

# Assessing Student Intercultural Learning in Study Abroad

Written by Andrea Paras and Lynne Mitchell

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/06/08/assessing-student-intercultural-learning-in-study-abroad/>

ANDREA PARAS AND LYNNE MITCHELL, JUN 8 2016

In a previous blog post, we wrote about using written reflections to get real-time information about student learning during a study abroad program. These reflections not only help instructors make appropriate real-time interventions in students' intercultural learning, but they can also be a useful tool for educators who want to evaluate the overall effectiveness of their programs. Our rationale is that it would be foolish to leave student learning in a study abroad program up to chance. We wouldn't lock a group of undergraduates in a microbiology lab for four months on their own and expect them to emerge having made major scientific discoveries, so why do we think osmosis is an appropriate method of instruction when it comes to intercultural skills? If we want to intentionally develop intercultural competence in students who study abroad, we need to know how students view culture and cultural issues, and how different students learn differently when it comes to intercultural competence.

In order to better understand the intercultural learning that took place amongst our India Field School students, we designed a research project that investigated not only *whether* there were gains and losses in students' intercultural competence, but also *why* these changes occurred. Our research employed a mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology that analysed students' Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) survey results alongside approximately 17 written reflections from each student. The IDI is a 50-question psychometric instrument that measures intercultural competence along a development continuum. It measures an individuals' own perception of how interculturally competent they perceive themselves to be, as well as their actual level of intercultural competence. All students were required to take the IDI survey prior to and after the program, as well as submit written reflections as part of their coursework. Here are a few of the main lessons from our research:

### **1. Immersive international programs do not guarantee improvements in intercultural competence, even when there is pre-departure training**

With a twelve-week pre-departure course focused explicitly on intercultural learning, the India Field School represents a best-case scenario, in comparison to other programs that do not have the capacity to offer in-depth intercultural training. As indicated by the IDI results, even though the overall intercultural competence of the group improved as a result of the program, individual results were uneven. Seven out of thirteen students experienced a statistically significant improvement in their intercultural competence, two experienced a decline, and the remaining four did not change at all. Interestingly, five students also experienced a statistically significant increase in their perception of their intercultural competence, which suggests that participation in a study abroad program might actually augment the tendency of some students to over-estimate their intercultural skills, even – or especially – if the program contains a large component of pre-departure preparation.

### **2. Moving backwards isn't necessary bad**

Along with the novelty and excitement of new experiences comes a plethora of disorienting emotions which are compounded by situations where students' expectations are unmet, or where communication is a challenge as they try to navigate a new cultural landscape. It should be no surprise that students revert to comfortable but less sophisticated notions of culture to reduce their psychological stress. But because the program design featured

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extensive teaching about intercultural theory, even students who struggled to adapt to the new environment were able to develop insights as to why. For instance, one student whose second IDI score was lower than her first came to the insight that when the intercultural situation in India became overwhelming, she tended to look for similarities in the cultures instead of critically examining differences. In such situations, successful intercultural learning is measured by ensuring through reflections that the student knows what happened and why.

### **3. An individual's initial level of intercultural competence is not necessarily a predictor of their ability to engage in intercultural learning**

Students participate in intercultural learning at various starting points, and we found that students with lower initial IDI scores had the greatest improvements by the end of the program. For instance, one student whose first IDI score was relatively low made some of the largest IDI gains in the second survey. These gains were reflected in her writings, where she demonstrated nuanced insights about how “volunteer privilege” can create unintended harms in host organisations. This example underscores the importance for instructors to be equipped with appropriate tools and supports to maximise the opportunity for learning no matter where students are beginning along the IDI continuum.

In short, intercultural learning during study abroad takes place along multiple dimensions, and instructors should be prepared to deal with students moving both forward and backward, as well as equipped to adapt their teaching strategies according to the student and the situation.

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