Authentic pedagogy and participatory learning in study abroad.

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In the global effort for universities to internationalize, study abroad programs are seen as an ideal opportunity for students to improve their foreign language skills and gain direct cultural knowledge through immersion in another society. However, while abroad, students often find it challenging to engage with local people and culture. Barriers can include ways in which study abroad programs are tailored, sometimes as “island programs” designed exclusively for foreign students, study terms that conflict with the local academic year, and isolated dormitory accommodations. Despite being immersed in the target language and culture, a lack of opportunity or initiative to participate in authentic activities limits the learning potential of many study abroad students.

To maximize study abroad as a transformative learning experience, it is important for educators to recognize that engagement with local people and culture does not usually occur spontaneously. This presentation will discuss two examples of a pedagogical approach designed to harness student mobility for authentic learning that brings study abroad students and local students together for mutually beneficial intercultural learning. In a university course in Canada, East Asian students served as “cultural consultants” sharing their life experiences and cultural knowledge with students studying their global region. This authorized role offered those study abroad students authentic opportunities to practice speaking in their target language and to form relationships with local peers. Meanwhile, local students experienced an enriched classroom environment that brought foreign culture to life. Likewise, in a course based in Japan, study abroad students participated in volunteer activities in the Tohoku region, the site of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. Working alongside Japanese peers, these students gained confidence communicating in the Japanese language. In both situations, collaborative learning helped each group build confidence to participate in authentic topics of discussion and activities, and come to see themselves as being a part of a community of learners capable of meaningful communication in a foreign language. Following these descriptions, the presenter will share ways in which this pedagogical approach can be adapted across university curricula for the benefit of students both at home and abroad.