however is not enough (Stier, 2006), and programs need to have strategic aims and directions that foster, monitor and seek new ways to develop interculturally competent students.

An important element in this is the need for programs to foster a depth of engagement between students and the host culture (Pope and Reynolds, 1997; Pope, Davis, Reynolds, Dings, & Ottavi, 1994; Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004). The significance of this lies in the differentiation between skills and competencies. By simply living in a country and studying at a foreign university, students will of course gain culturally-specific skills to get by. Cultural competency, however, is the ability to implement these skills in a way that submerges you deeper in the host culture and connects you with the people of that culture.

Kegan (1994) developed a model that identifies three dimensions of cultural competence, and he argued that development in all three dimensions is needed in order to translate cross-cultural skills into cross-cultural competence.

1. The Cognitive Dimension: This focuses on how you construct your views and create a meaning-making system, based on how you gain and interoperate information.
2. The Intrapersonal Dimension: This focuses on how you understand your own beliefs, values, and sense of self, and uses these to guide your choices and behavior.
3. The Interpersonal Dimension: This of course focuses on how you view yourself in relationship to and in interacting with other people; and their views, values, and behaviors, etc. How you makes choices in social situations.

In developing a framework for looking at the development of intercultural competence in American students studying in Australia, Kegan's (1994) three dimensions of development (cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal), are a useful tool.

The Cognitive Dimension:

For students coming to Australia from the United States, the very limited and overly stereotyped information they've usually been exposed to about Australia often leads to a view that things will be very similar. When venturing to countries that have stark and obvious cultural contrasts, students brace themselves for an intense cultural experience. In Australia however, those differences are far more convoluted, and for the most part unexpected. Of course students realize that the lingo's a little different, and of course they have broad stereotyped perceptions about Australian culture; but the deep-seeded differences in the cues of interpersonal communication, and in the values of Australia as a society, can often catch students completely off-guard.

An example of this initial level of development in the cognitive dimension is when a student begins to acquire knowledge about the host culture almost immediately upon arrival. A stark illustration of this was a student two semesters ago who was at lunch with an IES staff member on his first day in Australia, shortly after being collected from the airport. Upon settling the bill, he was not only surprised, but shocked to the point of being argumentative that he wasn't able to pay with American currency. There he was, waving his U.S. dollars to the wait staff and asserting "these are American dollars – why can't I pay with American dollars?" This is obviously a very blunt example, and for the most part the cognitive picture is painted with far more subtle brush strokes. Subtle experiences that the student may not even consciously realize are contributing to their cognitive understanding of the host culture.

As for that student, (and yes he was one of those whom you could tell a thousand stories about), he later that evening (his first night in Australia), attended a '50 Cent' concert (one of America's most famous rap artists), at the 'Sydney Super Dome'. There he was, 10,000 miles from home, watching '50 Cent' in a crowd of 20,000 people – all dressed in American Hip-Hop clothing brands, and all rapping along to every line. The next day however, at the IES orientation, the student commented in depth about how surreal the concert had seemed – and how although things were really similar to the U.S. on the surface, the closer you looked the more the differences seemed blatant. In the space of 24 hours this student had gone from not knowing what currency Australia uses, to commenting quite articulately on subtle observations he'd made about Australian culture.

The point is that many American students perceive Australia as being almost an extension of the United States – with its Anglo majority, English-speaking population, close political ties, strong links in terms of popular culture (music, fashion, film and TV), and even in the food we eat. Of course American students see Australia as 'different', but those differences are often anticipated as more cute, 'token' differences, rather than disparities that will actually have a significant impact on their time abroad and on their personal growth.

This initial cognitive dimension which focuses on how one constructs ones views and creates a new understanding is however often a sticking point. Unlike countries where there are stark cultural differences, the lines are blurred and in fact because things are so similar on the surface, American students in Australia often fail to recognise an incident as even being a cultural clash. Instead cultural differences are often perceived as simply being a strange or negative experience – detached from culture. In that regard, culture-shock can at times be more intense, and harder to work through for U.S. students in Australia, than in say Japan, Spain or Argentina – where those cultural differences are more blatant and easily recognised.

The Intrapersonal Dimension

The intrapersonal dimension focuses on how you understand your own beliefs, values, and sense of self; and how you use this understanding to guide your choices and behavior. An example of this is in customer service. The United States has an intense customer focus, strongly reinforced by the tipping culture, and very different to the feel and style of customer service in Australia. Thus, for American students in Australia, even small things (like ordering food in a Restaurant), can result in a communication breakdown, that is entirely the result of cultural misinterpretation.

In Australia for example, wait staff (other than at a fine dining restaurant), will usually only attend to your table if you waive them over. In the same way that Australian's can sometimes feel smothered when dining in a restaurant in the United States, American students often feel that wait staff in Australia are ignoring them, or being rude or lazy. In Australia, it's seen as important to give people space, and not to crowd them, or rush them, and the dynamic of service is more casual, relaxed and informal. Of course this is just a cultural difference, but it becomes a problem when a lack of understanding leads to an incorrect interpretation of the experience.

As students gain a deeper cognitive understanding, and then reflect on this to incorporate that into their own intrapersonal perspective, they of course feel at ease with this cultural difference – and it is no longer seen as wrong, but simply different. At this point they are then able to adapt their behaviour and become more deeply submerged in the host culture.

There are many examples of how cultural differences can lead to an incorrect judgement of values – based on a misunderstanding and lack of context. As students develop their intrapersonal perspective of culture, they learn to step back and ask ‘why?’. ‘Why is this different here?’ rather than jumping to a value judgment.

For example, during the IES Sydney orientation, students are taken on a guided walking tour of downtown Sydney, through the botanical gardens and around to the Sydney Opera House where they embark on a sunset dinner cruise on the harbour. During the walk, they stop at a public bathroom. Inevitably they walk out murmuring to each other with furrowed brows. Upon a little coxing they sheepishly express concern at the fact that the public bathroom has a needle disposal bin, and that they didn’t realize Sydney had such a problem with drug addicts. Furthermore they seem concerned that their drug use is encouraged through the provision of the needle disposal bin. It makes sense that they jump to this conclusion, based on their own frame of reference – and straight away, the student has had a negative experience, and formed a negative assumption about Australian values.

The IES staff member then explains that Australia will often have needle disposal bins in public bathrooms, and that the explanation is very simple. It’s not that there are a lot of drug addicts in Australia, but like in any country there are some. Australia has very strict workplace and public safety laws, and in order to protect the staff that clean those toilet facilities, and the public that use them, it makes sense to offer a safe disposal of syringes. The reality is that many of the disposed needles are often from medical users (such as diabetics) rather than addicts.

Whatever the case, the intrapersonal dimension helps students to work through the scenario. Interculturally competent students start looking at emotional reactions, start understanding why feelings occur, and begin coping with the diverse feelings (such as unease, uncertainty, ambiguity, and ethnocentrism) that are triggered by unknown cultural settings (Bochner 1982; Gudykunst 2003)

This shows how through a basic understanding as to why a country and a culture does things the way they do, a far fairer assessment can be made about that countries values and norms. Of course it’s only natural to form judgements based on your own frame of reference, and your own cultural bearings. By being informed however, stark misinterpretation can be avoided – and for the most part, the values of peoples all over the world are shown to be far more closely aligned than what many people expect. The challenge for American students in Australian then is to remember to ask this question of ‘why?’ – but in a country where they’re not constantly being reminded that they are in a different culture, by stark cultural differences, this challenge is significant.

In any case, students that come to Australia do learn to be far more open-minded and measured in their assessment of differences, looking at situations from different angles before jumping to conclusions. Obviously, this transformation in students occurs to a greater or lesser extent, but it’s fair to say that they do all leave with a broader horizon and a deeper understanding of the world around them; and how their own values are shaped by the cultural window through which they’ve viewed that world.

The Interpersonal Dimension

The interpersonal dimension focuses on how you view yourself in relationship to other people, and their views, values, and behaviors, etc. This determines how you makes choices in social situations. Each culture has a set of culturally unique cues of interpersonal communication – such as body language, colloquialisms, facial expressions, and tone-of-voice, etc. As students gain a deeper understanding of the interpersonal dimension, they are able to observe and adjust their behaviour to the host countries unique cues of interaction.

An example of this, for American students studying in Australia, is the unspoken law in the United States that ‘the customer is always right’ – and the fact that this principle holds far less weight in Australia. As a result, Americans sometimes struggle to resolve situations in a harmonious, culturally sensitive way. It’s this cultural contrast that can often lead to Americans being perceived as rude or demanding, even though their tone-of-voice and expectation would be totally acceptable in the United States. In Australia, that “I’m the customer and I want this now...” attitude immediately leads to a “who do you think you are?” type of response – which is unapologetically echoed by management if the customer is too pushy. The approach that garners far better results in Australia is “hi, I’m sorry to be a pain, but I’m having some problems with this, and was just hoping you might be able to help me out?”

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This is not a foreign concept to an American student. Were they studying in Japan for example, where this emphasis on politeness and respect is well documented, then they would most likely instinctively use a more graceful tone in making a request. In Australia however, students assume things to be the same as back home – and thus often fail to adapt their behaviour to the subtle differences in etiquette and style.

Often when working with groups, such as a group of American students on a study abroad program, the challenge for students to gain a deeper understanding of this interpersonal dimension is far greater, as you have a group norm operating that tends to support egocentric interpretations.

There are many other cases where the different dynamic in the way people communicate can be confusing for Americans. Generally, people communicate in a far warmer, more open and personal way in Australia. Australian's tend to be instantly familiar, asking far more personal questions than what is common in the United States. Within minutes of meeting you, an Australian will be chatting away and asking questions about family, religion, work and even making jokes that most Americans would reserve for the company of their closer friends.

Australian's will also often query Americans about their political opinions – which can lead to a sense of confrontation and defensiveness among American students. The reality is that for Australians, politics is common conversation, and even if people disagree, that's not necessarily seen as a basis for defensiveness or confrontation, but rather for an interesting and friendly discussion.

This familiarity with which people communicate can also contribute to a misinterpretation by Americans of the strong separation in Australia between formality and respect. For students, an obvious situation where this occurs is on campus - in the way they interact with their professors. In Australia, it's standard to address a professor by their first name, as is the case in most business encounters as well. This is not something that Americans are used to, and it can at times be misread. Students need to realize that there is still a hierarchy, and still a code of respect that needs to be shown in Australian society – it's just that the way this is communicated is shaped by a more laid-back and relaxed cultural footprint. Recalling an experience in a lecture theatre in Sydney, when an American study-abroad student addressed the professor as "dude", this was an indication that Australia's relaxed style of communication can at times be misconstrued.

Conclusion

The IES MAP was developed as a set of inclusive and specific criteria to measure program quality and to be used by staff to improve existing programs. Gillespie, Braskamp & Braskamp (1999, p.104) state that. *"In addition to setting this operational strategy in motion, the project's secondary goal was to establish a conceptual framework of quality that would serve IES in its review of existing programs and the development of new programs"*.

Ultimately, success must be measured by the actions of our students. When a student returns to the United States and shows curiosity and passion for new cultural experiences, and has the knowledge to recognise and dissolve their own cultural learning, then a program provider can be proud to have contributed to that students self-growth and expanded cross-cultural competence. When looking back at emails past students have sent, there is certainly a strong reinforcement that this is happening for IES.

The IES MAP is useful for contextualising this type of student feedback. We know IES is on target when the focus areas of the MAP are continually raised by students without seeking their direct feedback. An example of how the cognitive dimension – a students' views and meaning-making system – were shaped by their time abroad, was evident in one email, where the student commented:

"Half-way through the semester, when I was trying to grasp the difference in teaching styles between the US and Australia, I finally found a grip. In the US the emphasis of learning how to succeed in a certain field is by far the primary topic taught, and what you can do to be above the rest. In Australia, obviously the field and how to succeed in it is the main focus, but there is a different perspective here. Australia acknowledges and examines much more so than the US what it means to be a part of a certain field... What it broke down to for me, was that there was a much more global awareness perspective being taught in Australia"

IES Adelaide Student, Gustavus Adolphus College

Some key skills concerning intercultural development were highlighted by Pope and Reynolds (1997 p. 271). These included "the ability to identify and openly discuss cultural differences and issues," and to "differentiate between individual differences, cultural differences, and universal similarities." A great example of an IES Study Abroad student gaining these skills follows:

I've noticed since I've been back that the desire for American kids to see foreign countries, like Australia, is much less. There is always this group of people who want to see the world, travel and learn, undoubtedly. On average though, the desire for Australian's to see what America is like, is much larger... There is a sort of arrogance that cripples the US youth because many believe that because "we are the best, why would I want to see anything else?" And that goes beyond US/Australia relationships. I believe that because there is this arrogance that the US is superior, our global vision and curiosity lacks".

IES Adelaide Student, College of William and Mary

One could be fairly confident that the above student will be able use this heightened cultural knowledge and sensitivity to make more culturally aware and appropriate decisions in their day-to-day life, and in terms of shaping their broader world view.

Whilst many American students do perceive Australia as being almost an extension of the United States when they first arrive; the cultural nuances, unique social cues, and unexpected nature and extent of those differences actually do have a significant impact on their world view and sense of identity. The degree to which this occurs is directly proportionate to the extent to which they are open to submerging themselves in the host culture. By utilising tools like the IES MAP as a framework for program design and structure, study abroad providers can reinforce and resolve these unexpected differences as very positive learning experiences.

There are many tools that could be utilised to gain quantitative data to look at intercultural development in study abroad students. These tools include the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI) (Kelley & Meyers, 1995); the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), (Hammer & Bennet, 2001). Intercultural Learning Outcomes (ILO), (Sutton & Rubin, 2004) and the Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory (ICSI) (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). Designing and conducting research utilising these tools at pre and post experience points could be a useful focus for future research. It would appear useful to demonstrate validity towards meeting our program aims when it comes to intercultural development.

When reviewing student learning and intercultural development, the curiosity and journey of discovering that differences are real, is exciting. Study abroad students own habits and day-to-day lives are changed, and critical thought turns everyday experiences into personal growth. This, most importantly of all, contributes to the students knowledge of humanity, of the world, and of their place in the world – but lets let them have the last word:

"Even though my parents are well-travelled, I'm finding that it is a very different experience to have lived outside of the U.S. especially during such a tumultuous political environment. Long story short, I'm realizing now how much my life in Australia has changed me, and I think those revelations will be ongoing... [but] life is about making the most of where you are, while you're there - not dwelling on the past or being nervous about the future. Australia was amazing, and the best way for it to continue to be a positive force in my life is if I take what I learned there and use it to make the next stages of my life all the better. I'm lucky to have had the opportunity to meet such great people, and it's better for me to be happy that I now have friends all over the world than to be sad that I no longer live next door to them"

IES Sydney Student, Tufts University.

Surely that type of personal growth is why we are passionate about working in this industry.

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