Enriching Faculty-led Programming with Intercultural Learning Through a Decolonial Lens

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Introduction

Faculty-led programming is a cornerstone of education abroad offerings for U.S. students. Faculty not only enhance their courses and research interests on a global scale, but students increasingly recognize that education abroad strengthens their academic experience and workforce readiness. To ensure faculty-led programming is done in a responsible, sustainable, and inclusive manner, this resource will discuss how to integrate intercultural learning into faculty-led programming, regardless of academic discipline.

While programming may be developed within an institution and academic area, it will be hosted in a new environment, which requires an effective understanding of the local context. There are cases where travelers commit cultural faux pas, get into legal trouble, and tarnish institutional and country reputations by not understanding the local cultures. More importantly, it is critical to understand if the country where a faculty member is taking students may have strict norms or laws that could endanger the well-being of their students. This resource will explore areas of consideration, resources to integrate intercultural learning, and examples of cases the authoring committee has experienced.

Background and Context

While international education in the United States has historically been maximized by white affluent students seeking to augment their studies by applying a global lens, it has become increasingly diverse in its population and host locations. Most programs still travel to European countries, but the field is seeing an increasing interest, driven by student and faculty demand, in non-traditional locations. As student bodies become more diverse through varying intersecting social identities, so too does program development and academic preparation need to change.

Recent data on the changing demographics of U.S. students studying abroad indicates that approximately **31%** of U.S. students who studied abroad during the 2018-2019 academic year were from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, compared to **17%** a decade earlier (Institute of International Education, 2019). According to the 2023 Open Doors Report, during the 2021-2022 academic year, 188,753 U.S. students studied abroad, marking a rebound in participation after the pandemic. However, racial and ethnic diversity still lags behind the overall postsecondary enrollment figures. For instance, Black or African American students comprised 5.3% of study abroad participants, compared to their 12.5% representation in U.S. postsecondary enrollment. Similarly, Hispanic/Latino students accounted for 11.9% of study abroad participants,

while making up 19.6% of postsecondary students in the United States (NAFSA, 2023; Institute of International Education, 2023).

Problem Statement

Developing a curriculum within a US institution can be drastically different from developing a course to be taught abroad. While the core learning objectives will certainly remain the same, faculty must remember that the local context will play a major role in how the content is delivered, received, and processed. A few challenges to consider:

- Technology readiness, availability, and functionality,
- Instructional space design,
- Local cultural norms to outsiders and additional social identities, and
- Timeframe and division of traditional in-classroom instructions with activity and visit-based experiences.

Pedagogical methods that may be successful at a faculty member's U.S. home institution may not only be improper within the context of the host country, but it may even become impossible. This is where partnerships with education abroad offices and staff as well as organizations within the host country are critical in program development. From how students choose to dress to attend class to how teaching may need to change to a different hands-on approach requires intercultural learning, understanding and integration for a successful program.

Defining Intercultural Learning

Intercultural learning is a process that promotes an individual's understanding and engagement with cultural differences, with the aim of developing intercultural competence. It involves critical reflection on cultural assumptions, fostering openness, curiosity, and empathy toward other cultural norms and practices. This learning model is essential in preparing individuals to navigate and succeed in diverse environments, whether in educational settings, workplaces, or broader social contexts (Deardorff, 2009).

Studies show that students who participate in overseas these programs exhibit increased intercultural sensitivity compared to those who remain within their home institutions (Edmunds, 2020). This sensitivity is important for inner development; fostering respect and open-mindedness toward other cultures, which can help mitigate the risks of cultural misunderstandings and conflicts (Tuzovic, 2020). When intercultural learning is implemented intentionally, study abroad programs can help students build essential competencies such as adaptability, flexibility, and cultural empathy—skills that are invaluable for navigating the complexities of intercultural interactions in both professional and personal contexts (Gibson et al., 2023). This form of learning is instrumental in shaping students' global perspectives and fostering long-term cultural competence, making it a key element of any faculty-led study abroad program.

Decolonizing of Intercultural Learning

Relying solely on a Western lens in faculty-led study abroad programs can perpetuate harmful colonial practices by privileging Western knowledge and perspectives while marginalizing local voices. This approach often reduces complex, diverse cultures to simplistic or exoticized versions that fit within Western frameworks of understanding. When students are introduced to new cultures solely through a Western perspective, it reinforces the idea that Western norms are the default or superior, while other cultures are treated as objects of study rather than equal participants in a global dialogue. This dynamic not only undermines the educational experience but can also perpetuate existing power imbalances between students and the local communities they engage with. For example, LaFever (2021) points out that many traditional intercultural communication models focus heavily on cognitive learning, which is rooted in Western educational practices. These models often ignore the emotional and spiritual aspects of learning that are crucial in many non-Western cultures. The failure to integrate these dimensions reinforces the dominance of Western epistemologies, which, in turn, marginalizes other ways of knowing and understanding the world. This can lead to students developing a shallow understanding of the host culture, as they are not exposed to the full depth of its knowledge systems and values.

Combatting this issue requires a shift toward decolonizing study abroad programs. One effective approach is to integrate local perspectives and knowledge systems into the curriculum. Wei (2023) highlights the importance of intercultural bilingual programs in Mexico that elevate indigenous languages and knowledge. Such programs allow students to engage with the local culture on its own terms, rather than filtering it through a Western lens. This creates a more reciprocal learning environment, where students and faculty learn from local knowledge holders, thereby fostering mutual respect and understanding. In addition, faculty must actively involve local educators and community members in the design and implementation of these programs. Viscogliosi et al. (2024) demonstrate the success of such collaboration in a transborder occupational therapy program between Canada and Haiti, where both student groups were seen as co-creators of knowledge. This model ensures that the learning experience is not unidirectional, with Western students "learning" about the local culture, but rather an exchange where both groups contribute to and benefit from the intercultural engagement.

Another key strategy is to implement pre-departure and ongoing training that addresses the history and impacts of colonialism. By educating students about the power dynamics that exist in cross-cultural interactions, they can approach their study abroad experience with greater cultural humility and awareness. Garson et al. (2021) emphasize that equity and inclusion in intercultural learning cannot be achieved without a critical understanding of these dynamics. This preparation allows students to recognize their own positionality and engage with local communities in ways that are respectful and non-exploitative.

Implementing Intercultural Competence in Practice

To assess the development of intercultural competence, it is typically considered as cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills which allow a student to effectively adjust to other cultural situations (Deardorff, 2011). This is difficult to measure as it is not just knowledge, but also attitudes and awareness etc. The international programs office or education abroad centers (names may vary across campuses) serve as valuable resources for faculty seeking to integrate intercultural learning into their courses. These offices offer support through:

1. **Curriculum Development with an Intercultural Lens:** Education abroad offices collaborate with faculty and program providers to design curricula that intentionally integrate intercultural learning objectives. This ensures that students are not just passively observing different cultures but are actively engaged in understanding and navigating cultural differences. Courses are often paired with experiential learning opportunities, such as internships, service learning, or homestays, which deepen students' cross-cultural understanding.

2. **Pre-Departure and Re-Entry Programming:** These offices provide essential pre-departure training and orientation that prepare students for the cultural differences they will encounter. Through workshops and reflective activities, students develop skills such as cultural awareness, empathy, and adaptability. After returning, re-entry programming helps them process their experiences, connecting their intercultural learning with broader academic and professional goals. These reflection points are key to turning their experiences into lifelong intercultural competencies.

3. **Tailored Support for Diverse Learners:** Education abroad offices are often committed to ensuring that intercultural learning is accessible to students from diverse backgrounds. They work on building inclusive programs that consider varying cultural perspectives, identities, and needs, ensuring that all students can benefit from and contribute to intercultural learning. For example, they offer scholarships, customized advising, and additional support for underrepresented students, including those from marginalized racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds.

4. **Facilitating Immersive Experiences**: Education abroad offices play a key role in connecting students with host institutions and local organizations that promote immersion in the local culture. These connections foster meaningful interactions between students and local communities, helping them experience different worldviews, communication styles, and cultural norms. Whether through living with host families, participating in local events, or engaging in community projects, students can better understand and appreciate the cultural nuances of their host countries.

5. **Guiding Critical Reflection:** Education abroad offices encourage students to critically reflect on their own cultural biases and assumptions through structured reflection activities before, during, and after their international experiences. This process of self-reflection is essential for intercultural learning, as it challenges students to confront their own perspectives and build a more

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nuanced understanding of the world. Offices often provide frameworks for this reflection, such as intercultural communication models or global citizenship frameworks and assessment tools like the IDI, LLC | Intercultural Development Inventory (idiinventory.com) guiding students to develop empathy and open-mindedness.

6. **Building Long-Term Global Competencies:** By collaborating with global partners and institutions, education abroad offices ensure that students gain skills needed for working and interacting in an increasingly interconnected world. Intercultural learning isn't just about understanding differences; it's about equipping students with the skills to navigate those differences in professional and personal contexts. Education abroad offices help students connect their intercultural experiences with future goals, providing them with a competitive edge in a globalized workforce.

Designing effective intercultural learning experiences requires intentionality. Faculty cannot assume that students will automatically engage with other cultures simply by being in a different environment. Intercultural competence must be developed through deliberate, structured efforts that help students build the necessary attitudes, knowledge, skills, and qualities to successfully navigate cultural differences. Their efforts should encourage deeper engagement with local communities to foster authentic learning experiences.

Key areas of intercultural competence, as identified by Deardorff (2006), include:

a. Attitudes (respect and valuing of other cultures, openness, curiosity)
b. Knowledge (of self, culture, sociolinguistic issues)
c. Skills (listen, observe, interpret, analyze, evaluate, and relate)
d. Qualities (adaptability, flexibility, empathy and cultural decentering)

To support the development of these competencies, the following model practices can be integrated into intercultural learning programs:

a. **Pre-departure preparation**
   i. **Cultural Awareness and Language Training**: equip students with foundational knowledge and language skills.
   ii. **Setting Expectations**: Help students anticipate cultural challenges and growth opportunities.
b. **On-site immersion**
   i. **Cultural Orientation and Local Engagement**: Involve students in local events and community activities to deepen their cultural understanding.
   ii. **Cultural Mentorship**: Connect students with host families or local mentors and consider programs like student buddy systems to foster peer interaction.
c. **Structured reflection**

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       i. **Journaling and Discussion Groups**: Encourage students to reflect on their experiences through writing and group discussions.

       ii. **Guided Reflection**: Use prompts and questions to help students critically analyze their cultural experiences.

    d. **Academic integration**

       i. **Curriculum Alignment**: Integrate intercultural learning objectives into the curriculum

       ii. **Projects and Assessments**: Assign tasks that require students to apply intercultural skills and mindsets.

       iii. **Guest lecturers**: invite local experts to speak on cultural topics relevant to the course theme

    e. **Post-program**

       i. **Re-entry Workshops**: Help students process their experiences and integrate their learning back into their home culture.

    f. **Program evaluation**

       i. **Continuous Improvement:** Regularly assess the effectiveness of intercultural learning strategies and adjust the program as needed.

Case Studies

As faculty leading study abroad programs, using case studies are an effective way to prepare students for the complexities of cross-cultural interactions and ensure they are equipped to navigate potential challenges. These case studies provide valuable teaching tools for contextualizing intercultural learning through a decolonial lens, serving as opportunities for students and faculty to critically engage with issues of decolonization, discrimination, and intercultural awareness. These moments are essential in helping students recognize the power dynamics and historical legacies that shape global interactions, fostering deeper empathy, cultural sensitivity, and a commitment to equity in their experiences abroad.

A. **Inappropriate Clothing at a Historical Site**

    a. A student wears a shirt featuring a colonial-era logo that is the mascot of their university, while visiting the Apartheid Museum in South Africa, unaware of the negative connotations of the symbol. The student is surprised and confused when they are asked to leave. How could the student have been educated about understanding local historical sensitivities? Students may not always recognize how cultural contexts can shift and impact their environment.

       i. **Intercultural Learning Moment:** This scenario provides an opportunity to discuss the lasting effects of colonialism on different cultures. Faculty can engage students in critical conversations about the colonial history of their host country and the importance of decolonizing their mindset as visitors. Students can reflect on how cultural symbols carry different meanings in various contexts and the power dynamics they represent. Encouraging

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students to critically analyze their own cultural assumptions and privileges is a vital part of intercultural learning.

B. **Mental Health Struggles and Risky Behavior**

    a. A student struggling with mental health challenges adapts poorly to the new environment abroad, leading to risky behaviors, such as excessive alcohol consumption. How can faculty support students' mental health, especially in high-stress environments?

        i. **Intercultural Learning Moment:** Faculty can use this case to emphasize the need for cultural sensitivity when addressing mental health. Different cultures approach mental health in varying ways, and understanding these approaches is critical. Faculty can discuss how mental health stigmas are reinforced by cultural norms and colonial histories, guiding students to explore how these stigmas manifest in the host country. This also opens a dialogue about self-care, coping strategies, and the intersectionality of mental health and intercultural experiences.

C. **Harassment and LGBTQIA+ identity.**

    a. In a country where LGBTQIA+ identities are not widely accepted, a student is harassed on the streets. The student, feeling isolated and unsafe, seeks help from the faculty leading the program. How could the faculty have prepared the group (not only the student) to be aware of how local laws and cultural attitudes could present safety concerns for students holding marginalized identities, as well as how the faculty members are prepared to provide students with appropriate support?

        i. **Intercultural Learning Moment:** This case study allows faculty to discuss the complexities of gender and sexual identity in different cultural contexts. Faculty can guide students in understanding how colonial legacies may have shaped local attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ identities, highlighting how laws and norms are often products of colonial histories. This is also an opportunity to teach about intersectionality and how different identities (gender, race, sexual orientation) can intersect with local cultural contexts, influencing how students experience discrimination.

D. **Identity Based Isolation and Discrimination**

    a. A Black American student on a study abroad program in Europe reports feeling isolated from their peers and experiencing racial discrimination, including being refused service in a restaurant while out with white classmates. How could the faculty leader have worked to help cultivate a positive and supportive intra group dynamic pre-departure and an awareness of racial discrimination in the host country?

    Intercultural Learning Moment: This case highlights how racial discrimination can manifest differently in various cultural settings, often rooted in colonial legacies and global power imbalances. Faculty can facilitate conversations about racism as a global issue, encouraging students to compare their experiences of race at home

with those abroad. The case can be used to challenge students to think critically about how their own identities influence their interactions with others and to explore how colonial histories have shaped modern-day racial dynamics in the host country.

E. **Language Barriers and Communication Challenges**
   a. A student on a study abroad program struggles with the local language, making it difficult to communicate and fully engage with the host   community. Despite efforts to adapt, the language barrier causes frustration and limits the student's experience. This situation highlights the importance of providing. How much language training should a faculty member provide prior to immersing students into a host context where English is not easily accessible? What additional support for students facing communication challenges should the faculty member be prepared to offer?
      i. **Intercultural Learning Moment:** This scenario provides an opening to discuss linguistic imperialism and how language plays a role in cultural dominance and suppression. Faculty can explain how colonial powers historically imposed their languages on colonized peoples, often erasing local languages and creating lasting barriers to cultural exchange. By encouraging students to engage with the local language, faculty can help them decolonize their approach to intercultural communication, highlighting the value of learning and respecting local languages as part of intercultural competence.

F. **Disability and Cultural Perceptions**
   a. A student with a physical disability encountered mixed experiences while studying in Spain. While modern infrastructure, such as roads and public spaces, were generally accessible, many older buildings, particularly historical sites, lacked necessary accommodations like ramps or elevators. The student, who brought an aid to assist with mobility, noted that despite concerns, they were able to be much more independent than anticipated. The student found that they could navigate many areas independently, which contributed to a greater sense of autonomy during their study abroad experience. What type of information may have been offered by the faculty, possibly in partnership with on campus or national disability services professionals, to the student to result in this successful outcome?
      i. **Intercultural Learning Moment:** Faculty can use this case study to explore the intersection of accessibility and cultural perceptions of disability, emphasizing both the progress and the ongoing challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. This provides an opportunity to discuss how historical and cultural factors, such as colonial legacies, shape infrastructure and societal views on disability. Faculty can encourage students to reflect on the role of independence and autonomy in different cultural contexts, exploring how accessible infrastructure can empower individuals while also acknowledging areas where further inclusivity is needed.

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G. **Homestay Accusation and Cultural Misunderstanding**
   a. In a study abroad program in Italy, a Hispanic student living with a host family was falsely accused of stealing an item from the household. The host family's assumption was influenced by stereotypes and a lack of cultural understanding, leading to significant tension between the student and the family. The situation escalated, requiring intervention from program staff and faculty leader and program staff to mediate and resolve the conflict. What role does the faculty play in this situation? What support can the faculty offer the student? What does the faculty have the right to ask of, or expect from the program staff who organize and manage homestay relationships?
      i. **Intercultural Learning Moment:** This case allows faculty to address how stereotypes and biases, often rooted in colonial histories, can influence cross-cultural interactions. Faculty can guide discussions on how assumptions about race and ethnicity can lead to conflict and misunderstanding, both in the host country and abroad. Encouraging students to reflect on how their own biases may affect their intercultural experiences fosters critical self-awareness, which is essential to decolonizing intercultural learning.

H. **Cultural Misinterpretation and Business Etiquette**
   a. In a study abroad program focusing on international business in Japan, a group of students struggled with the nuances of Japanese business etiquette. For example, they did not fully grasp the importance of hierarchy and formality in meetings. Instead of addressing senior executives with the appropriate level of respect, such as using honorific titles and waiting to speak until invited, they treated the interaction more casually, as they might in a Western business setting. What role does the faculty play in this situation? What type of prior information may have been offered by the faculty about Japanese business etiquette?
      i. **Intercultural Learning Moment:** This case allows faculty to emphasize the importance of understanding cultural nuances and business practices, which are often shaped by historical and cultural contexts. How and when could the faculty begin the discussion about how colonialism and globalization have influenced business customs around the world, and how students can adopt a decolonized perspective by respecting local traditions rather than imposing Western business norms.

I. **Environmental Impact and Cultural Awareness**
   a. In a sustainability-focused study abroad program in a rural South American village, students unknowingly offended local community members by disregarding sacred areas in nature. Their project involved exploring the local environment but failed to recognize the cultural and spiritual significance attached to certain natural landmarks. What role does the faculty play in this situation? What may have been appropriate for the faculty to discuss pre-departure? What kinds of local community member engagement with the group prior to "exploring the local environment" is important to coordinate?

i. **Intercultural Learning Moment:** This case highlights the need to understand the cultural and spiritual significance of the environment in different societies. Faculty can discuss how indigenous perspectives on nature, often marginalized or suppressed by colonial forces, differ from Western views. This creates an opportunity for students to reflect on environmental ethics and how they can approach sustainability with a decolonized mindset, respecting indigenous knowledge systems and values.

J. **Neurodiverse Student Facing Group Isolation**
   a. In a study abroad program focused on cultural immersion, a neurodiverse student who regularly asked questions and challenged certain cultural assumptions was perceived by their peers as being disruptive. The student's tendency to process information differently and engage deeply with discussions, sometimes interrupting or questioning the flow of group activities, led to frustration among the other students. Over time, the group began to avoid the student, openly expressing their displeasure through negative comments and exclusion. As a result, the student felt increasingly isolated and unsupported, struggling to participate fully in the program. How might the group have been better oriented to one another prior to departure? What kind of exercises could have been arranged to help build trust, understanding, trust, and sense of connection among participants?

      i. **Intercultural Learning Moment:** Faculty can lead discussions about how different neurological processes can affect communication and engagement, challenging students to consider the bias they may hold against individuals who do not conform to expected social norms. Faculty should encourage students to practice kindness, empathy and understanding, discussing how neurodiverse perspectives can enrich group learning rather than being seen as disruptive. This ILM moment also allows for conversations on how intercultural competence includes being inclusive of different learning styles and thinking processes, ensuring all students feel valued and supported within diverse environments.

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Continued Learning:

- NAFSA Resources
    1. NAFSA intercultural competence framework/model: https://www.nafsa.org/sites/default/files/ektron/files/underscore/theory_connections_intercultural_competence.pdf
    2. NAFSA intercultural competence framework/model: Theory Reflections: Intercultural Competence Framework/Model

- Frontiers Journal
    1. Intercultural Professional Development for Educators: Applying Intercultural Learning to Enhance Effectiveness
    2. Understanding How Program Factors Influence Intercultural Learning in Study Abroad: The Benefits of Mixed-Method Analysis
    3. Student Learning Objectives: What Instructors Emphasize in Short-Term Study Abroad
    4. Developing Intercultural Competence Through Short-Term Study Abroad Programs: A Qualitative Case Study
    5. Promoting Student Retention, Completion, and Intercultural Growth Through Short-Term Study Abroad
    6. Intercultural Competence in Short-Term Study Abroad
    7. Decolonizing study abroad – Frontiers

- Assessment Tools
    1. Intercultural Development Inventory
    2. Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES) | Kozai Group Assessment
    VALUE Rubric (AAC&U) -
    3. https://www.aacu.org/initiatives/value-initiative/value-rubrics/value-rubrics-global-learning
    4. VALUE Rubrics - Intercultural Knowledge and Competence | AAC&U

- Additional Resources

1. Developing Intercultural Competences in the Study Abroad Program Semester at Sea
2. The effect of study abroad on intercultural competence: results from a longitudinal quasi-experimental study
3. Intercultural Competence in Short-Term Study Abroad
4. Intercultural Engagement Through Short-Term Faculty-Led Study Abroad: A Practitioner's Guide with Multidisciplinary Perspectives from a Public University
5. The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence | SAGE Publications Inc
6. ICC Global website: Resources
7. An Educator's Guide to Intercultural Learning
8. https://www.routledge.com/Developing-Intercultural-Competence-in-Higher-Education-International-Students-Stories-and-Self-Reflection/Arasaratnam-Smith-Deardorff/p/book/9781032134970?srsltid=AfmBOoouMr3SCTRLvXHvGKCCcefDftNBF949p2YlPaRlh1B8MWKEdgkX
9. ICC Global website: https://iccglobal.org/resources/resources/
10. Educators Guide to Intercultural Learning: https://academics.lmu.edu/media/lmuacademics/global-localinitiatives/documents/An%20Educators%20Guide%20to%20Intercultural%20Learning.pdf
11. Education Abroad and the Undergraduate Experience: Critical Perspectives and Approaches to Integration with Student Learning and Development [1 ed.] 9781620368299 - DOKUMEN.PUB
12. Deardorff: Building Cultural Competence | Innovative Activities and Models | Fons