Safe Space in Education Abroad: Setting the Stage to Learn

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Introduction

Education abroad programs generally claim to transform participants by breaking down cultural walls and imparting intercultural knowledge and skills. Theoretical and practical efforts aimed at increasing participant preparation, program excellence, and engagement via facilitators are admirable, yet partial, contributions to these goals (Anderson, Lorenz, & White, 2016). A recent case study I conducted exploring what students learned in their education abroad experience and what contributed to that learning revealed the centrality of safe space as an accelerator to learning, intercultural engagement, and personal transformation (Kadatz, 2018). Entering culturally disorienting spaces, often with unfamiliar people, education abroad programs contain the elements to transform individuals and groups. Global trends indicate education abroad's continued expansion in coming years, extending beyond the most adventurous participants (Knight-Grofe & Rauh, 2016; Study Group on Global Education, 2017). Without confidence and courage to express ideas and insights, share insecurities about new surroundings, and engage the other, the potential for personal transformation comes into question. Safe space provides room for connection, vulnerability, healthy conflict, reflection, academic integration, and creativity. These combined components in turn build confidence and security in education abroad participants, propelling them into learning opportunities. For the purpose of this discussion, safe space will be defined as an

environment of trust that allows for personal and group transformation through open and honest dialogue (Kadatz, 2018). Education abroad providers need to prepare program leaders to create safe spaces that facilitate engagement and transformation.

Method

I undertook my case study from a constructivist paradigm, primarily social constructivism, which looks at the "cognitive structures that are still in the process of maturing, but which can only mature under the guidance of or in collaboration with others" (Berkeley Graduate Division, 2016). The specific group my research examined was the group of students and staff participating in St. Stephen's University's (SSU) Europe 2016 seven-week education abroad program. A unique phenomenon amongst higher education programs, the class progresses through their liberal arts education together and then travels as a unit with familiar staff and faculty who guide them in situ through their educational experience. I utilized indexes, questionnaires, observations, interviews, and student assignments as data sets. I collected observations between the dates of June 8-19, 2016, when I joined the group partway through the program at their base locations in Perugia, Italy and Vienna, Austria. My study involved all willing students who were enrolled in the SSU Europe 2016 education abroad program. Twenty students enrolled in the program and nineteen completed it for academic credit. Since the assignments were a key component of the data sets, only students who completed the program for academic credit were invited to participate in the research. Nineteen students agreed to participate in the research. Using a saturation method, semi-structured interviews that lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes were conducted with eleven students until there ceased to be additional significant information added.

The group of students consisted of twelve females and seven males who were between the ages of 21 and 25 at the time of completing the post-program questionnaire (December 2016) and indicated that their ethnic background was either Canadian or European. At this time two students were in their third year of studies, 13 were in their fourth year, and four had completed their degree. Seven students were international studies majors, four were psychology majors, one was a history major, one was a religious studies major, and the remaining six were double majors of varying disciplines.

I worked at the same place where the research was being conducted and was a teaching assistant for the course from which I drew the assignment data. This necessitated vigilance on my part to ensure that I did not compromise the research data I was collecting, harm the individuals with whom I was conducting the research, or bring my own biases, values, and desires for research results inappropriately into the study (Creswell, 2014).

The procedure used for data analysis in this research study closely followed Creswell's (2014) model. All data sets were reviewed twice, and themes were drawn using an iterative process that looked within and across the data sets. Over one hundred base themes emerged from this process, which were then reduced to the following consolidating themes: Community, Leaders, Learning, Liminal, Locals, The Other, Program Structure, Reflection, Safe Spaces, Spirituality, and Students. These were further organized into three groups: Learning Environment, Group Interactions, and Outside Ourselves.

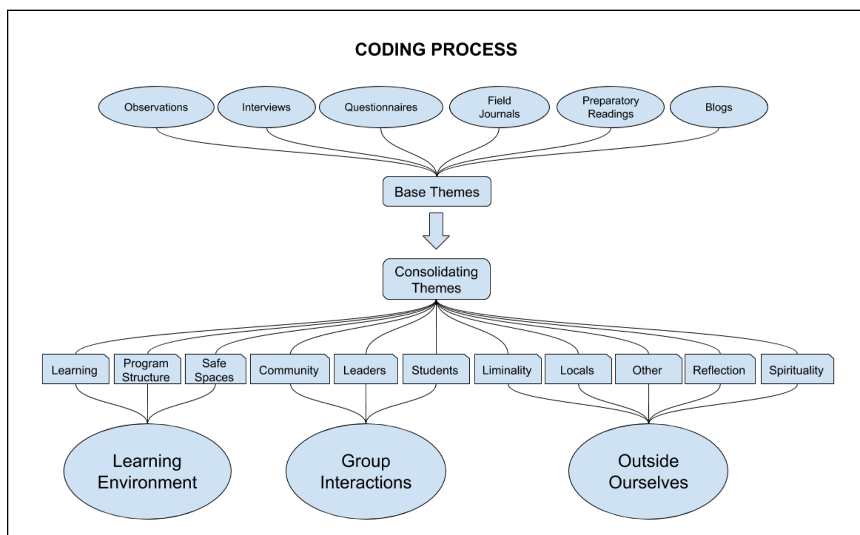

Figure 1. Coding themes from data sets to final groups.

The Learning Environment, Group Interactions, and Outside Ourselves groups began to give a picture of what the base themes emerging from the data sets were indicating. The overarching picture showed that a group of students familiar with each other were exposed to an intentionally wide range of academic and cultural content and encouraged to engage with that content through questions, discussion and reflection. A leadership group that was knowledgeable, professional, relational, and accessible facilitated this process of engagement. This produced a program containing a wealth of academic, cultural, and personal learning opportunities in which students engaged individually, amongst their peers, and with the leadership. Their ability to engage and the depth of engagement was enhanced by the safe learning environment and shared learning experience. This

enabled them to emerge from the program with significant conceptual, intrapersonal, and intercultural learning; strengthened and broadened personal relationships; and expanded, curious worldviews. Safe space emerged as an unexpected theme within the data sets and is explored in more depth below.

Safe Space

Being accepted for who we are, what we have said, or how we have said it are deep human longings (Brown, 2017). People have and will continue to look for safe opportunities to express and process emotions and ideas, especially on sensitive topics. Kurt Lewin (1997) desired to alleviate social conflict by making space for and addressing problems experienced by minority and disadvantaged groups. His work in social psychology led to the development of sensitivity training (T-groups) that used honest feedback to increase self-awareness and identify personal biases among group members in an effort to address issues of racism and religious prejudice. Manifested under Carl Rogers as encounter groups, these groups established a space where

> the individual will gradually feel safe enough to drop some of his defenses and facades; he will relate more directly on a feeling basis with other members of the group; he will come to understand himself and his relationship to others more accurately; he will change in his personal attitudes and behavior; and he will subsequently relate more effectively to others in his everyday life situation...[I]n this situation of minimal structure, the group will move from confusions, fractionation, and discontinuity to a climate of greater trust and coherence. (Rogers, 1974, p. 370)

Later adopted by women's movements and the LGBTQIA2S+ community (Kenney, 2001; Roestone Collective, 2014), the use and definition of the term continues to evolve and has made

inroads into social work and education. The capacity of these spaces to aid participants in navigating uncertainty and change is highlighted in the constructive engagement with the inherent resulting discomfort of facing that uncertainty with others (Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015; Redmond, 2010; Roestone Collective, 2014; Zembylas, 2015). Spiritual philosopher Henri Nouwen suggests that these kinds of learning spaces contain "mutual trust in which those who teach and those who want to learn can become present to each other, not as opponents, but as those who share in the same struggle and search for the same truth" (1986, pp. 85-86).

Safe space stands out as the most significant finding in my study. Establishment of safe space enabled students to be authentic to themselves and the group with their suppositions, emotions, insecurities, and beliefs. Safe spaces serve as the nexus between information and experiences the students encounter and outcomes of liminality, engaging the other, reflection, and healthy spirituality. Leader disposition and program content within the learning environment merge with the familiarity of the group to establish these safe spaces where authenticity emerges. Contrary to the concerns that this may create an atmosphere that reinforces paradigms and protects students from real world interactions, these safe spaces encourage vulnerable sharing and building social bridges, intellectual disagreement within the group, and open-minded engagement with the world.

Education abroad addresses physical safety in risk management and orientation practices but has been slow to ensure the implementation of safe spaces to support and enhance the student learning process. This is despite contributions from the field of experiential learning stating that engaging in effective reflection and meaning making requires a psychological safe space (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Disorienting and unfamiliar by nature, education abroad spaces are potentially unsafe spaces that

challenge and stretch students significantly. Acknowledging these factors in combination highlights the need to establish safe spaces for students to take part in effective experiential education (Hawe & Dixon, 2016; Ripamonti, Galuppo, Ivaldi, Scaratti, & Bruno, 2018). Whether because of logistical limitations, an overemphasis on intercultural and linguistic competence as a quantifiable outcome, or the perceived impossibility of creating these spaces consistently, little research has been directed toward this aspect of education abroad until recently (Anderson, Lorenz, & White, 2016). This absence raises the question of how much attention is given to the topic of safe space in practice. Without the provision of safe space, students set out on resource intensive educational initiatives without the ability to reap the benefits of those experiences.

Understanding what constitutes safe spaces in an education abroad setting specifically and knowing how to establish these spaces will be an important step toward expanding learning possibilities for education abroad students. My study's contribution to that effort is that it identifies components that facilitated safe spaces in this case study: a supportive environment that encourages questioning and challenging; familiarity and trust among students, staff, and faculty; and invitations to share vulnerably. Implementing these components into existing pre-departure, orientation, and assignment aspects of education abroad programming can effectively and affordably increase the development of safe spaces for students. Key to implementing these activities is the presence of facilitators with an aim to develop safe spaces.

Leaders

Leaders were acknowledged in the data from my research as the most significant factor in establishing safe spaces and fostering the subsequent outcomes of liminality, engaging the

other, reflection, and healthy spirituality. Students willingly participated in the program, drawing from and adding value to their interactions with each other, which were enhanced due to their familiarity and pre-established level of trust with each other. However, it is improbable that they would have engaged in the nature, number, and depth of activities with program content and each other without intentional leader facilitation. Leaders designed and facilitated a learning environment that prepared students to engage with academic and cultural content from a perspective of curiosity and openness to dialoguing with difference. Ample space and time were provided for program content, autonomous learning, reflection, group interactions and logistics, and rest. Leaders positioned themselves as co-learners and co-creators of knowledge, understanding, and meaning, making room for student input in the learning experience. They also connected with students intentionally and consistently, making themselves available for academic and personal needs. Students perceived the leadership as approachable and available, describing them as caring companions on the learning journey.

Effective leadership's impact on student learning and engagement is well established and supported in the literature on education abroad. Contributions in recent years emphasized the necessity of program facilitator interaction with participants consistently, prompting them with questions and cultural guidance that foster intellectual curiosity and participant initiative (Anderson, Lorenz, & White, 2016; Engle & Engle, 2012; Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2003; Nam, 2011; Ripamonti et al., 2018). Momentum from these initiatives enabled participants to engage learning opportunities and generate long term and substantial learning outcomes (Knight-Grofe & Rauh, 2016; Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009).

Outside education abroad, the concept of intentional, personalized interactions between instructors and students is also well established. Grünzweig & Rinehart (2013) acknowledge Buber's dialogical principle of education as ideal for education abroad learning environments, where Buber states:

> What is important is not just searching for information and providing information, not just questions and answers back and forth, but a truly reciprocal, interactive conversation which teachers must lead and control but into which they also must enter with their own person, directly and candidly. (Grünzweig & Rinehart, 2013, p. 18)

Extending beyond the concept of regular and frequent interactions, Buber, Grünzweig, and Rinehart advocate for personalized, vulnerable interactions between facilitators and participants, akin to the findings from my study. Stepping into the personal, emotional, and social aspects of participants' lives as they interact with program components outside of their established frames of reference provides opportunities for transformative learning (Anderson, Lorenz, & White, 2016; Freire, 1970; Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015; Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2003; Naude, van den Bergh, & Kruger, 2014; Nouwen, 1986; Rogers, 1969; Smith & Knapp, 2011). Approaching education from this vantage point correlates with constructivist theory, viewing the learning experience as multi-faceted and holistic, incorporating all aspects of the participant that interact with their learning experiences (Dewey, 1998; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Naude, van den Bergh, & Kruger, 2014).

Combining academic, personal, and situational learning in a challenging and supportive environment lays a foundation for safe spaces where participants can open up and share—becoming more vulnerable with each other, expanding the range and depth of topics with which they engage, and forming and participating in

community. Leaders in my study chose to include themselves in the community environment they helped to develop, sharing their own thoughts and lives in the process of learning and living together. As a result, they became co-participants, co-learners, and co-meaning makers. Student responses expressed appreciation for this approach, stating that it made them more comfortable and confident in their environment and contributed to the building of what has been identified in other settings as social capital (Putman, 2000). While not stated specifically by the students, I suggest a correlation also existed between the approach the leaders modelled and the care, challenge, and support students identified occurring among themselves. Contrary to concerns of the leaders' approach moving the students toward exclusively emotional experiences and away from rigorous academic inquiry, my study points to the opposite. Perspectives outside my study suggest that freedom to question and challenge is achieved by combining mutual respect and care, levelling of hierarchies through choice and shared experience, and fostering curiosity. This freedom in turn brings forth deep conversations on topics integral to the human lived experience in an environment full of creative conflict and care (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Brown, 2016; Carlsson-Page & Lantieri, 2005; Junker, 2013; Kohn, 2006; Noddings, 2005; Palmer, 2012).

Extending opportunities for interaction, leaders brought the group together once or twice a week to share their learning experiences. These gathering times afforded students, staff and faculty a voice to express their personal and educational barriers and breakthroughs. Simultaneously, perspective was gained on the personal state and experiences of the whole group, both humanizing each other collectively and open sourcing their collectively gained knowledge and understanding, continuing the building of bridges between them. Researchers and educational

theorists agree that social learning can emerge from gathering times, drawing on both the safety of the established space and the collective interaction with each other's thoughts and experiences (Buber, 1958; Freire, 1970; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Naude, van den Bergh, & Kruger, 2014; Shrewsbury, 1997; Sloman & Fernbach; Vygotsky, 1978).

Leaders are pivotal in establishing safe space within the learning environment, engaging and guiding participants' learning experience, and connecting with participants to draw out collective learning and connection. The importance of identifying and equipping facilitators to realize these outcomes by providing safe learning spaces cannot be overlooked if organizations seek and claim to provide education abroad opportunities that have the potential to provide transformational learning.

Conclusion

Education abroad needs to remain focused on its primary objective, bringing about transformational change in its participants. The field runs the risk of ignoring two key contributions established nearly a century ago: meaningful and lasting change are facilitated by deep social engagement in safe spaces; and intentional reflection on experiences. In an industry self-advocating as one of the premiere vehicles for facilitating transformational change while positioning itself to expand exponentially, re-examining base assumptions about what brings about change in its participants and establishing infrastructure and programming to support that change are critical. If education abroad seeks to avoid the perils of accidentally reinforcing simplistic nationalist sentiments among its participants, it needs to invest in preparing facilitators who maintain an emphasis on incorporating safe space and intentional reflection into their programming. Additional research on the role and impact of

facilitators in fostering safe spaces and reflective activity among participants is necessary to guide next steps effectively.

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