

Across Borders: Partnerships and Student Learning in Unanticipated Situations

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Tags

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Setting

At a U.S. public university, grant funding was awarded to develop a three-week study abroad component for an existing, popular interdisciplinary program focused on border issues (e.g culture, human rights, border-business). The success of the original program, according to students, was centered in the inclusion of diverse topics and authors offering a comprehensive learning experience about geographical and socio-cultural borders. Former students assessed the course as a transformative learning experience based on learning different topics, analyzing different socio-cultural realities, and reflecting on diverse identities. The revised study abroad course sought to build on this success and recruit students from varied cultural backgrounds and academic fields.

The course instructor and staff in the international office worked together in this new educational effort. They identified potential partners (e.g., host institutions) to accomplish the programming and educational objectives. This collaboration cultivated local engagement and refreshed the inclusion of varied experts from different disciplines. This refreshed programming included a practical exploration where students studied the uniqueness

of national territories across three geographical borders (one week per location). The instructor and staff members worked closely with international and local partners to create a faculty-led study abroad program based on previous evaluations, diversity of student population, transdisciplinary curriculum, and institutional collaborations. The team also developed a detailed schedule, a departure orientation, and a meeting between the students and the host institutions.

Case

Week #1

The student group and instructor arrived safely at the first destination. The first host institution conducted welcome activities and the group was placed in a hotel near downtown. This location was a long distance from the host institution, however, transportation was arranged for the group. The first day of activities was promising. The group planned to meet the leadership team from the local institution and visit historical settings. The instructor suggested the students be in the lobby 30 minutes before departure.

All students were on time, but transportation arrived 25 minutes late. The instructor thought the delay was an isolated situation so a conversation with the host team was not needed. Although activities started late, the day was full of satisfactory experiences with local partners and the group forgot about the schedule incident.

The next morning, transportation arrived late again, and some students started getting upset about it. The instructor talked to the group about this issue but did not address the matter with the local partners. The schedule for this second day was so packed that local organizers decided to skip lunch time. During the following dates, there were other schedule changes that raised uncomfortable interactions between students, instructor, and host representatives. The first week was wrapped up with mixed feelings about the experience.

Week #2

The group continued their travel schedule to the second destination. All participants were hosted in one of the institutional dorms. Activities were running on time based on shared expectations between the local partners and the group. This second destination was focused on topics related to economics, business, high skilled immigration, and challenges in education grounded in their border location. As part of the experience, the partner put together a panel where local students shared stories about their immigration pathways in the region. The panel conversation was able to engage both groups, visitors and locals, in a reciprocal conversation where personal stories were shared to connect theory with practical examples.

After this activity, the group talked about the day. One of the students started crying and shared with the group an uncomfortable experience that happened at the end of the activity. A local participant had touched his hair without permission and referred to its texture as “different and lovely.” This issue was an unexpected situation that brought confusion and sadness to the group. The group decided to have a conversation with their host institution collaborators. During this conversation, the group found out that this type of behavior is normal in this region and was considered a compliment.

Week #3

The third and last destination included experiential activities such as dance sessions, cuisine workshops and craft activities. The students and the instructor were excited about the last portion of their abroad schedule. In the following days, the group was able to meet local artists and attend performances. One of these activities included a dinner hosted by a famous local artist. It was a great opportunity to learn more about this artist, local culture, and the importance of preserving traditions.

Other well-recognized artists and community members attended this special dinner too. After dinner, local guests started cleaning the table, washing dishes, and helping the host. At the same time, the student group sat in the patio area and chatted. When the group was leaving, a local highlighted to the group their rude behavior and their lack of community spirit.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How could/should the instructor address each situation with local partners?
- How could learning experiences be created from these three situations? How could the instructor facilitate student learning?
- How should educators approach conversations with students about cultural differences and practices? How could educators plan or prepare for uncomfortable situations? How can they create safe spaces for dialogue?
- How can educators balance the demands of a busy study abroad program schedule with the desire to take time to debrief situations in the moment?
- During the program design phase, what kind of activities should be considered for mentoring students before, during, and after a study abroad program to navigate these situations?
- How can educators create and nourish collaborative practices across cultures? How can educators facilitate reciprocal relationships with international partners?