

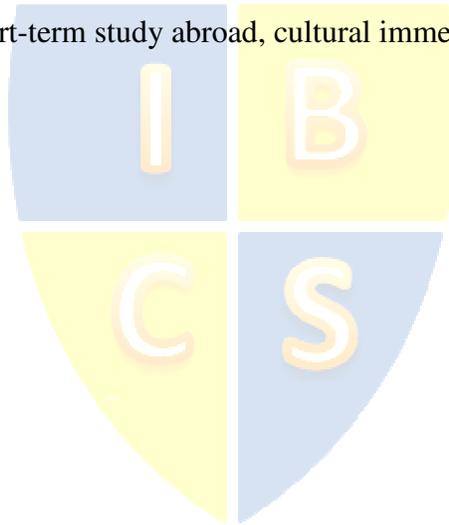
Short-term study abroad in India: from cultural continuity to technological advances

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ABSTRACT

Preparation, on-site travel experiences and reflections of a short-term study abroad trip to India during Winter Break 2015 is discussed from the perspective of best practices for design and delivery of a study abroad program. Also addressed are the multi-cultural, interdisciplinary composition of the students, faculty, and community members who participated in the program. Of particular focus is the perceived value of the interdisciplinary composition of the students whose academic backgrounds include business, education, and psychology.

Keywords: India, student, short-term study abroad, cultural immersion



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INTRODUCTION

According to DeLoach, Kurt, and Olitsky (2015), “for decades, business schools have sought to increase students’ global awareness through study abroad program.” (p. 4). Study abroad literature currently reflects positive findings regarding the effectiveness of two-to-three-week study abroad programs in increasing cross-cultural understanding as presented by Gai, (2015). Bégin-Caouette, Angers, and Niflis (2015) have identified study abroad programs “including cultural and linguistic stays, humanitarian projects, student exchanges and work abroad programs” as a valuable tool of education in the 21st century. It is noted that cultural immersion is an important component of this effectiveness. As reported by Grosse (2011), “As globalization and e-commerce develop, the need for cultural knowledge grows more acute” (p. 308). The short-term study abroad program described in this paper involves cultural immersion in multiple cities across India. India, Brazil, Russia and China (BRIC), along with Asia and Africa have been identified as emerging markets that could benefit from the growth in globalization (Kunnanatt, 2013).

In August 2015 the College of Education and Social Sciences (COESS) and the College of Business (COB) at a regional university in West Texas partnered for a short-term study abroad program that would take place in India during the 2015 – 2016 Winter break. Some 24 faculty, community members and graduate students from the COESS and the COB participated in the study and trip to India. A schedule was prepared that included visits to small villages in the south of India, as well as centers of technology and commerce in larger cities, particularly in the middle and northern areas of India. India is home to many different religions including Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Sikhism and Christianity. The role of religion in the daily lives of people in India is pervasive. To understand the importance of religion in the fabric of the lives of people in India, background in key concepts of these five religions was reviewed and trips to temples, mosques and other religious organizations were planned as part of the trip. Certainly a visit to India would be incomplete without including the holiest city in India, Varanasi. Another aspect of the structure of this particular study abroad program was the inclusion of key historical sites, particularly those related to the rule of the Moghuls, the influence of Indian artisans, and the influence of the British during the time when Great Britain ruled in India.

A major purpose of this paper is to highlight the potential value to be gained from including a multidisciplinary approach in both students and content. The paper provides an overview of the structure of this short-term study abroad program and how it conforms with best practices for a short-term study abroad program as described by Sachau, Brasher, and Fee (November 2010). It is the position of the author that the multidisciplinary academic backgrounds of the students and the development of on-site activities designed to fit with each of the academic backgrounds of the students participating in the program helped to create a richer outcome for all participants. Nguyen (2015) supports the idea that cross-cultural development is more likely to take place in an environment where there is a desire to engage socially with peers. The option for self-selection to participate in a multi-disciplinary study abroad program involving cultural immersion supports findings of multiple papers published recently including Nguyen, Petzold and Peter, and Sachau, Brasher, and Fee. Composition of the students who self-selected to participate in this short-term study abroad experience also reflects interculturality.. Borghetti, Beaven, & Pugliese (2015) describe interculturality as “a dynamic process by which people draw on and use the resources and processes of cultures with which they are familiar but also those they may not typically be associated with in their interactions with others” (p. 32).

Sixteen students participated in the short-term study abroad trip to India. There were nine female students and seven male students traveling with the group. Six of the students were Hispanic, one was Palestinian, seven were Caucasian and two were Indian. The two students from India were traveling with the group to serve as interpreters as needed. Three of the faculty/community members were traveling to India for the twenty-first time. Three of the faculty/community members were traveling to India for the first time. It is interesting note that thirteen of the sixteen students participating in this short-term study abroad program are either Caucasian or Hispanic. Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2015), in their studies of predictors of study abroad intent, found little difference between the likelihood of students of Hispanic and Caucasian to participate in short-term study abroad programs. The paper is organized into three sections. The first section includes an overview of each of the four orientation sessions that were designed to acquaint students with factors related to travel safety and discipline related activities, the culture of India, the role of religion in the lives of people in India, the historical background that helped India develop into the country it has become today, as well as some of the factors impacting the country's economy and related social issues. Section two moves the reader from the anticipation and preparation of what would be experienced to explanations of the actual experiences of the study abroad group within India, especially as they related to education, country culture, religious practices, and business operations. Section three reflects on the differences and similarities between what was anticipated from the orientation sessions as compared and contrasted with actual travel experiences and includes concluding remarks regarding the short-term study abroad experience and its relevance to an intercultural, multi-disciplinary group of students.

PREPARATION

There were four orientation sessions scheduled for all of the people (faculty, graduate students, and community representatives) who would be participating in this study abroad program. As noted by Holmes, Bavieri, & Ganassin (2015), "one way of promoting intercultural learning of self and others is through intercultural encounters" (p. 17). An overarching goal of the preparation activities and the actual in-country experiences was to intentionally increase intercultural awareness in specific ways. Students were prepared to experience a variety of local accommodations ranging from homes in small villages to stays in five star hotels and even a visit to a hotel built by the British during the time they controlled much of India. During the trip students would be immersed in local Indian cuisine for each of the areas visited as well as being encouraged to learn and use local customs (e.g., not eating with the left hand but becoming somewhat proficient with eating with the right hand without the customary utensils used in the United States). It is practices such as these, according to Bandyopadhyay and Bandyopadhyay (2015) that enhance intercultural competence in students as opposed to providing only a descriptive exposure to other cultures. While the pre-departure orientation sessions provided a descriptive exposure to the cultures that would be experienced in India, it was the actual experiences of participating in the cultural practices that would result in students moving from lower to higher levels of intercultural awareness. A discussion of the topics covered in each pre-departure orientation session follows.

Travel and Activities in India

The initial orientation session focused on issues of how to prepare to travel safely in India and some of the cultural issues that related to differences of expectations regarding how men and women were treated in the United States and in India. Issues related to food and water safety, packing, leisure time activities and general logistics of the trip were discussed. Expectations of acceptable dress, particularly by women traveling in India, were also addressed.

Activities relevant to each of the three academic disciplines represented by the graduate students who would be participating in the program were described. The College of Education and Social Sciences had graduate students from both Education and Psychology who would be participating in the program. Students majoring in education would have the opportunity to work with young boys in an Orphan's Home close to Nizamabad and to tour a government school and a private school. They would view educational practices at each site and have an opportunity to meet with students. Students majoring in psychology would have an opportunity to provide testing of selected students in the Orphan's Home for Boys and explain their findings to the personnel who worked with the boys on a daily basis. Students completing an MBA in the College of Business would learn about agricultural practices in a small village, visit a plant where seeds were treated, sacked and distributed, learn about technology practices in India through a tour of Microsoft's Research and Development facilities in Hyderabad, learn about tourism from the tour company responsible for providing oversight to our transportation and on site activities, Uday Tours & Travel, Pvt. Ltd., and receive an introduction to the spices used in Indian cooking and how spices were purchased by McCormick to be sold worldwide. In addition to participating in the daily activities during the study abroad program, students from the College of Business were expected to complete a research paper upon their return to the campus that essentially compared and contrasted business practices in India and the United States for three different areas (e.g., agriculture, tourism, and technology). Business students were encouraged to make daily notes related to their activities but were not required to submit journals for review at the end of the trip as was expected by students in the College of Education and Social Sciences. Craig, Zou & Poimbeauf (2014) have commented on the importance of journaling as a method of discovery and reflective analysis that can transform mere tourism into mindful travel. While the author supports the use of daily journaling, Heffron and Maresco (2014) have discussed the concept that "The experience of studying abroad, with its new setting, new culture, new classmates and professors, new activities, and new travel experiences – takes students outside of their comfort zone" (351). There is also consideration to be made that the exposure to the new activities and culture itself is an important component of personal growth and increased sensitivity towards other cultures.

Religions of India and Religious Practices

The second orientation session focused on the diversity of religion in India and the role of religion in the daily lives of the people in India. It was explained that India is "all religion-all the time." According to the information provided by Dr. Eddie Henderson, "India is the birthplace of two of the worlds' four largest religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, and home to the world's third largest Muslim population. Additionally, India is the birthplace of Jainism and Sikhism." The assigned reading for this orientation session was *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion* by Stephen P. Huyler. Dr. Henderson lead a discussion regarding each of the key religions found in India.

Historical Perspective

A historical perspective of India was the focus of the third of four orientation sessions designed to better acquaint us with India's past and present culture, a continuation of explaining the role of religion and the variety of religions practiced in India. As noted by Moran (2014), "The ancient land of India began in prehistoric times. Around 1500 B.C., Aryans descended from the north and integrated with the native Dravidians to form the basis of classical Indian society. The earliest inhabitants settled along the banks of great rivers. Archaeological discoveries reveal that some 500 years ago, a high-level civilization flourished in the western and northwestern parts of India. (p. 341)"

While multiple writers have addressed India's past in terms related to the earlier beginnings of civilization, the focus for this study abroad program began with the rule of the great moghuls from 1526 through 1707, the subsequent rule of Great Britain, and finally India's gaining their independence from Great Britain in 1947. We also examined some of the advances made by India in global business practices. The assigned reading for this orientation session was *Taj Mahal: Passion and Genius at the Heart of the Moghul Empire* by Diana and Michael Preston.

Social Issues

The fourth and final orientation session focused on social issues primarily from a perspective of their impact on women. The topics were varied but started with arranged marriages, the idea of wedding first, love later. The focus was more on the joining of families than love between a husband and wife although the divorce rate for a couple with an arranged marriage is much lower than the divorce rate for couples in the United States who marry for love. Along with the arranged marriage is the subject of dowry. The wife's family is expected to provide a dowry to be paid to the husband's family. Sometimes it may be determined later that the initial amount was insufficient and the wife and her family are pressured to provide more dowry. When additional money has not been forthcoming it seems that wives may have been killed over this issue.

Another issue that was discussed related to sati or the burning of the widow on the husband's funeral pyre. While sati is prohibited it can still happen in some areas of India. In some families, a widow can be viewed as an expense. For families whose income is barely enough to feed themselves, feeding a widow may be seen as an expense that cannot be afforded.

Another issue that was discussed was that of child brides. While this may not be as prevalent today as it has been in the past, it appears that it is still practiced in some areas of India. Female children are often seen as an expense while male children are seen as a source of potential future income for the family. It is still the custom in many families in India for women to move to the home of their husband upon marriage. They bring a dowry with them and then they work for the husband and his family. Because of this perceived loss of income associated with a female child, sometimes women are forced to undergo testing to determine in advance the sex of the child she is carrying. Some women are then forced to undergo an abortion so that they may try later for a male child. There has been a higher rate of newborn deaths of female children reported than of male children. The assigned reading for the fourth and final orientation meeting was *May You be the Mother of a Hundred Sons* by Elisabeth Bumiller.

Also mentioned was a book by P. Sainath *Everybody Loves a Good Drought: Stories from India's Poorest Districts* that highlights a system of debt whereby the poor have no opportunity of ever overcoming the growing charges applied to their loans. It also looks at health and education in rural India where the poor are often targeted with no way of improving their

circumstances. The problems associated with a lack of clean water, particularly for those in rural India, are also addressed.

In addition to the books cited in each of the orientation sessions, a variety of films were mentioned as a source of viewing cultural customs and practices in India. A list of films viewed by the author before traveling as part of this study abroad trip are provided in Appendix A. The focus of the films varies from comedy to more serious issues such as child poverty and homelessness, struggles of living in two cultures, the perceived value of being fluent in English - the language of business in India, how poverty shapes decisions regarding the future of an older daughter and how a child bride too young to remember a wedding can become a widow and be forced to leave her parents' home to live with much older widows where prostitution was their only access to income. In each of the films, regardless of the seriousness of the issues addressed or the comedy that might be woven into the plots, religious customs and beliefs are ever present as are the cultural practices so common in the India market places.

The following section highlights key activities and experiences that took place during the actual study abroad program.

REFLECTIONS

The 21 previous trips to India made by two of the faculty and one community member contributed greatly to the effectiveness of this short-term study abroad program to India. It could have served as a model for the publication by Fox, King, and Reina (2014), "To the end of the world and back: A primer for international study trips". Literally everything described in this primer was applicable to the planning completed for the Winter break short-term study abroad trip to India. Much of the success of the trip can be attributed to the detailed planning and the frequently repeated mantra, "Everything is subject to change but everything will work out." And it did. Because of the in-depth pre-trip planning and cultural discussions, students had a realistic understanding of what to expect at each stage of the journey. They also had a pre-conceived expectation that it was very likely that changes could be needed and would be made as necessary but in the end it was still going to be a life changing experience with an opportunity to experience a new culture (to the participants who were traveling to India for the first time) with a history and background reaching far back in time centuries before the United States was ever considered. An interesting parallel between India and the United States is that both were at one time subjects of Great Britain and both chose to pursue, and to achieve, their independence from Great Britain. One country chose a path of passive resistance. The other country chose to declare war and fight until victory was won. The multi-disciplinary makeup of the students' academic backgrounds and the on-site activities enriched the experiences the students, faculty members, and community members who participated in this cultural immersion to learn more about India. The breadth and variety of activities increased the depth of learning for all students and spanned education, business practices, religious practices and cultural experiences that varied with each individual and their level of openness and comfort with all that was available to them. These experiences took place in small villages located south of Hyderabad and in larger cities such as Hyderabad, Agra, Delhi, and New Delhi. If there is one common outcome for all of the participants of this short-term study abroad program, it is that their perceptions about what it means to be from India or to live and work in India are forever changed and personalized.

The content covered in the four mandatory orientation sessions helped all participants in the study abroad trip be familiar with a wide variety of issues common to India. Participants

knew in advance to expect in the street markets of the larger cities they would need to be careful about how they protected money and other valuables. Seeing a seasoned tour guide have his cell phone stolen in the market by a young boy reminded everyone that while everyone in the group was treated in a friendly and gracious manner, it took only a few seconds for property to be stolen. Everyone gained an appreciation for learning the art of negotiation and practicing this new skill where the results were sometimes better than others. Participants knew what behaviors were considered respectful and the type of clothing that was and was not acceptable for women and men in India.

From small villages to large cities, from temples and mosques, from more formal upscale shops and street markets, from smaller hotels to more luxurious hotels, from historical structures to modern day technology plants, there was much to see and do every day. As the group made its way through a multitude of places in the country known as India, the people could not have been more gracious and could not have done more to make this group feel welcome.

CONCLUSIONS

The combination of pre-departure orientation sessions, reading materials and videos that resulted in discussions about what to expect while traveling and studying in India helped all participants arrive prepared to better understand the local culture in both small villages and larger cities. The background gained before visiting small businesses in rural communities and high technology companies in larger cities was very helpful. Because of the impact of culture on business practices, having some background about the cultural background related specifically to India, it was easier to understand some of the differences in how business was conducted in India as opposed to the United States. Having gained some cultural understanding in advance of traveling to India, students appeared to be more comfortable trying behaviors that matched cultural expectations of the people in India.

The cultural background gained in advance of traveling to India was also helpful as all students worked with students in a variety of educational settings. Understanding in advance the pervasive role of religion in India made students more comfortable with the ways in which religion and education were intertwined. While respect was shown for the traditional approaches to education in the schools that were visited, the students and faculty where we visited were also open to our students using more experiential educational approaches during the time they spent with their students. There were also opportunities for psychology students to administer evaluations to help identify specific areas of strengths for some of the students in one particular school.

While the students who participated in this short-term study abroad program came from a variety of different academic backgrounds (e.g., business, education, and psychology) and different ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Caucasian, Hispanic, Palestinian, and Indian), the result was a group of students who worked together effectively to benefit from each of the experiences available during this program. The result appeared to be cultural and educational growth and development of all participants regardless of their academic or cultural backgrounds.

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APPENDIX A

Selected Films Highlighting Indian Culture

Brick Lane. Produced by Sony Pictures. 2009.

English Vinglish. Produced by EROS International & R. BAL. 2013.

India Rising: The New Empire. Produced by CNBC. 2009.

Monsoon Wedding. Produced by Universal Studios. 2002.

Salaam Bombay! Produced by Metro Goldwyn Mayer. 1988.

The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel. Produced by 20th Century Fox. 2012.

The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel. Produced by 20th Century Fox. 2015.

The Namesake. Produced by 20th Century Fox. 2006.

Water. Produced by 20th Century Fox. 2005.

Well Done Abba. Produced by Reliance Big Pictures. 2009.