

Feature Article

Examining the impact of tour guides on student immersions during a short-term study abroad experience

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Introduction

Compared to students from other countries, American students are relatively less like to travel outside of their home country. Nevertheless, prior intercultural experiences through activities such as studying abroad are important as components of their careers in an increasingly globalized world. Traditional Study Abroad (SA) programs offered by universities have a profound impact on the cultural awareness and adaptability of students who participate in these experiences. Recently, wider opportunities to engage in short-term SA experiences have prompted shifts in the planning and structuring of these trips to achieve the most impact on student development. In this paper, American students' input was gathered based on their reactions to a number of tours and excursions and the influence of the travel guides was analyzed during a 2018 short-term SA to Central Europe to determine student motivation to learn more about various cultures.

Literature review and background

Studying abroad has had a positive impact on the lives of many college students.^(1, 2) One student skillset on which SA programs have had the most profound effect is cultural awareness. Badstübner and Ecke⁽³⁾ noted that "cultural understanding is acquired most effectively" while being immersed in a SA environment. American students are even more likely to benefit from the cultural awareness gained during a SA because of America's comparative isolation from the rest of the world. Medina-López Portillo⁽⁴⁾ found that intercultural sensitivity, which is "an individual's psychological ability to deal with cultural differences," is an important outcome of a SA for American students and surmised that, "given the growing emphasis on internationalizing higher education and the rapidly increasing number of students embarking on study abroad programs each year, research on cultural learning is assuming greater value and relevance" (pp. 179-180). Universities in the US are increasingly attempting to make SA programs more available to remedy this lack of experience in immersion into new cultures.

The duration of American SAs has traditionally been at least one semester (16 weeks). During this time, students live on campus or in a host home and become immersed in the local culture not only on their college campus but also in the surrounding community. This traditional model of a SA fully integrates the student into the local culture outside of the regularly scheduled activities and SA classroom responsibilities. These traditional SAs offer American students a great deal of experiential learning because of the free time students can use to explore. Roberts et al.⁽⁵⁾ found that this type of non-structured learning is the best way for students to gain cultural awareness during a SA.

Short-term SAs have been more commonly offered in recent decades in order to increase the likelihood that students will be able to take part in a trip. Scholars have pointed out that if a short-term SA is planned and coordinated appropriately, true cultural awareness and insight can be adequately gained.⁽⁶⁻⁸⁾ Barkley and Barkley⁽⁹⁾ reported that cultural experience is an important ingredient of a short-term SA if administered appropriately, and Brubaker⁽¹⁰⁾ pointed out that "cultural learning should become an integral and explicit component of short-term SAs." Teichler and Steube⁽¹¹⁾ found that the planned logistics of a short-term SA trip will make or break student experiences, and Brubaker⁽¹⁰⁾ suggested that it is the responsibility of the SA leader to "support the need for integrating culture learning into short term study abroad" during the preparation stages of the trip. As such, advance planning of structural immersions into the SA program is the best way to enable students to gain an understanding the local culture.

There are a variety of methods by which adequate cultural immersions can be integrated into short-term SAs. Iowa State University has polled their SA students since 1998 about which aspects of the trip best immersed them into the local culture. The results were as follows: (1) Interacting with locals (32 %), (2) Planned tours (27 %), (3) Time on your own to explore (20 %), (4) Food (9 %), and (5) Tour guides (7 %).⁽¹²⁾ In another study, Gibson et al.⁽¹³⁾ found that students showed greater interest in their discipline-specific area (agriculture in their study)

during their short-term SA. They proposed that the leader must ensure two essential elements during the planning process to ensure adequate learning in a short-term SA: (1) technical discipline-specific content that is more often inherent in short-term SA's, and (2) cultural content areas that may be more inherent in traditional SA programs.

Any type of travel experience is impacted by excursions, which are likely to be coordinated by an expert on the local culture or a tour guide. Cohen⁽¹⁴⁾, a pioneer in tour guide research, first provided an academic analysis of the "tourist guide". Tour guides have a significant history working in cities⁽¹⁵⁾ and play an influential role in motivating and managing visitors' experience in the local culture.⁽¹⁶⁾ In sum, a good tour guide wants to allow the tourists to be happy in the local surroundings.⁽¹⁷⁾ Salazar⁽¹⁸⁾ claimed that the increased salience of tour guide research is redefining tourism markets. With increased global travel patterns in recent decades, many countries rely on tourism and tour guides for their economies.^(19, 20)

The importance of tours for local economies has prompted increased focus on that area of employment. Recent studies have begun to offer guidelines for how to become better tour guides.⁽²¹⁻²³⁾ Randall and Rollins⁽²⁴⁾ examined the performance of tour guides from the perspective of tourists' expectations, and Weiler and Black⁽²⁵⁾ noted that the practice of guiding a tour has evolved over time and developed into an artform. Today, competition between tour agencies has risen to such a point that tour agency ratings and tour guide ratings have attracted attention in the literature as well as in publicly available ratings sites like Travelocity and various forms of social media.

Like normal travel experiences on holidays, SA trips involve planning structured components including tours, which for a SA at its core means curriculum-related experiences. These excursions are set up either with tour agencies or, increasingly, directly between the SA leader and independent tour guides. Either choice utilizes tour guides as a conduit between the culture and the student experience.

A deeper look at the Iowa State study indicates that tour guides are inherent in both the #2 category, planned tours, and their own stand-alone category. Nevertheless, there is a gap in the literature assessing the impact of tour guide performance in the context of SAs. This study will attempt to determine the relationship of tour guides performances and the coinciding contribution to student cultural immersions during a short-term SA.

Methodology

This analysis utilized a predictive study based on Gibson et al.'s⁽¹³⁾ suggestion that technical and cultural content are the two key learning components of short-term SAs. A predictive study is a type of experimental design which is utilized when aiming to ascertain when and in what situations an event will occur. Within the predictive study, a relational or causal hypothesis (if a tour guide's performance prompted students to desire to learn more about both the local culture and/or the

local industries/economy) will be examined using a regression analysis with the tour guide rating scores as the explanatory variable.

This study assessed 30 undergraduate students from a public higher education institution in the American Midwest (which is a member of the Association of American Colleges & Universities) during a 3-credit SA trip that took place over the course of 14 days in May 2018. All the students were majoring in a technology-related field. To specifically address the concepts raised by Gibson et al.⁽¹³⁾, students were surveyed about what types of excursions (cultural or technical) prompted them to want to learn more about (1) local culture and (2) local industries/economies. This trip covered four cities in three Central European countries, all of which were listed among the top 32 European cities for millennials to live in.⁽²⁶⁾ Surveys were distributed (see Appendix) immediately after the official trip tours. Weighted regression models were fitted separately with tour characteristic (C vs T), tour guide rating, gender, and tour length, which acted as a moderating variable.

A total of 19 official excursions were planned for the trip, 13 of which were designated as cultural and 6 as technical based on their content. Survey questions were developed in light of Gibson et al.'s⁽¹³⁾ definitions of "cultural content" and "technical content" and included items such as: (1) As a result of this tour do you want to learn more about their culture? (Do you want to take holidays there, spend money on entertainment there, etc.?) and (2) As a result of this tour do you want to learn more about their industries/economy? (Do you want to work there, want to engage in business with a partner there, etc.?) (see Appendix). Two of the cultural excursions did not have a guide and were thus excluded from the analysis.

Results/future studies

Based on the regression analysis, Figure 1 depicts two scatterplots, which provide a visual representation between the variation of the values of the two variables (independent variable: tour guide rating; dependent variable: willingness to learn more about that city's industries/economy, want to work there, etc.).

After fitting a linear regression line to the data points, the data reveal that tour guide ratings are not significant in determining the level of interest a student might have in learning about the cultural aspects (p value = 0.138) of a local area, but a tour guide is influential in shaping the student's inclination to explore the economic and industrial facets (p value = 0.0335) of the local area.

The data show that good experiences with the tour guide motivated students to learn more about local industry. As such, a causal hypothesis, which is a statement that describes a relationship between two variables in which one variable leads to a specified effect on the other variable, may be inferred, whereas a good tour guide prompts a student to want to learn more about local industry and/or be willing to work there in the future. It could also be inferred that the importance of technical-

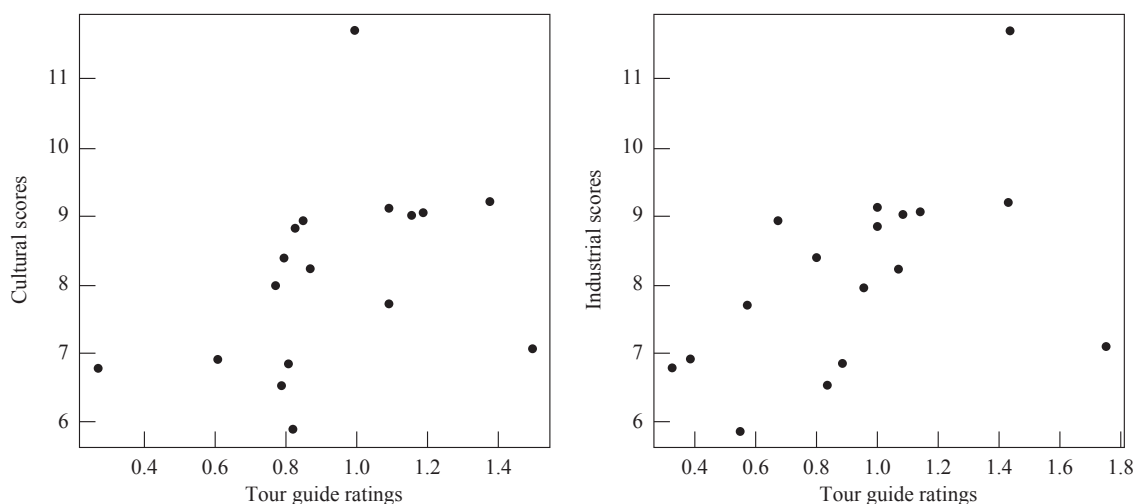


Figure 1: Scatterplots showing the variation of cultural and industry scores with tour guide ratings

related know-how from tour guides that promoted and showcased local successful manufacturing and industry motivated students to want to learn more about the local economy, want to work there, and so forth.

This study may be replicated with other types of experimental designs. For instance, future studies may analyze SA tour guides based in different areas of the world, other generations of Americans on SA's, or SA students from various majors.

Notes

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- industries/economy? (Do you want to work there, want to engage in business with a partner there, etc.?)
- _____ much less apt to want to learn more about their industries/economy
- _____ somewhat less apt to want to learn more about their industries/economy
- _____ the same in wanting to learn more about their industries/economy
- _____ somewhat more apt to want to learn more about their industries/economy
- _____ much more apt to want to learn more about their industries/economy

Appendix

Student survey distributed after each tour

On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being best, rate the tour guide:

- 1-2 _____
- 3-4 _____
- 5-6 _____
- 7-8 _____
- 9-10 _____

(Check one that applies: I think the length of this tour was...

- Much too long _____
- A bit too long _____
- Just about right _____
- A bit too short _____
- Much too short _____

As a result of this tour do you want to immerse yourself their culture? (Do you want to take holidays there, spend money on entertainment there, etc.?)

- _____ much less apt to want to immerse yourself in this culture
- _____ somewhat less apt to want to immerse yourself in this culture
- _____ the same in wanting to immerse yourself in this culture
- _____ somewhat more apt to want to immerse yourself in this culture
- _____ much more apt to want to immerse yourself in this culture

As a result of this tour do you want to learn more about their