



Book Review

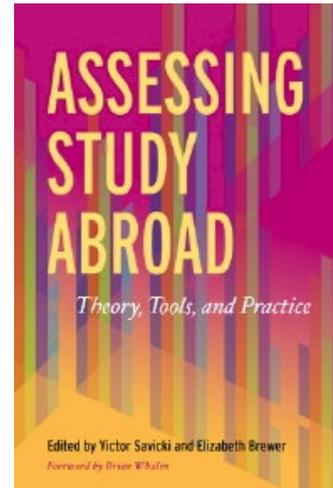
Assessing Study Abroad: Theory, Tools and Practice

Edited by Victor Savicki & Elizabeth Brewer
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As study abroad programs become more prevalent among universities throughout many parts of the world, the question of how to assess the effectiveness of such programs arises. What are the best ways to evaluate whether or not overseas education programs are fulfilling their aims? This 336-page text is an attempt to answer that question. Written primarily for study abroad program administrators in the United States, much of the material in its 18 chapters is also relevant to international educators worldwide.

Although this volume's 23 authors sometimes have varied opinions about program assessment, a number of common threads stand out. In particular, the following seven points regarding study abroad assessment are underscored by multiple contributors.

(1) Assessment should be regarded as an ongoing, iterative process rather than as a single snapshot. Several contributors suggest that study abroad's most significant changes are apt to develop gradually over long time frames. Single-sitting measures, often taken immediately after an overseas abroad program is finished, seldom yield accurate pictures of any enduring effects. Savicki and Price (p. 230) recommend conceptualizing study abroad assessment in terms of the Japanese notion of *kaizen* or 'continuous improvement' (Imai, 1986). Salisbury makes a similar point by stating:

Assessment is a process that should situate improvement as its primary intended outcome.

Organizations and institutions that fail to introduce changes based on assessment findings have not really assessed. Unfortunately, higher education generally and study abroad specifically have often fallen into the trap of assessing for the purpose of proving what is already believed to be so. (p. 24)

(2) Rather than having a few experts evaluate a program, key stakeholders should be involved in the planning, implementation, and assessment process. Getting stakeholders to agree on what is being assessed – and also why and how the evaluation is occurring – is essential to program success. As Braskamp and Engberg (2014) emphasize, educational assessment should be a collaborative effort combining the voices of diverse constituents. Although working with differing parties is often time-consuming, in this volume Brewer notes that:

When study abroad assessment is a shared enterprise, it can lead to shared ownership and responsibility for study abroad and also allow for multiple insights and perspectives into assessment processes and findings. (p. 299)

(3) Assessment should be structured into a study abroad program from the onset so that its goals and components are linked with broader institutional goals. Assessment should not be regarded as an ancillary task *after* a program is organized. Ideally, it should be an integral facet of each program and way of fostering alignment between various program components. Too often, there is a lack of congruence between study abroad program goals, measurement methods, program content, and student expectations. Noting this, in Chapter 3 Gozik enjoins:

Regardless of where one begins, it is critical that each of the components of a plan—the mission statement, learning goals and outcomes, assessment tools, and distribution of results to key constituents—link together within a cohesive cycle . . . this ordering ensures that learning outcomes align with the office and institutional mission and priorities and that there is a method for measuring each of the stated goals and outcomes. (p. 66)

(4) Multiple instruments are needed to get an accurate picture of what changes—if any—occur as a result of study abroad. Several authors in this text advocate using mixed-methods incorporating both quantitative and qualitative research tools. The dangers of relying too heavily on one instrument are underscored repeatedly. This work outlines a number of ways to triangulate data and briefly mentions a broad variety of research instruments.

(5) Assessment standards need to be transparent, and assessment criteria and program goals need to be communicated clearly to all stakeholders. Too often study abroad participants are unsure how their participation will be assessed, or even what the desired outcomes of a given program are. Particularly if students are receiving academic credit for their overseas experiences, study abroad organizers need to communicate evaluation criteria actively and make sure that participants have realistic goals. Echoing Earl (2003), in Chapter 7 Brewer and Moore encourage study abroad stakeholders to view assessment as a key component of the learning process – not merely as a judgment about what has been learned (p. 145).

(6) The assessment process can be embedded in tasks directly related to the goals and objectives of a study abroad program, which is often better than asking participants to complete activities that they might perceive as irrelevant. Study abroad researchers are often plagued by low response rates and overseas sojourners can feel uninterested in completing the questionnaires or interviews. As conceptualized by William (2011), embedded assessment – also known as construct-referenced assessment or stealth assessment – is a type of formative evaluation in which tasks (such as student diary entries) contain prompts that can be used to evaluate learning. In Chapter 14 Gillespie, Ciner, and Schodt encourage study abroad programs to utilize embedded assessment by stating:

The advantages of an embedded assessment are that it is based on a pedagogically valid activity in the context of a course or program, as opposed to a method that occurs after the fact, and students are more likely to take the assignment seriously as a course requirement (p. 264).

(7) Don't worry about having a “perfect” assessment – there is no such thing. Assessment of complex change is inherently complex, often messy, and prone to biases. Particularly in study abroad scenarios, in which true control groups are difficult to achieve, many constraints are inherent in the assessment process. However, a number of authors overcoming paralysis by focusing on simple, attainable assessment goals at first. On this note, in Chapter 7 Brewer and Moore advise:

It is important to embark on assessment incrementally. Make modest starts that do not demand a large learning curve. As experience is gained, new tools are learned, and findings suggest new questions, assessment practice can evolve and become richer. (p. 160)

Some Pros and Cons

One nice feature of this book is that it offers an inside view of ways study abroad administrators can assess their programs. The process is seldom clean or clear-cut, and sometimes the data do not generate the results hoped for. I particularly liked the way Savicki and Price described the development of an in-house assessment tool at Wesleyan University in Chapter 12. That tool can be adapted for use at other institutions freely if proper citations are made. This is welcome because many commercial assessment tools such as the BEVI, GPI, and IDI cost over \$20 per participant (Roy, Wandschneider, & Steglitz, 2012) - a figure that may be beyond the budget range of some schools.

Another nice feature of this book is that it introduces a wide range of theoretical concepts. Although few of these are explained in detail, proactive readers will be able to find more information about unfamiliar ideas and terminology elsewhere. In particular, I felt Saunders, Hogan, and Olson's discussion of a "backward design" assessment process in Chapter 4 was helpful. The final overview of study abroad assessment resources by Brewer was also useful.

This book has two major drawbacks. First, it is Americentric: all of the contributors are working in the United States and some of the instruments are designed primarily for American students. I did wish some works of Asian, European, African, and Australian scholars could have been used to balance out insights from the USA.

Second, some of the information could have been scaffolded more effectively. Adding some exploratory questions to the beginning of each chapter as well as a few reflection questions at the end would make this text more "experiential" and encourage critical reflection. The quality of the chapters is uneven, and this text could have been designed in a more interactive way.

The Bottom Line

In recent years several excellent texts about international program evaluation have come out, making the task of recommending a single book more daunting. This text covers some of the same topics as Bolen's *A Guide to Outcomes Assessment in Education Abroad* (2007), but has the advantage of offering an in-depth comparison of how nine institutions evaluate their study abroad programs. If you are fairly new to the field of educational assessment and hoping to garner a range of different ideas about how to evaluate the international programs at your school, Saviki and Brewer's book is worth reading. If, however, you are looking for a more practical "cookbook" approach to assessing study abroad outcomes, perhaps Deardorff's *Demystifying Outcomes Assessment for International Educators: A Practical Approach* (2015) might be more useful. That volume offers many handouts, worksheets, and practical ideas for administrators wanting to evaluate their programs. Then again, if you are interested in larger issues of program design and how to optimize pedagogical interventions in addition to assessment issues, I believe that Berg, Paige, and Lou's *Student Learning Abroad: What Our Students Are Learning, What They're Not* (2012) is certainly worth a read. Since more and more financial resources are being devoted to study abroad at many institutions around the world, study abroad advisors and program directors should probably become acquainted with each of these books.

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