

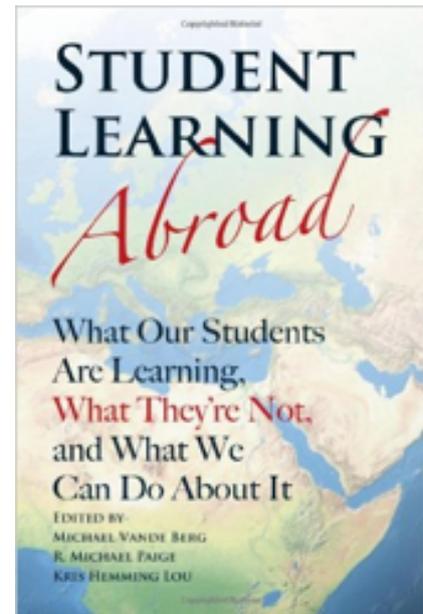


Book Review:

**Student Learning Abroad:
What Our Students Are Learning,
What They're Not,
and What We Can Do About It**

Edited by Michael Vande Berg, R. Michael Paige
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Stylus Publishing (2012)

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For those who cherish the belief that study abroad invariably leads to improved cross-cultural awareness or enhanced communication skills, this 470-page volume offers a useful and cautionary counter-narrative. *Student Learning Abroad* encourages study abroad program administrators to rethink their basic assumptions about what international education can – and cannot – accomplish. Five basic themes are interwoven through its seventeen chapters. Those themes are briefly summarized.

1. *The notion of how historical paradigm shifts have shaped study abroad programs*

This text helps readers appreciate how the notion of “study abroad” is an evolving social construct whose roots stretch back to the European Grand Tour of the 17th and 18th centuries, if not further. The fields of anthropology and intercultural communication have both impacted study abroad as it is known today. To some degree, sociological and psychological theories have also shaped many international education programs. Today, at least three competing paradigms for study abroad exist. From a positivist perspective, study abroad can be viewed as a chance to “get information” about foreign cultures and perhaps become “cultured.” From a relativist perspective, it is often framed as an opportunity for “immersion” in foreign cultures – although the requisite conditions for meaningful immersion are seldom understood. A third perspective is adopted by the twenty-two authors of this volume, who embrace a constructivist view of study abroad, emphasizing that its significance does not lie in any overseas experience per se, but rather in how students come to translate and regard those experiences. Engle and Engle aptly summarize this view by adding, “an event does not engender experience; rather, it is the personal interpretation of the event that determines the nature of experience.” (p. 302).

2. *Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)*

Post-modern readers uncomfortable with the notion of a universal Grand Narrative might find it difficult to accept Bennett’s (1986, 1993, 2004) DMIS model, which asserts that there are six developmental stages that individuals invariably pass through while progressing from monocultural ethnocentric worldviews towards more multicultural and ethnorelative worldviews. Teleologically, the DMIS model provides a *raison d’être* that frames the goals of many study abroad programs seeking to promote “internationalization.” Personally, I have come to regard the DMIS model as what Austin (2011) refers to as a “useful fiction.” This model provides a convenient way to

cognitively scaffold divergent views regarding intercultural contact. However, it also seems that some competing models such as Byram's (1997) multimodal model of intercultural competence or Dearsdorff's (2006, 2009) intercultural competence model have value. On this point, the editors acknowledge that, "although master narratives help us organize our lives into meaningful patterns, they can also limit our capacity to adapt to new conditions and take advantage of new opportunities" (p. 15). Today it seems prudent to acknowledge that the DMIS is the leading model of cross-cultural development and it stands as one of the core tenets of this book.

3. *Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)*

An epistemological discourse runs deep throughout this text, challenging conventional positivistic notions about what learning is and how it occurs. Marton and Saljo's (1976) distinction between "deep" and "surface" learning is repeatedly echoed, and the importance of transformative deep learning is underscored. For this to occur, the four phases of learning suggested by Kolb (1984) – concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract hypothesis, and active testing – are considered essential. Each of these involves differing cognitive functions – sensing, remembering, theorizing, and acting – and in Chapter 7 Zull refers to these as the "four pillars of learning" (p. 170). This text also mentions other learning theories such as Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory as well as Kegan's (1994) Subject-Object Theory. However, Kolb's ideas form the backbone of this text.

4. *The need for intercultural learning and "cultural literacy"*

The editors describe intercultural learning as "foundational" (p.18) and central to any study abroad experience. They suggest that active intercultural interventions are needed to foster critical reflection of observed differences during overseas sojourns. This text repeatedly argues for the need for mentoring by skilled cross-cultural experts during all phases of the study abroad experience: prior to departure, while overseas, and for at least a semester upon return. Vande Berg, Paige, and Lou further state, "Most students learn to learn effectively abroad only when an educator intervenes, strategically and intentionally" (p. 19) adding that "immersion in experience abroad will not, in and of itself, lead students to learn effectively." (p. 20). The importance of learning about value orientations, verbal and nonverbal communication styles, and conflict management styles is underscored throughout this work. The specific types of interventions described herein vary widely. For example, Chapter 11 mentions an interesting online pre-departure/post-return program. Chapter 15 portrays a ship-board program somewhat similar to Japan's Peace Boat™ program.

5. *Hammer's Intercultural Development Inventory® (IDI®)*

The need to accurately assess program outcomes is something that few administrators would disagree with. Although this text briefly describes a range of potentially useful assessment tools, only one is covered in depth: the IDI of Hammer (1999, 2009, 2011). Since this commercial, closed test is not open to public scrutiny, I find it difficult to dismiss my doubts about this 50-item survey, despite the fact that over seventy in-house validation studies have been conducted on it. Since the scoring method and items themselves are not transparent, I believe external validation is problematic. Many of the key studies in this volume rely on IDI measurements, and the fact that the IDI cannot be used to validate other assessment tools (Hammer, 2015, p. 5) or be independently validated makes me somewhat hesitant about this measurement tool.

The Bottom Line

This text provides a large body of evidence that counters some of the claims suggested by Allport's (1954) Intergroup Contact Hypothesis in study abroad contexts. In other words, it provides ample evidence that merely living in a foreign culture does not necessarily translate into a better understanding of it. This text also offers a useful overview of some of the diverse ways that study abroad pre-departure, on site, and post-return programs are being conducted at university-level programs in North America. Finally, the practical advice at the end of this volume from experienced study abroad administrators alone would make this text worth the purchase price.

The most obvious limitation of this text is its American-centric focus: all of its studies are from American institutions. However, Asian readers will likely find that a good deal of the material is also relevant to their contexts.

In conclusion, I feel this book does a valuable job of bringing together many disparate historical multidisciplinary threads. Although some readers may find it difficult to accept all of its tenets, the volume itself is certainly worth reading.

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