

Student learning and the role of a pre-trip course in a short-term study abroad program

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Research Questions

1. What are the richest benefits that students identify from their study abroad experience?
2. Were the students' experiences enhanced as a result of the pre-trip course they took?

Required pre-trip course

- ½ semester prior to departure
- Approximately 13 hours of instruction, including:
 - Immunization clinic, health and safety concerns
 - Overview of Ecuadorian history and culture
(*The Panama Hat Trail*)
 - Ecuadorian education system
 - Introduction to teaching English as a foreign language
(*More than a Native Speaker: An Introduction for Volunteers Teaching English Abroad*)

Wabash Program in Ecuador, 2009

- **2 weeks in Quito**
 - Students stayed with Ecuadorian host families
 - Took classes in Ecuadorian culture and Spanish at *PUCE*
 - Daily excursions to places of interest in Quito
- **1 week in South Quito**
 - Foundation serving at-risk youth in Quito's poorest district
 - Teaching English classes at Colegio Emilio Uzcátegui
- **Weekend trip to coast**
 - Guided visits focusing on flora and fauna
- **1 week in Amazon jungle**
 - Eco-lodge that supports technical high school
 - Hiking and visit to indigenous healer
 - Work projects and assisting with English language teaching at high school

Data Collection

- Student journal entries
 - 1 prior to departure
 - Approximately 2 per week while in Ecuador
 - Double entry journals (which in some cases doubled as blogs)
- Recorded “debriefings” following teaching in South Quito and in the Amazon
- Exit interviews 2-3 months after return
 - Benefits from experience/what learned
 - Critical incidents
 - Pre-trip course preparation

Benefits identified by students

- Increased proficiency in Spanish, especially in speaking and listening
- Increased knowledge of academic discipline (biology, education)
- Greater knowledge of and interest in the world, including the US
- Personal growth and development (maturity, self-confidence)
- Increased social conscience

Improved Spanish Skills

"I felt like my Spanish speaking ability was at an all time high when I talked to her [host mother] during dinner. After dinner, she would always make a point to tell me how much my Spanish had improved. Sometimes I knew that she was just saying it to be nice, but the times when I knew she was sincere, I always felt great inside." EI

"I increased my Spanish-speaking ability tenfold." MJ

"We only spoke in Spanish in the house [with the host family] and my language skill improved dramatically." IS

"The other night, we had a 4-hour conversation about life, religion, and personal beliefs, all in Spanish. I've never been able to do that before, and it was so cool to be able to sit with my host mom over cookies and tea and talk about such deep topics." CL

Greater Knowledge of Academic Discipline

PG, biology major:

"I had never seen a mountain up close before, let alone climbed one with my friends ... It was nice for me as a biology major because I got to see first hand the way plants cope with varying levels of resources. I pulled a lot of experiences from this mountain."

On first-ever visit to the ocean: "For the first time in my life all of the things I had read about in biology textbooks or heard about from friends were put into perspective. I was witnessing the incredible diversity of life I spent the last two semesters studying in my intro. Biology courses and I was loving it."

"As our boat began to approach the beach I couldn't help but notice the stunning geography and wonder how Charles Darwin felt as he approached islands similar to this."

Greater Knowledge of Academic Discipline

VN, Teacher Education:

“In all honesty, all of the studying that I have done at Wabash has finally come together here in Ecuador to give me a clear picture of myself as an educator and the true role that I have in a social context. I couldn’t have asked for a better outcome from such an immersion trip.”

Greater Knowledge about and Interest in the World (including the U.S.)

“The Ecuador program has allowed me to learn information that cannot be taught in the classroom. It has also allowed me to learn more about the world we live in.” IS

“The picnic [with host family] reminded me of how American society is so fast paced nowadays. In Ecuador a meal is a time to reflect and enjoy the company and food you are blessed with.” IS

“I was never, like, a guy that watched the news, hated it ... And now I kind of want to learn what’s going on around me in my country, in the world Definitely with talking with my host family they’d bring stuff up or explain something ... something that was historical that was going on. It was like, that’s pretty cool that they know so much about their culture, you know? So I just kind of felt that I needed to ... It’s an obligation for me to do that with my own American culture.” DK

Personal Growth and Development

- “I grew as a person, watching these students work so hard [at the school in the Amazon]. I consider myself a hard worker, but these kids just get it. They understand that when something needs to be done, they just do it. And this is what I took from the work in the mornings. Just do it.” EI
- “Words truly cant express the positive impact the Ecuador trip has had on me. The experience of learning about a different culture and also learning more about myself has helped me to grow as an individual.” IS

Greater Social Conscience

- “... the mall still seemed to be filled with U.S. Merchandize. We saw WWF wrestling belts, american brand clothing, even items advertised as, “It’s the rage in the states!” I thought it was kind of cool right at first but as I thought about it I was sickened. I came to Ecuador to experience their culture not to see how much ours was ruining theirs.” PG
- In a way I just expected all countries to be well off. I had no real idea that some countries could have it bad. Ecuador is a country comprised of mostly poor people. The middle class and upper class are extremely small in comparison. This is an important part of Ecuador’s culture. It makes it easier to understand why their is so much crime in certain parts of the city ...” PG

Critical Incidents

- “Another thing that stuck out to me was the amount of homeless families there are in Quito. Not only did I see homeless men and women, but I also saw a lot of homeless children as well. I will never forget the night that I was in one of the local bars dancing and socializing and I looked up and saw a small girl asking one of my friends for money. To clarify the situation, this little girl was no older than 5 years of age and was in the middle of a nightclub asking people for money. Not only did it break my heart, but again, it made me count my blessings and thank God for the things that I take for granted.” JJ
- “When I was going to school one day, I watched a little girl on the sidewalk, she went and picked a bottle up off the street that had something, that actually had some liquid left in the bottom of it, I don’t know if it was Coke or what, but she went over and took the cap right off and drank it, and it was just a bottle sitting on the side of the road. And her mom was sitting on the side, like up on the sidewalk right next to the road too, just watching her, and I went and got them a, got one of those giant, like 3 liter Cokes and took it down there and gave it to her.” CP

Value of Pre-Trip Course

- Learned about Ecuadorian culture
- Would have been more taken aback by poverty if not prepared in advance
- Got to know classmates prior to the trip, which helped adjustment in Ecuador
- Prepared them for teaching, including collaborative and group learning from those more experienced in Teacher Education
 “Definitely the education stuff ‘cause I’ve never done anything with teaching, anything like that, so I didn’t have any idea what I was getting myself into. And I felt like the lesson plans, all that, even though we didn’t [laughter] we didn’t use any of that while we were at the school, but it was nice to have that and to see, this is what we want to accomplish and these are going to be the most important ideas ...” CP

Plans for the Future

- Identify an appropriate instrument for measuring speaking and listening skills to administer as a pre- and post-test
- Provide a model for reflective journals in advance (to avoid descriptive entries with little or no reflection.)
- Include reflection on the value of the post-trip research projects
- Interview Ecuador program participants from earlier years to gauge the impact of the experience over time.