



International Short Faculty Led Experience to Germany, Poland and Czech Republic: An Intercultural Experience for Students from Two Different Universities in Two Different Countries

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Authors' contributions

*This work was an international collaboration between Oklahoma State University and
UPAEP University. Author MGFJ designed and conducted the course, and author PNP was
in charge of the promotion. Both authors reviewed and edited the manuscript, read and
approved the final manuscript.*

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ABSTRACT

Short Faculty Led Experiences (SFLE) are becoming very popular among higher education institutions, mainly because the students have the opportunity to travel with a

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professor, a person that they know and respect, the experience is short, and have the possibility of earn credit/hours toward their degree. The benefits of SFLE include, improve their knowledge of the host culture, and transform their worldview. However, most of the SFLE are organized by one institution and do not include traveling with students from another nationality. The purpose of this paper is to describe the process of designing and delivering a SFLE to Germany, Poland and Czech Republic, for students from two different universities in two different countries. The authors conclusions included, 1) the key of the development of this SFLE between two different universities in two different countries was the strong relationship between both institutions and the professor's academic leadership and intercultural competence; 3) language proficiency was "the challenge", 4) cultural differences, as time management and leadership style were crucial in the development of the program, and 5) organizing this experience reinforced the importance of the development of intercultural competence.

Keywords: Short faculty led programs; international.

1. INTRODUCTION

Short Faculty Led Experiences (SFLE) is becoming very popular among American Higher Education Institutions [1,2,3,4]. The number of American students who attend shorter than a semester has been growing, according to the Institute of International Education. The number of students who attended these programs increase 463 percent since 1985 [5]. Students attend SFLE for a variety of reasons; one of the most important motivations to attend is earning undergraduate or graduate credit/hours [6,7]. The length of the SFLE varies between 7 days to 2 month (being the 2 week experiences the most popular [10]. The main component of these experiences is that SFLE includes an international or national trip, at the beginning, during or at the end of the course. SFLE has showed help internationalize increasing the number of students who travel abroad, helping internationalize a campus [8,9]. Practically, every college and university in the United States has a web page offering international opportunities. Higher education institutions recognized the profound impact that these experiences have in students' lives, and these opportunities are more marketable and knowledgeable when they enter to the workforce [9,10].

Faculty members get involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of the program, as well as designing the syllabus and determining the course requirements [11,12]. These requirements normally include attending some classes before and after the traveling experience. A SFLE professor is not only in charge of the teaching process but it is also a guide, a counselor and a leader [11]. Designing and conducting a SFLE is an enormous responsibility for faculty members and they get very limited institutional support including recognition and logistic support. However, the rewards conducting a SFLE could be very important in the development of students' intercultural competence. Organizing SFLE in one institution is complex but coordinating two international higher education institutions from two different countries is a challenge and an opportunity.

There were not information available about international collaboration in Short Faculty Led Experiences (SFLE), so the purpose of this paper is to describe the process of designing and delivering a Short Faculty Led Experience that included students from UPAEP University in Mexico and Oklahoma State University in the United States, two different institutions from two different countries.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROGRAM

2.1 Course Design and Development

In 2012, the responsibility of the UPAEP Liaison office was an adjunct professor at UPAEP's Interdisciplinary Center of Graduate Studies [13,14], and at OSU School of International Studies [15]. The Liaison office Director proposed to organize a Short Faculty Led Experience which included students from Mexico and the United States. The course was entitled "Multicultural and Diverse Societies of Germany, Poland and Czech Republic, importance of Achieving Intercultural Competence".

Due the complexity of the logistic of the program, the professor selected a company specializing in academic study abroad experiences [16]. The professor reviewed all the company offered and selected: The Holocaust in Europe. This study abroad trip met the professor's expectations and requirements. The program was offered by EF Tours during the dates that students from both institutions were able to attend. (Spring Break 2013 – March 16-26, 2013).

In addition to the trip the selected course included, the study abroad experience, pre departure and post departure session as well as academic briefings and reflective experiences. All the academic content was designed and conducted by the professor.

The course description for UPAEP and OSU was defined as Multicultural and Diverse Societies of Germany, Poland and Czech Republic, the importance of achieving intercultural competence. It was presented mainly to support Oklahoma State University and UPAEP University, as well as other higher education institutions' strategies to increase intercultural understanding and competence, diversity, and intercultural opportunities among undergraduate and graduate students, preparing them to live and work in different societies. The focus of this class is to discuss the basic concepts of the European XX Century history from a cultural perspective. This course included a general understanding of the World War II, Cold War, cultural values and stereotypes, intercultural sensitivity and competence, tolerance vs. acceptance, and the importance of learning history and cultural differences. Theory was presented and discussed in open forums encouraging students to critically discuss the importance of analyzed world history, as well as appropriated behaviors in diverse societies, understanding and respecting diversity and cultural differences in order to become intercultural competent and global leaders.

2.2 Course Objectives and Platform

The course was designed using the Oklahoma State University Desire to Learn Platform (D2L). Students from both institutions enrolled in the course were granted access to the platform. The course was designed using a Hybrid model, where the students were able to attend face to face sessions, Skype sessions and work on their assignments using the discussion and the drop box in the D2L platform.

The course was designed in three steps; the first one included pre-departure assignments, and the second one consisting in the study abroad experience itself and in third one a reflection and final paper.

The learning goal of the course was to reflect the Multicultural and Diverse Societies of Germany, Poland and Czech Republic, the importance of Achieving Intercultural Competence. Discussion of the importance of accepting cultural differences vs. learning to tolerate different cultures, importance of achieving intercultural sensitivity and competence while gaining an understanding of the importance of developing appropriated skills to live and work in multicultural and diverse societies. The learning objectives as a result of participating in this course were to: 1) Describe the major events leading up to World War II; 2) Interpret and analyze the importance of the historic events of the XX Century and the relationship of these events with the United States (Cold War); 3) Discuss and analyze the importance of cultural values and stereotypes, as part of the acceptance of cultural differences; 4) Interpret and analyze the importance of inclusive global societies, managing diversity, and cultural intelligence; 5) Identify, analyze, evaluate and summarize cultural differences among people from Europe (each one of the countries that will be visited) and the people of United States; 6) Develop effective strategies to successfully approach people from other cultures; 7) Develop successful intercultural training strategies both personal and as a group so as to improve intercultural competence.

After the course was designed, it was presented to the Dean of the Graduate College at UPAEP and to the Director of the International Studies academic program. They authorized the course and assigned a course number and started offering the course to graduate students in Mexico and undergraduate and graduate students in the United States. The course was marketed for undergraduate and graduate students from both institutions.

2.3 Pre Departure

Eight students (four from each institution) enrolled in the course, one undergraduate and seven graduate students. After enrollment, they were granted access to the Desire 2 Learn platform at Oklahoma State University. The platform was designed to secure the self-guidance of each one of the participants in the program. The D2L platform includes a home page where the students select the course. The main page includes a course home, content, discussion, dropbox, quizzes, class list and grades.

The pre departure assignments include read a book about cultural intelligences and to watch five movies related to the topic, some suggestions were Hitler Biography, Casablanca, Schindler's List, Rome, Open City, Come and See, Ana Frank Diary, Life is Beautiful, Pianist, The boy with the Stripped Pajamas, Nuremberg, D Day, Confessions of a Nazi Spy and The ring.

The students attended three departure sessions (face to face or by Skype). During those sessions the professor discussed the general content of the course, the assignments and the logistic for the trip. The assignments included the attendance to the pre departure sessions, a description of their personal objectives, summary of the book chapters and movies, travel abroad and reflective journal.

2.4 Study Abroad Experience (Trip to Europe)

After the students attended the departure sessions, read the books and turned in their assignment the Study Abroad Experience began. American students traveled with the professor to Berlin from Oklahoma City Airport. Mexican students traveled by themselves from the Mexico City Airport. Both groups met in the Hotel in Berlin.

The schedule of the trip included the following main activities and visits, guided tour of Berlin, visiting Brandenburg Gate, Kurfurstendamm, Berlin Wall, Checkpoint Charlie, Jewish Museum, Unter den Linden, Reichstag. Trip to Warsaw; visit the ghetto and the Jewish Institute. Krakow, Wawel Hill, Główny Square, Auschwitz and Birkenau. Prague, Charles Bridge, Vitus Cathedral, Golden Line, Jewish Quarter, Museum, Cemetery, and Synagogues.

During the experience, the students were interacting with each other, sharing rooms and learning about cultural differences. Each one of them was responsible for completing a reflective journal during the trip.

2.5 Post Study Abroad Experience

After the trip was over the students returned to their countries. The final assignment included the reflective journal and the course evaluation.

3. DISCUSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Designing and delivering the program was a challenge due the complexity of the coordination between two institutions in two different countries. Getting the administrator to work together was a difficult challenge. However, students who participated in this international experience agreed that the experience was rewarding and challenging. These comments agree with Rosenberg [17], who mentioned that the challenges of study abroad are great but the rewards are greater.

The main challenge of this international experience was the language, students from UPAEP University in Mexico were bilingual but not fluent, American students were monolingual. Even when the instructor was bilingual, all the tours and programs included in the experience were offering in English. The countries we visited were not English speaking countries, and that make American students realized that learning another language could be a good professional investment [18].

Cultural differences among American and Mexican students were evident during the course (before and after the trip); according to the students, the main differences were time management, and relations vs. task orientation [19]. Mexican students were more relax about time, and made American students feel uncomfortable sometimes, but Mexican students orientation toward the relations made the trip more relax and enjoyable. Some of the students' comments after the experience were: *"This trip change my perception about Mexicans", "This trip change my life forever", "I will continue traveling abroad in the future", "learning from other cultures was an enrichment experience", "working with people from different cultures is not as easy as I thought", "you need to be aware of cultural differences", and "I wish I had this type of experience when I was an undergraduate student"*.

The authors conclusions included, 1) the key of the development of this SFLE between two different universities in two different countries was the strong relationship between both institutions and the professor's academic leadership and intercultural competence; 3) language proficiency was "the challenge", 4) cultural differences, as time management and leadership style were crucial in the development of the program, and 5) organizing this experience reinforced the importance of the development of intercultural competence, as the ability to effectively work with people from other cultures.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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