

# Translating Study Abroad Experiences for Workplace Competencies

- **Philip Gardner**, director, Collegiate Employment Research Institute, Michigan State University  
**Inge Steglitz**, assistant director, office of study abroad, Michigan State University  
**Linda Gross**, assistant director, career services network, Michigan State University

One of the positive benefits often attributed to participation in study abroad is the importance employers place on it during the recruiting and hiring process for college seniors. It seems intuitively obvious that having an international experience would benefit students moving to globally competitive organizations. Unfortunately, however, employers do not necessarily value the study abroad experience as highly as other cocurricular activities in which students can choose to participate.

At Michigan State University (MSU), we initiated research of the hiring process by asking employers their opinions about the value of study abroad. The results were not encouraging, as employers placed low importance on study abroad compared to other cocurricular activities. However, follow-up research showed that students were not articulating their international experiences in ways that had meaning for employers. Experience gained on study abroad may have value to employers, but students have to *unpack* their international academic experience by critically reflecting on it, and *reframe* their stories in the context of the workplace and in language employers understand. This article shares findings from our research and how it led to the development and delivery of our Unpacking Your Study Abroad Experiences seminars for returning study abroad participants.

## EMPLOYER RESEARCH

Our early questions probed the value employers placed on study abroad and their understanding of the types of international learning programs available to students. Approximately 20–25 percent of respondents in some way valued study abroad. Generally, their companies could be described as large multinational firms. Yet it was clear from their comments that employers possessed

little knowledge of what study abroad was about. Many mentioned that they had no first-hand experience with these programs because study abroad was not available to them during their undergraduate days or they were not aware these programs existed. Even though we could take some solace that one-fifth of employers valued study abroad, the information we had did not tell us very much about how employers weigh the study abroad experience in their evaluation of candidates during the hiring process. Further studies showed that employers seldom tapped into the study abroad experience in evaluating résumés and in initial interviews with students. Yet employers were emphatic that they were looking for experiences that added value to their companies. The impression recruiters often gain from hearing students describe their study abroad experience can best be summed up as “academic tourism.” Students’ presentations are like travelogues: highlighting the cool places they visited with a little academic work thrown into the mix. Employers often take away from the interview the impression that study abroad was a lot of fun, but contained little (work-related) substance.

In informal employer focus groups, we explored why study abroad just does not resonate as a useful experience in identifying qualified candidates. Many recruiters could not frame the study abroad experience against other cocurricular activities students elected to pursue simply because they themselves had no exposure to it as undergraduates. Nearly all recruiters had pursued internships and participated in student organizations as undergraduates and could draw upon their experiences to relate to the students they were interviewing. However, for older recruiters, study abroad programs did not exist when they were in school, and for many younger recruiters, they were not prominently promoted



by their institution (or they simply chose not to participate in international study programs).

The onus, therefore, is on students to translate study abroad into a framework recognizable to employers and to draw the connection between study abroad and the world of work. Employers want to know how the experiences students have had by graduation have contributed to the development of workplace skills and competencies. A typical question an employer might ask a student is, “In what ways will your experience abroad add value to my company?” Most students have given little thought to how study abroad has shaped and prepared them for the world of work and are unable to give meaning to their experience in ways that employers can identify. In other words, graduating seniors have flunked one of their most important

## *Employers want to know how the experiences students have had by graduation have contributed to the development of workplace skills and competencies*

exams—the hiring interview—because they were not prepared with appropriate examples of skills acquired from their international experiences.

### **FOCUSING ON COMPETENCIES**

We shifted our research focus to examine what behaviors, skills, and competencies gained from study abroad appear relevant in the workplace. Our focus groups of approximately 450 employers generated a comprehensive list of possible traits and competencies gained from study abroad that we then tested in a series of questions to focus group participants, asking them to compare new and recent hires with and without known international study or internship experiences. The majority of the employers selected three competencies

in which internationally experienced hires demonstrated higher abilities. The results produced a meaningful separation between the two student groups.

The first group of traits in which internationally experienced hires demonstrated higher abilities, as selected by more than 50 percent of the employers, included:

- Interacting with people who hold different interests, values, or perspectives
- Understanding cultural differences in the workplace
- Adapting to situations of change
- Gaining new knowledge from experiences (picked by 45 percent of employers)

Another group of traits also emerged, with more than 30 percent of employers recognizing that recent hires with international experiences excelled beyond their peers in:

- Ability to work independently
- Undertaking tasks that are unfamiliar/risky
- Applying information in new or broader contexts
- Identifying new problems/solutions to problems
- Working effectively with coworkers

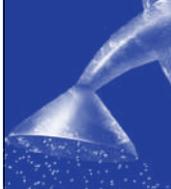
Employers recognized that study abroad could influence the development of all of the skills and competencies on the original list. However, when fewer than 30 percent of employers chose a particular competency, it was harder to attribute study abroad as a sole or major contributor to the development of that trait. We decided to focus our attention on the leading traits, being aware that an individual student’s international experience may contribute to

the other competencies as well. Employers reacted positively to this list. They cautioned, however, that simply going abroad did not guarantee that these skills or competencies were actually developed and displayed. This is similar to what employers say about internships. *The value of study abroad depends on how well the student can reflect on and articulate his or her experience.* Students must successfully articulate to the employer the skills gained and how these skills/competencies can apply in the workplace. The results from the final survey and these employer comments prompted us to design a reentry program, now called Unpacking Your Study Abroad Experience, that provides a venue for students to reevaluate their experiences from the perspective of the workplace.

### **UNPACKING YOUR STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE**

*Theoretical underpinnings.* We draw mainly from social learning theory, which is based on the premise that the interaction between environment, behavior, and the person’s psychological processes affect learning and identity. Of particular interest is Bandura’s concept of *self-efficacy*, which refers to an individual’s confidence in his/her ability to negotiate the challenges inherent in the larger social world (1997). Study abroad experiences provide a variety of challenges students must negotiate: from public transportation systems, markets, menus, and pharmacies to higher-order things like language, customs, cultural norms and, of course, their academic coursework. One of the reasons experiential learning in study abroad is so powerful is that it engages all four sources through which Bandura suggests self-efficacy expectations are learned:

- Performance accomplishments (learning by doing, mastery)
- Vicarious learning or modeling (watching others perform)
- Verbal persuasion, for example, encour-



agement and support from others (or lectures from their professor)

- Physiological arousal; for example, the anxiety that arises in connection with the behavior (As in the first few days of cultural immersion and the students' consciousness that they *have to behave differently and learn new things to get what they need.*)

We set out to accomplish three main objectives in unpacking. First, we sought to help students make critical connections between their learning experiences abroad, both inside and outside the classroom, in the context of career preparation. Second, we aimed to challenge the meaningfulness of their study abroad experience by probing deeper in to the ways it may have helped them develop academically, culturally, professionally, and personally. Finally, we wanted to help students find confident ways to articulate more effectively the skills and knowledge they developed through study abroad.

***A typical unpacking session.*** The workshop is offered twice each semester and, additionally, when requested by a faculty leader. Designed to last two hours, there are four segments to the workshop: importance of skills and competencies to employers, doing authentic reflective practice, debriefing the unpacking exercises, and a wrap-up exercise.

We begin with a fifteen- to twenty-minute discussion of the skills and competencies sought in candidates for employment. The key skills are defined in the context of the workplace. Then the skills and competencies that are closely associated with study abroad are introduced. By introducing the skills and competencies early, we shift the focus away from the academic confines of campus to the world of work. Realizing that many of the students who attend expect to attend graduate or professional school at some point, we have also established a second frame of reference, and that is the personal

statement commonly used in graduate school admissions.

A brief overview (ten minutes) of authentic reflective practice is covered prior to entering into the unpacking exercises. Students are provided with suggestions for doing authentic reflection. We then chose one to two student volunteers to participate in a debriefing (unpacking) of their experience. We have a general idea of the types of study abroad experiences that students bring to the workshops through introductions at the beginning of the session. We try to select someone who has had a full semester away or an international internship for the first exercise because it allows us to draw out more of the skills and competencies. We have found that short, faculty-led study experiences require more effort to get students to articulate their experience; unfortunately, some have very little to say. We try to do unpacking interviews with at least two student volunteers from the audience each session.

Our interviews are focused on making connections to the student's stated career goals or interests. By the end of their interview, they typically have a list of bullet points describing knowledge and skills gained that they can incorporate into a resume or a personal statement. Each interview is different, customized to help the student think about his or her experience in new ways and especially in relationship to their intended career trajectory. The goal is to probe for depth (and a little discomfort) to help the student increase conscious learning, transferable skill awareness, and their ability to articulate skills with concrete examples from their learning abroad experience.

During the final thirty minutes, we direct students in an exercise in which they unpack the experiences of one of their peers. This exercise gives them practice in mimicking the reflective steps introduced by the exercise leader. The final fifteen minutes of the workshop stress the different

ways to present the skills and competencies in résumés and interviews: as bullet points on résumés and as stories told during the interview. We provide the students with contact information for trained career advisers and encourage them to make appointments when they begin their job search or applications to graduate school.

## UNPACKING FOR ONE MSU STUDENT

Several examples of an unpacking have been developed and can be found in our original unpacking research brief, available for download at [www.ceri.msu.edu](http://www.ceri.msu.edu). We offer one here to portray the process and its outcome.

Students are notorious for compartmentalizing experiences; keeping academics in one box, cocurricular experiences in separate boxes, and social life in yet another. Our conversation with a student we'll call "Alex" began with a vibrant description of the social life in Rome, but we soon found a more compelling story. Alex was a junior general business management major who studied abroad in Italy and Cannes for the summer with an MSU-led program in advertising and public relations to take electives needed to graduate. The program started in Rome studying European advertising and ended at an international advertising festival in Cannes. He was the only male in the group of twenty-five and the only one without an advertising background. The class was structured into small groups; each group was to do an advertising project that would develop an effective ad campaign for an Italian audience. His initial response about the quality of his program was rather negative: he felt he got very little out of it that would help him in his career.

Alex had a lot to say about the group project. The trouble started immediately. His group project partners argued and bickered about whose idea was better. He thought he was disadvantaged due to his lack of background in advertising. As the

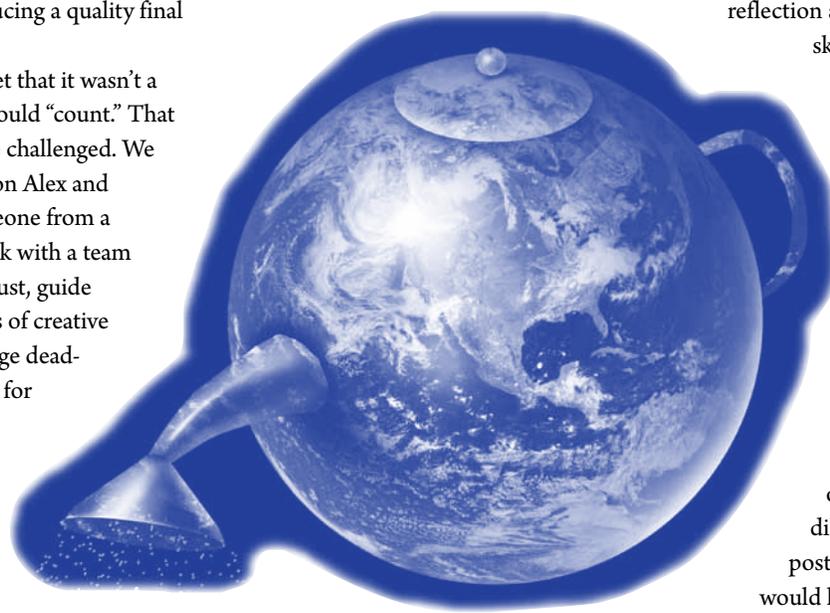
bickering continued and time became precious, Alex took it upon himself to take control of the group and instill some order and planning. He began mediating some of the conflicts, drawing attention back to the specifications in the assignment outline. Through his leadership, an idea and a project plan were decided upon and tasks assigned to each member. He monitored the project's progress, making sure each member stayed on her assignment. The group did well in producing a quality final product.

Alex expressed regret that it wasn't a business project that would "count." That statement needed to be challenged. We turned the tables a bit on Alex and asked, "If you saw someone from a different discipline work with a team of experts, earn their trust, guide them through a process of creative decision making, manage deadlines and specifications for a project that was completed in a quality way on time, what would you call that person?" Initially, Alex looked at us blankly. It just took two words to prompt his realization: "A manager." Clearly, Alex developed skills (listed below) that could easily be reflected and valued by employers on his résumé:

- Led a project team of advertising students in developing an ad campaign
- Mediated creative differences between team members
- Managed project objectives and work assignments to successfully meet deadlines.

As good as those bullets are, Alex and his team missed out on some critical opportunities for cultural learning to enhance the quality of their project. When Alex was asked how the group went about gauging

the effectiveness of their product for the Italian market, they simply relied on their professor's assessment and the advertising they saw in class. Although the group went out every night to a local bar where twenty-to thirty-year-old Europeans hung out, they did not once solicit the opinions of their European counterparts. Nor did they really pay attention to advertising on Italian television or other media. They totally



separated their academic exercises from the social and cultural aspects of their program.

## CONCLUSION

Over the past few years, we have extended our unpacking in several ways. We now provide predeparture "packings" so that students might make their experiences more purposeful and intentional. We have modified the work-focused unpacking for our freshman seminar abroad participants so that the focus is on college learning when they begin on-campus studies shortly after their return.

From a career services perspective, one of our challenges is to get students

to think more broadly about the array of experiences they've had in which they have developed skills relevant to the workplace. Some of the most meaningful learning experiences do not happen in class, but occur in study abroad, student organizations, and service-learning experiences. From our observations, students need help in making sense of their collegiate experiences and in connecting their classroom, cocurricular, and life experiences. Critical reflection and being able to articulate one's

skills with meaningful examples is essential to ongoing professional development. Our work underscores the importance of helping students become more conscious of the transferable skills, knowledge, and attitudes they gain that are assets in work and organizational settings.

Like many other study abroad offices, the MSU office of study abroad had been trying diligently to attract students to post-study-abroad sessions that would help them reflect meaningfully on their experiences and integrate them into their personal, academic, and professional lives. It was not until we made the obvious connection with students' careers that students began to attend our workshops in larger numbers. We learned from these sessions that personal and academic meaning come through a purposeful direction that students envision for themselves. We are encouraged by our workshops that students can gain significantly from participation in global education. ■

## REFERENCE

Bandura, A. 1997. *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: W.H. Freeman.

Copyright of Peer Review is the property of Association of American Colleges & Universities and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.