

Structuring a Short-Term Study Abroad Experience to Foster Professional Identity Growth in Undergraduate Education and Social Work Students

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Abstract

This paper explores the emerging themes in the development and implementation of a short-term study abroad tour of Ireland and Northern Ireland by education and social work majors. The twenty-two student participants were invited to take part in a post-travel focus group process to discover how the experience impacted their developing professional identities. As the researchers reviewed the focus group transcripts and reflected on the experience, powerful ideas regarding the development of a successful study abroad experience emerged. The following four themes emerged: instructors need to purposefully schedule the experience to meet the social and learning needs of the students; instructors need to fully immerse students in the culture for a more effective, meaningful, and lasting experience; students must rigorously engage in the cultural and educational expectations while on the study tour; and the students need multiple spaces during the tour to discuss and debrief the experiences that challenge their preconceived expectations. Although it would be premature to say these themes rise to the level of “best practices” at this point, this research will help direct and strengthen future studies of faculty-led study abroad experiences.

Keywords: *professional identity, intercultural development, study abroad, multicultural education, teacher education/development, social work education/development*

In the summer of 2015, we offered a cross-disciplinary course to education and social work students entitled “Peace and Reconciliation in Ireland.” The class included an embedded two-week study tour of Ireland/Northern Ireland, where we took an in-depth look at programs and policies designed to foster healing of the historical wounds left by the Troubles. Prior to departure, we met with the twenty-two student participants numerous times in a seminar format to prepare for the international experience. The tour included time in the Republic of Ireland in urban Dublin, as well as rural Donegal. We also traveled to Northern Ireland and spent a number of days in Belfast and Londonderry, with the goal of comparing and contrasting their experiences between the south and north of the Irish isle.

In developing this course and tour, we also formed a research objective around how an experience like this would impact the students’ formation of their professional identities in their respective disciplines. Equal to this goal was also the discovery of themes associated with the

experience itself from a professor/facilitator perspective. This paper will focus on the themes that emerged in developing, implementing, and processing a faculty-led study abroad experience.

Professional Identity Formation of Pre-Service Teachers

Research on developing professional identities is quite limited, especially on how international experiences affect professional identity. To better understand how pre-service teachers and social work candidates develop professional identity, *professional identity* needs to be defined specifically for pre-service teachers (PSTs) and undergraduate social work candidates.

Pre-service teachers are not solely shaped by their experiences within their learning environments, as experiences outside of the schools are very influential (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010, p. 455). This relates directly to Harro's (2013) Cycle of Socialization that provides an understanding of the cyclical influences of identity creation. According to Harro, our personal identity is influenced by specific people (i.e. parents, friends, family, teachers, clergy), institutions (i.e. school, work, church, etc.) and other outside entities (i.e. media). We have little control over our influences, especially early in our growth, and we come to see and understand our world based upon what we have come to know, both good and bad. Without an understanding of how we can grow, evolve, or completely change an aspect of our identities, we will continue repeating this process in a continued cycle of socialization.

For teachers (as well as social workers and any other professionals who regularly interact with others), these identities cannot be activated based upon the different social situation; rather, we are always a reflection of the identity in which we have come to be, and these roles are constantly evolving based upon the influence of our experiences (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010, p. 455). Harro (2010) does indicate that we can leave the socialized understanding of our surrounding world towards a Cycle of Liberation, where our identities can grow beyond the current limiting actualities. What is needed to break out of this cycle is for us to engage in meaningful and systematic reflective practice on how our current perceptions of personal identity are being challenged. This form of reflection must be learned and practiced in order for the practicing teacher to make informed interpretations of their ongoing experiences (Harro, 2010; Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010, pp. 455-456). We cannot just reflect and identify the discordance in their personal identity; rather, we must also plan and act towards change and growth in order for any progress to expand upon our personal identity.

PSTs also need pragmatic experiences beyond the hypothetical that tend to dominate the classroom-orientated instruction they receive in their teacher education programs. The classroom should be a place where PSTs challenge their personal identities by being pushed beyond their "comfort zones" (Brindley, Quinn, & Morton, 2009, p. 531), as well as learning strategies to become more systematic reflective thinkers. The practica experiences are where PSTs are able to challenge perspective and experience *praxis* (Freire, 1974). Research has shown that study abroad experiences have a significant influence on helping PSTs become reflective thinkers (Brindley, Quinn, & Morton, 2009, p. 531). Teachers experience some of their most significant changes in professional growth following graduation (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010, p. 456), as extended experiences in new educational cultures create ongoing challenge toward their personal and professional identity.

Professional Identity Formation of Social Work Candidates

The process of identifying oneself as a social worker is both complex and developmental. One of the primary aspects of this identity is learning and understanding the recognized body of knowledge associated with social work (Sims, 2006). Social work education programs are the primary vehicles for learning this knowledge base. Accredited programs are expected to ensure that students “understand the profession’s history, its mission, and the roles and responsibilities of the profession” (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). Although this knowledge base is an important cornerstone to professional identity, it is clear that there are other significant traits (i.e. attitudes, values, and beliefs) that are shared with others in the profession (Beddoe, 2011).

This shared identity is recognized as a specific social characteristic or group membership, and social work programs begin that process by creating a fitting-learning environment at the university (Sims, 2006; Beddoe, 2011). Like other professional training curricula, accredited social work programs allow only majors to enroll in core course work, thus creating an insular environment for acculturation. Another key aspect of this socialization is the existence of role models to help the student develop the appropriate identity (Adams, et al., 2006). Faculty (including field instructors) often function as formative role models, as well as job supervisors and coworkers.

Credentialing is also an important factor in professional identity development. Gaining a significant credential, such as a diploma or licensure, is viewed as “legitimizing” a claim to a profession such as social work (Castells, 1997). Gaining employment with a relative job title also influences professional identity.

Short-Term Study Abroad Programs

Many of the perceived benefits of participating in a study abroad program have been well documented (Dwyer, 2004b; Gorka & Niesenbaum, 2001; National Association of Foreign Student Advisers, 2014). One large-scale study, commissioned by The Institute for the International Education of Students, identified a significant number of participants indicating the experience impacted their lives in a positive way (Dwyer & Peters, 2004). Over 3,000 participants responded and identified three primary areas of development. Participants believed that they benefited significantly in maturing as a person and gaining self-confidence. Students who have studied abroad also identified intercultural development as a result of their travels. Participants gained both a better understanding of the destination culture and global awareness, as well as a better understanding of their own culture and biases. Finally, the study indicated that the majority of travelers reported that their study abroad experiences positively impacted their subsequent education and career choices.

Paige et al. (2009) found that study abroad experiences had a strong positive impact on civic engagement, social entrepreneurship, and leading a more modest lifestyle. Much of the current literature focuses on the benefits of yearlong or semester-long placements. Little research has been done on the benefits of short-term study abroad experiences. One pilot study by Anderson et al. (2005) that examined the benefits of a short-term program suggested a positive impact on participant intercultural sensitivity. Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005) found that a short-term program impacted participant’s future course selection and forthcoming travel or study abroad decisions.

Research seems to suggest that the longer in duration the study abroad experience is, the more beneficial it is for the student; despite this, the trend has clearly been established that student education abroad experiences are now shorter in duration than in years past (Dwyer, 2004a), with

the majority of students studying abroad for less than an academic year (Dwyer, 2004b). Short-term study abroad programs are usually defined as courses that include one to eight weeks of travel (Tuma, 2007). These programs are often faculty developed and led with various degrees of institutional support. The reasons for shorter experiences are primarily two-fold. First, the expense associated with studying abroad for a semester or entire academic year is viewed as prohibitive by many college students (Curry, 1999). Second, students worry that extended study-abroad experiences will disrupt their plan of study for a timely graduation (National Association, 2003). Many students believed that a longer experience would necessitate taking credits that would not matriculate into their required curriculum and/or cause them to graduate later than they expected.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to examine a sample of our 22 undergraduate education and social work students' developing understandings of professional identity while on a two-week study trip in Ireland.

We opted to use two sessions of focus groups for data collection. We needed to gather all of our data in only two sessions, and focus groups are ideal under these constraints (Morgan, 1989, p. 15; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 16). Focus groups create spaces where “the give-and-take of interaction leads to relatively spontaneous responses from participants as well as producing a fairly high level of participant involvement” (Bellenger et al., 1976 as qtd. in Morgan, 1989, pp. 17-18). We assumed that these sessions would be one of the first opportunities the participants had to consider their perceptions on professional identity, and a small-group dynamic comprised of individuals with whom they have come to know well would foster meaningful dialogue.

All 22 students who participated in our study-abroad program were invited to attend one of two scheduled focus group sessions. Ten of the twenty-two students participated (45%): six participants during the first session (four from social work and two from education), and four participants during the second session (three from social work and one from education). As Morgan (1989) suggests, there is a “need to maintain a reasonable amount of homogeneity within groups in order to foster discussion,” and yet “the goal is homogeneity in background, not homogeneity in attributes” (p. 46). Although the second group fell short of the suggested number of six to twelve people (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 57), the size of the groups allowed for everyone to a chance to speak. We realized that we only needed to “do as many groups as are required to provide an adequate answer to the research question, because there are few economies of scale to doing more groups” (Morgan, 1989, p. 43).

We approached the sessions as a “moderating team” (Krueger & Casey, 200, p. 101). We opted to use two moderators, where we would “work together but represent different levels of expertise with focus-groups and the topic of discussion” (p. 188). We both had similar expertise in focus-group research; however, Dr. Carney provided perspectives of social workers, while Dr. Tack offered understandings of teachers in relation to the research questions.

We created an interview guide with the purpose to “provide direction for the group discussion” (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 61) through semi-structured interviews addressing three major questions:

1. How do the participants think their involvement in the Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland study-abroad tour impacted their teaching/social work practice, considering their beliefs prior to the experience?

2. How do the participants think their involvement in the Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland study-abroad tour impacted their identities as future teachers/social workers, considering their beliefs prior to the experience?

3. How do the participants think their participation in the Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland study-abroad tour impacted their cultural competencies as future teachers/social workers, considering their beliefs prior to the experience?

Morgan (1989) recommends that focus group sessions should last between one and two hours in length (p. 55). These questions provided robust conversations that lasted just over one hour for each session.

Emerging Themes

Through our own personal reflections along with the student interviews, there are four key themes that emerged. The first theme is that instructors need to purposefully schedule the experience to meet the social and learning needs of the students, rather than go through one-size-fits-all tours. The tour we developed was not of the cookie-cutter variety. Although we did use tour companies to assist in securing airfare, ground transportation, and lodging, the day-to-day activities of the tour were designed by us to best engage our students in the course objectives. It is an important distinction to make, as we had defined goals for each of the educational experiences of the tour, and were uncompromising in our dedication to these goals.

This experience would have been much easier to simply commit to a packaged program from an educational tour company, but we believe the disconnect would have detracted from the student experience. This meant that we had an active role in leading during the ground tour rather than deferring to an assigned tour guide. We needed to work and teach as co-teachers to manage this. While in Ireland, we met as instructors multiple times daily to review upcoming activities, logistics, and any student concerns. As with any complex extended educational experience, not everything went according to plan. The strong rapport we built as colleagues and co-teachers allowed us to flexibly work together and navigate changes as they occurred with few issues.

The second theme that emerged was the need to fully immerse students in the culture for a more effective, meaningful, and lasting the experience. Vital to a successful international travel experience is preparation. Our goal in designing this experience was to dedicate ample time prior to traveling and prepare students for what they would encounter on this tour. We planned five pre-departure seminars throughout semester prior to the experience. These seminars served three purposes: to provide a historical foundation of the Troubles; to prepare our students for international travel; and to establish a philosophy of international travel that would ensure a smooth transition into a new culture.

We provided information on the history of Ireland, specifically about the recent experiences with the Troubles, as well as information about Irish culture. The overarching theme of the tour was “peace and reconciliation in Ireland.” In order for students to build a foundation for understanding what was currently happening in Ireland, they needed to have some extensive historical education about the decades-long conflict between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The students had readings and mini-lectures on the Troubles. They were allowed time to interact in small groups to discuss emerging perspectives on the Troubles and how they, as pre-service teachers and social work candidates, would address these issues in their work environments.

We spent a considerable time preparing the students for international travel. Many of the participants had never been outside of the United States or on an airplane. We discussed what and how to pack (most importantly, what not to pack), and provided a checklist of recommended items based on our experience of international travel and what we knew would be culturally appropriate as well as appropriate for the expected weather. We emphasized that each person would be responsible for carrying all of his or her luggage, and this was not an “all-inclusive vacation.” We assisted students in getting passports, and understanding the intricacies of customs navigation. A representative from financial aid met with the class to discuss securing funds for this experience. These concerns and experiences are not unique to this group of students, and we took them into account when we planned the seminars, while leaving time to address ongoing questions and concerns.

We discussed our philosophy of international travel, and encouraged students to see themselves as travelers, or temporary citizens instead of “tourists.” It was in these pre-departure sessions that we also introduced the concept of “being the other” or being seen as a cultural outsider. We discussed what stereotypes the Irish might have of students from the United States, and how not to live up to the “Ugly American” caricature. Most importantly, we began to understand the challenges of being in a new culture while challenging certain long-held personal and professional beliefs and assumptions. We needed to establish a culture of respect and understanding through familiarity with each other (including the professors). We emphasized that for the fourteen days of the tour, we would be spending significant amounts of time every day with each other. We did not encourage them to select roommates for the trip, but instead asked them to be open to spending time with many members of the class.

The students who participated in the focus groups vocalized the anxieties they experienced during travel that would have limited the effectiveness of the tour if left unaddressed. One participant expressed the challenges of all the change that happened: “I never left home before, either, and you go somewhere new by yourself, you have to grow up a lot. Deciding who to trust, who not to trust, and the pace at which you should do that.” While another student remarked about his or her need to co-exist socially: “It was like having to learn how to make friends all over again and getting to know each other. I thought that was one of the most important things for me.” To ease these pre-travel anxieties, we created a Facebook group for the students. This allowed us to be in constant communication throughout the semester, and acted as an effective communication tool while we were in Ireland. We could prompt students to create conversation threads about questions they had, and look to others for answers. This also allowed them to create rapport and extend conversations and connections from seminars.

The third theme that emerged the need for rigorous student engagement in educational and cultural experiences while on the tour, as well as allowing for multiple opportunities to explore and experience the culture outside of planned experiences. We intentionally started the tour in Dublin, as this “westernized” city provided a manageable transition from “familiar” big cities in the United States. This allowed our students time to culturally acclimate themselves before we went to areas in Northern Ireland that would strongly challenge their preconceived perceptions of political, social, cultural, and educational issues. The students reflected upon many of the differences they observed in various parts of Ireland: “I view Northern Ireland and Dublin as two different trips...because my experiences in those two places were completely different.”

This awareness of difference did not alleviate all cultural missteps students experienced when working through preconceived (mis)understandings. Many of these cultural “stumbles” were simple mistakes in vernacular nuance. One student described her experience in attempting to navigate the cultural minefield of the names of some cities: “I went to the store and the [clerk] asked

me where we were going. And I said, 'Oh, we're going to Londonderry,' and he immediately said, 'It's Derry.' He put my stuff in a bag and sent me out the door."

A difficult experience one a group of students had was being asked to leave a bar because of how they were dressed: "When we were in Belfast and we tried to go to this karaoke place and they turned us away because they said we weren't dressed right." Another continued, "[T]hey didn't even let us into a bar, because we were all wearing sweatpants. And we were like, 'Really?'" Another student described how the experience made her feel "humiliated. I've never been kicked out of any place before, and I kind of wanted to disappear. And we had to back up in front of all those people, all the other customer there, and we had to back up and turn around and walk away." Experiences like these challenged our students, as they have few experiences of this level of negative confrontations with cultural differences on such a personal level. As instructors, we needed to not only be aware these incidents occurred, but purposefully schedule times to engage the students in understanding these incidents. This process is further discussed in detail in the fourth emerging theme.

We opted to use Irish family homestays while in Dublin, as a chance for our students to culturally saturate themselves. Using homestays in lieu of hotels, our students were safely forced to work within a new set of norms alongside Irish natives familiar with guiding people through the challenges that arose (like those mentioned above). Our first five days were saturated with cultural, educational, and professional activities, yet we would argue that much of the implicit education on Irish culture occurred during the homestays. During this time, students were placed (in pairs or more) with Irish families who are experienced in working with international students.

It was also during these homestays where many of the students first saw themselves as "the other," yet had a safe environment to discuss what they were experiencing with their homestay parents. Our students happily referring to the homestay families as mom and dad during our conversations with them. Experiences as "the other," for some, involved the clothes they wore, while for others it was simply being treated as a "typical American student" (ex. given a three-minute limit when showering). As previously mentioned, it was important for us as the instructors to create time for the students to positively process these experiences.

The initial reaction one student had to homestays was, "They have a whole different set-up then we do. Like trends in make-up or clothes...it's completely different." Another student described how her experiences with the host family immediately challenged some of her preconceived assumptions: "Our host mom was always so dressed up. Even if she was staying at home...The kids in my host family...always had nice clothes...I was not expecting that at all. I thought it would be like in America." One student was impacted by family structure: "I think the family's set up [was] different than ours...a lot of kids stay at home until they're 26, 27, 28, and in our culture, you'd be considered almost like a failure." When pressed for answers during and after the experience, our students overwhelmingly mentioned that they felt able to address these differences comfortably with the homestay parents.

The final theme that emerged links directly to the previous theme in that there was a need to have multiple debriefings during the tour. As instructors, we took an active role in this process by identifying emerging issues and engaging the students in focused conversations. Throughout the tour, the group participated in daily activities focusing on the educational goals of the course. Two organic opportunities presented themselves early in the first week. One was travelling together on a charter bus just outside of Dublin. The drive allowed multiple opportunities to engage smaller groups of students in processing the tour. We as the instructors met during breakfast and again on the bus to discuss what we had been hearing from our students and how the new cultural

experiences challenged their professional identities. While on the bus, we divided students into groups and initiated conversations. These interactions were mainly listening sessions, where we presented challenges and students talked through the issue. We believe that, in part, later focus group conversations were successful because we had already created a culture of conversation.

Evening hours, designated as “free time,” provided the opportunity for students to choose to engage with us in further conversation. We often ate with the students and shared a Guinness at the local pub, which allowed for unplanned listening sessions. Although some may be concerned with this level of informal interaction, we discovered that it was an optimal time to process the events of the day in a friendly and informal environment. While we found these times to be powerful encounters, they required us to be attentive to maintaining the boundaries of the instructor/student relationship.

Understanding Emerging Professional Identities

As a result of these experiences and the opportunity for meaningful reflection, students discussed specific ways in which they are beginning to understand their emerging professional identities. In order to accomplish this, students needed to develop characteristics of their professional identities: relationship building, compassion and openness to others, and intercultural sensitivity.

One important characteristic our students mentioned was relationship building. We challenged students to form relationships in order to engage in meaningful learning experiences. As one student commented, she had to “relearn” the skills to make new friends and get to know others beyond the superficial.

Many of our students mentioned the need to build these relationships on a firm foundation of compassion. One student reminisced on feeling others’ compassion while feeling vulnerable:

One thing I remember was when I got so sick. You know, when everyone went to hike and I was in the woods? No, not even the woods, but out in the open, openly being sick? That day so many people checked-up on me. I don’t know how many times both of [the professors] were asking me if I was okay. And everyone knew I was sick, and everyone kept telling me about what happened, and drawing me pictures, and telling me about that. Normally, people don’t do that. It was like I felt really special, because everyone cared that I didn’t feel well, and cared enough to make me feel better. I think that’s something I’ll also take away: caring about people. It was really nice that people cared enough to include me, even though I wasn’t included.

This feeling and practice of sincere compassion continued as the trip progressed. One student mentioned “...people got more considerate of each other toward the end of it.” Building on this comment, another student made a connection to her professional identity: “Yeah, as individuals, we have to do this; but, as professionals we need to do this too. With students or clients, you have to build that trust so that you can help them. I think it showed both independently and in our group that way.”

Some students mentioned that this trip not only allowed them to work through their own shyness, but allowed to them understand how this skill will help them as future teachers and social workers. For some of students, this challenged their personal and professional comfort zones: “I consider myself shier, too, and I also just used to blend in. [In Ireland] we didn’t blend in. I didn’t

really like that.” Yet in challenging students to push their boundaries in a safe environment, one student mentioned that this is what allowed her to move past these uneasy feelings:

I’m shy. [This experience] has taught me that I don’t have to be so shy here, because I didn’t have to be shy there. Not only that, but increasing [my] cultural competency, or cultural awareness, or whatever you want to call it. You have to know how to deal with different situations and different cultures.

Many students discussed their growing intercultural sensitivity as a result of this experience. One student mentioned coming to a greater realization of her growing understanding of differing perspectives: “[This experience] definitely made me more open to other people’s situations...I mean, not like I wasn’t before; but, it gave you a whole different perspective in relation to things. More open and more considerate of their backgrounds.” Our students spoke often of this newfound perspective through their own experiences as “the outsiders”:

I think it’s kind of hard to see another student who is new to the country and understand how they feel. A place where you’re not the norm. Where you’re not in your normal culture. Handling that awkwardness where it’s different. It was really good to experience that, because I haven’t experienced that before. I guess a little, but not fully. So, it was good to feel that way and feel uncomfortable, and feel what a student new to the United States might feel, or somebody who’s culture is different than what’s ‘normal,’ because I think it will help me make them feel more comfortable in my classroom. I might understand what it’s like to feel a little different.

This student not only gained a greater awareness of what her future students may experience in her classroom, but she also started to understand the complexity of this process (“I *might* understand what it’s like to feel a little different.”).

Another key understanding that emerged is a growing “awareness of our surroundings,” and how our students’ perspectives are often not the same as their students or clients. One student discussed how even this short experience made a strong impression on her growing awareness:

Before I went [to Ireland], I wasn’t aware of my surroundings as much as I am now. ‘Cause I’m from a small town, and there’s all the same type of people there. So now I’m more aware of my surroundings, and you have to be careful about what you say...I think it just made me more aware.

This awareness was universally expressed by all our participants, but some even mentioned how they are no longer passive bystanders when they see others being wronged: “Before I went on this trip, when people would say racist comments, I wouldn’t really say anything. But now I’m like, ‘Hey! You did not really say that!’” Another added how she has moved from understanding to action in her work setting: “Especially now that I have clients [who are from other cultures] and I’m going out in public with them. People are so rude. And you’re trying everything you can to not say something to people, but you have to in some situations.” This movement from realization to action is a mature step in developing their intercultural sensitivity as future educators and social workers.

Concluding Thoughts

The nature of this experience was not to arrive at proficiency of understanding. This is a process, that takes time, but must begin with realization. Effective teachers and social workers typically take a few years of experiencing “the other” to even begin the process of questioning their own held biases. Our purpose in designing this course was not to have students arrive at a fully realized state of being at the conclusion of the experience. We feel there was success in creating a culture of awareness about the biases and misconceptions students hold, and provided multiple safe spaces for students to examine what this means for them as future teachers and social workers.

In reflecting on our own teaching practices, we feel that what fostered success was a combination of effective co-teaching practices and the dispositions of students. We believe that because of planning, purposeful seminars, and our interaction as co-teachers, students not only came to express positivity about the whole experience, but also a growing understanding of key facets in their own developing professional identities as teachers and social workers.

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