

Stepping Outside the American Study Abroad Bubble and Into a Spanish University Classroom

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Introduction

Every year thousands of American university students embark on the study abroad experience with expectations of meeting people from other cultures, learning a new language and traveling the world. Study abroad programs aim to facilitate these goals through offering opportunities to actively engage in the local culture. Interesting enough, although efforts are made at immersion through housing arrangements; living in host families, and extracurricular activities; internships, volunteering, buddy programs; the “study” aspect of study abroad most commonly remains through a US-run program instead of an academic institution of the host country, which would provide additional opportunities for contact with the local culture.

My research focuses on the “direct enrollment” experience, that is, the experiences of those who study within the host country’s system. I explore how they perceive the local universities classes, strategies they evoke to adapt to the new culture of learning, and the relationships they develop with students and professors in the classroom. In order to obtain a well-rounded understanding of the local setting, I also explore the local students’ and professors’ perspectives on their own university and impact of exchange students on it. The aim is understand the direct enrollment experience from the students’ perspective in order to develop recommendations that support their adaptation to the local classroom, allowing them to have a truly enriching experience.

Literature Review

Traditionally, US study abroad research has focused on determining student learning outcomes; mainly language acquisition, intercultural communication competence and personal development (Sanz and Morales-Front 2018; Ogden 2015; Paige, Cohen & Shively 2004). There has been much debate as to whether direct enrollment or American study abroad centers (also known as island programs) better promote learning outcomes. On the one hand, evidence shows students in direct enrollment programs develop more host-national friendships (Hendrickson 2016) and maintain relationships longer after the program has ended (Norris and Dwyer 2005). However, research also demonstrates direct enrollment is not effective for all students since it fails to provide support to overcome academic and sociocultural challenges presented (Vande Berg 2007; Scally 2015). These weaknesses may explain the prevalence of “hybrid” programs that offer the support of American centers coupled with some local classes. An unfortunate consequence is that US programs inherently increase peer group contact, which can detract from the development of local relationships (Allen 2010; Pyper and Slagter 2015) and tend to shelter students from the foreign environment, creating “American bubbles” hence negating potential learning opportunities (Ogden 2008).

While research has tried to quantify the impact of program type on learning outcomes (Terzuolo 2018; Vande Berg, Conner-Linton and Paige 2009), few examine the students’ experiences in local classrooms from their point of view. Three qualitative studies illustrate a similar pattern of how students’ negative perception of a host educational

setting can lead to disengagement from the class (Covert 2014; Goldoni 2009; Pellegrino-Aveni 2005; Bacon 2002). When expectations about learning are not met, it can result in misunderstandings which leave students with a negative view of the institution and its professors (Kinginger 2009). The present research considers direct enrollment in a university classroom as a potential environment for intercultural communication and language learning; but instead of attempting to measure learning outcomes and debating which program modality is “better”, it aims to gain a deeper understanding of students’ lived experiences and consequent process of learning.

Research Questions and Methodology

The research uses a qualitative approach from a social constructivist perspective which assumes each student constructs knowledge based on their individual experiences and social interactions in the classroom. Ethnography is both the method as well as the theoretical framework and it provides the appropriate tools to gather data and the analytic concepts to comprehend the students’ social experiences from their point of view. Specifically, this case study centers on the experiences of semester-long study abroad students from US universities in a large public university classroom in Spain. The objectives are:

- To explore how students from US universities adapt to the social and academic culture within the Spanish university classroom.
- To provide recommendations for study abroad students that would facilitate their academic and social adaption in the classroom.

During the academic year of 2017/18, I observed and participated in the university culture through attending 90 classes across the five faculties, conducting semi-structured interviews with participants and having informal conversations on campus with administrators, professors and students. Participants include 50 students from US universities (beginning and end of semester interviews) and six study abroad program administrators. Student characteristics vary from intermediate Spanish to native speakers, from small liberal arts schools to large public US universities, and from direct enrollment programs to attending one course at the Spanish university. Additionally, the research includes interviews with 23 professors and five international relations administrators, as well as informal focus groups with 65 local students from the Spanish university. The interviews explored views on what is considered good teaching and learning methodology, cultural differences and similarities in the classroom, strategies for academic success, and facilitators and barriers to social integration for exchange students. As the data shows, I strove for maximum variation sampling resulting in a rich and varied data set. So far, I have transcribed the data using CHAT conventions that I will analyze qualitatively in Atlas.ti. While the formal analysis is still underway, some preliminary observations can be discussed.

Contributions to International Higher Education

Although this is a case study, and therefore some conclusions could be considered culture specific; the process of adaptation, how students make meaning of their experiences, cope with cultural difference, and relate to their non-national peers and professors can be applied to the broader field of international education. Additionally, the data contributes to understanding different “cultures of learning”, socially transmitted expectations, beliefs and values about how to learn, teach, interact within the classroom and what is acceptable as good work (Jin and Cortazzi 1998) from Spain and the United States. The results seek to develop recommendations that focus on cultural synergy; a two way acculturation process in which both local students and professors and international students learn about each other’s cultures and adapt to achieve mutual benefits (Andrade 2006; Jin and Cortazzi 1998; Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 2005).

Conclusion

In the United States students generally rely on themselves to succeed academically and interactions with classmates are limited. The students follow the syllabus which outlines all requirements for the class. In Spain, study abroad students encounter a system in which expectations for deadlines, assignments and grades differ from what they are accustomed to. Spanish students generally rely on each other to pass classes and therefore value “compañerismo”, a relationship of solidarity and collaboration among classmates. Study abroad students that interact with their Spanish peers in the classroom are provided with insider information through what one student referred to as the “underground network”. This network shares class notes, tips about the professors, and even last years exams; information which can be key for exchange students to understand the professors’ expectations in the new academic culture.

Preliminary results shed light on facilitators and barriers to social and academic integration in the classroom. They consist of personality factors and university and/or program structure. Facilitators include student’s priorities, whether meeting local students and learning Spanish was important to them; and extrovertism, not being shy about asking questions to students and professors. Universities factors include Spanish “compañerismo” as well as group projects that provide additional opportunities for contact. Personal barriers include students’ schedules, especially for those with the majority of classes downtown in American centers; travelling on weekends, resulting in less time and motivation to meet Spanish students; and the fear of being judged for having an accent or making a mistake in Spanish. Barriers at the university itself include the previously existing cliques in the classroom that intimidate study abroad students; expectations, that Spanish students would initiate first contact; and lecture classes, that do not provide opportunities to speak to classmates.

Students who choose direct enrollment desire to explore the host culture in a more meaningful way. They seek the authentic experience of living as a college student in a foreign education system. Although adaptation and social integration in the classroom is limited for most students, it is impossible to deny students are learning through the mere experience. Perhaps it would be better to view direct enrollment study abroad as a period of discovery, confusion, excitement, frustration and cultural learning in which students learn to modify their ideas about what it means to learn in a university, accept one’s own limitations as a foreign student and grow from the experience in unexpected ways.

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