Conceptualizations, images, and evaluations of culture in study abroad students

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This paper addresses conference topic 2: “What is cultural learning on study abroad (and its relationship to language acquisition)?”

Study abroad is commonly perceived as one of the most successful ways to allow for cultural learning and the development of cultural sensitivity, a learning goal that has been captured most prominently with the 2007 MLA Report and its call for “translingual and transcultural competence.” While the MLA Report has created ample discussion (e.g., Barnes-Karol & Broner, 2010; several articles in The German Quarterly, 2008, and Die Unterrichtspraxis, 2009), the achievement and conceptual operationalization of “translingual/transcultural competence” in study abroad programs remains rather vague.

In this context, we aim to investigate learners’ conceptualizations, images, and evaluations of “culture” over the course of long-term study abroad. In particular, we are interested in a) how sojourners’ conceptualizations of culture(s) develop over time, b) how they relate their experiences to stereotypes and common discourses, and c) how their insights and conceptualizations connect with learners’ narrated engagement in various communities of practice and learning opportunities. Our investigations are based on a multiple-case study with ten Canadian learners of German, who studied abroad at German universities for one semester or one year and possess varying degrees of prior border-crossing experience. The data was collected with semi-structured interviews and e-journals over the course of the sojourn. We will use both narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis in our data interpretation.

The goal of our examinations is to shed light on the cultural learning process in study-abroad settings, in particular with regard to the establishment of translingual/transcultural competence as a learning goal. In so doing, we hope to provide insight into factors that allow students to reflect (and not to reflect) on culture and its manifestations critically and to develop sensitivity for cultural differences, which may help identify corresponding learning goals for study abroad programs, as well as pedagogical steps to be taken to enhance students’ transcultural awareness.

References