

# **INTERVENING IN STUDENT LEARNING ABROAD: A RESEARCH-BASED INQUIRY<sup>i</sup>**

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## **ABSTRACT:**

The presentation will summarize the major conclusions of a four-year study designed to measure the intercultural and second language learning of more than 1,300 U.S. undergraduates enrolled at 61 programs abroad. Focusing on the central research question—whether U.S. students learn effectively when left to their own devices while abroad, or whether students perform better when educators proactively intervene in their learning—the presentation will identify a series of program design elements and learner characteristics that are significantly associated with gains in intercultural learning abroad.

The Georgetown Consortium study provides significant evidence that most students benefit through enrolling in programs abroad that are intentionally designed to promote their intercultural learning (that is, programs that feature key design features that are strongly associated with student learning). In documenting important gender-based learning differences (as measured by IDI pre- and post-tests, the study's male students made no more progress in their intercultural learning than did control students at campuses back in the U.S., while female students did show significant gains), the study also argues that focusing intentionally on learning abroad is especially important for male students.

## **U.S. Student Learning Paradigms: A Brief History**

Attitudes and beliefs about U.S. student learning abroad have changed dramatically over the past several decades, evolving from what I have elsewhere called a traditional Teaching-Centered, to a newer Learning-Centered, study abroad paradigm (Vande Berg, M.; Balkcum, A.; Scheid, M.; and Whalen, B., 2004; Vande Berg, 2007). The Georgetown Consortium study, launched in fall 2002 and completed in spring 2008, sought to shed light on the question at the center of the tension between these two paradigms: whether students abroad learn most effectively when left to their own devices, or when educators intervene in the students' learning.

When in the fall of 1964 I studied in Mexico for several weeks as a high school junior, all involved in the program—six classmates and I, the Spanish teacher who accompanied us, our parents, and the middle-class Mexican families who welcomed us into their homes—assumed that our Spanish would improve, and that we'd learn useful things about the people, traditions, art and history of Mexico. When we returned to the suburbs of Chicago, no one doubted that this was exactly what had happened. Looking back, I've come to understand that the beliefs and attitudes that the program's stakeholders shared—the easy sense that when U.S. students went abroad, they normally and naturally learned useful things—was a core belief of the traditional, teaching-centered study abroad paradigm. In some mysterious way, students were apparently learning through experience—through exposure to the new and different—when they studied abroad.

In the early 1980s I began a new job as Director of English Programs at the Instituto Internacional in Madrid. My earlier experiences as a student in Mexico, as well as the assumptions of the traditional paradigm, had conditioned me to expect that I would be working in the midst of students, U.S. and Spanish, who would be improving their second language skills and learning useful things about “the other.” The Instituto had long enjoyed a history as a bastion of progressive learning in Spain, before and during the years of the Franco dictatorship, and over time had come to serve as home to a dozen U.S. college and university study abroad programs. By the early 1980s, perhaps a

hundred Spanish students were enrolled in the Instituto's Colegio (high school); another thousand Spanish (mostly university) students were taking courses in English language, literature and expository writing; and eight hundred U.S. students were participating in the study abroad programs housed there. While the Spanish and U.S. students rarely took classes with each other, they were in close proximity, spending their free time in the halls and cafeteria, attending events in the auditorium and, weather permitting, relaxing outside in the *jardín*. However, relatively few of them, Spanish or U.S., seemed to be making much of an attempt to interact with students of the other nationality—in spite of the fact that all of them were studying the other group's language and physically sharing the same rather compact spaces.

During my four years at the Instituto, I found it increasingly difficult to square my traditional expectations about U.S. student learning abroad with my observations of the study abroad participants taking classes there. Too many of them were not having the sort of experience U.S. educators expected and wanted them to have. In spite of the fact that they were sharing space with the Spanish, they were clearly linguistically and culturally marginalized. When I ran into U.S. students in neighborhoods beyond the Instituto, they were almost always speaking English and moving about in groups that consisted entirely of other U.S. students. To use Milton Bennett's now-familiar phrase, too many of them were having a U.S. experience in the vicinity of Madrid.<sup>ii</sup> When I returned to the U.S. and a job in the study abroad office at Kalamazoo College, I quickly learned, through sessions at NAFSA conferences and discussions with others who were responsible for organizing study abroad at their own institutions, that my experience with U.S. students at the Instituto had been anything but unusual: colleagues at a lot of other colleges and universities were complaining that their students, like the students I had observed at the Instituto, were too often failing to take advantage of available linguistic and cultural opportunities abroad. The core belief of the traditional U.S. study abroad paradigm—that students learned well when left to their own devices—seemed to be working less well in practice than in theory.

The faculty and study abroad professionals responsible for organizing study abroad for their students were at that point responding to the felt strains in the traditional paradigm in two ways. Some said that if students abroad were marginalized, they had only themselves to blame. Then as now, most colleges and universities required a minimum grade point average in classes completed on campus—typically, anywhere from a 2.5 to a 3.0 on a 4.0 grading system—as a requirement for studying abroad. If prospective participants had demonstrated that they were good students on campus—that is, if they had earned reasonably good grades—why wouldn't they perform well abroad as well? If they would just buckle down and do what students were supposed to do over there, they'd have the sort of experience everybody expected them to have.

Others said that students were marginalized because they were enrolled in the “wrong type” of study abroad—that if they were enrolled in the right sort of program, they wouldn't be marginalized. Direct enrollment proponents argued that since students went abroad to have academic and social experiences different from those at home, programs should “immerse” them in the new place so they'd have as authentic an experience as possible. Ideally, they should live the life of a typical host university student by enrolling directly in regular university courses, alongside local students, where they would be taught in the target language by host university professors. Proponents of U.S. island (then sometimes also called U.S. enclave) programs, though, argued that the direct enrollment approach suffered from two fatal weaknesses. First, students whose native language was English simply couldn't be expected to learn as well, in courses taught in another language, as they did in courses taught in English; and second, university courses abroad were so different from those at home that U.S. students couldn't reasonably be expected to learn much in them. (The last objection sometimes took the form of a complaint that courses at host universities too often lacked the academic rigor of courses on the home campus.) The island proponents, then, were maintaining that students in fact learned more through being separated from a more direct, unmediated experience with the local culture.

I became a proponent of the direct enrollment approach in those days since what I had observed at the Instituto suggested that too many students enrolled in island programs failed either to practice their second language skills or do much to learn about local people and culture. When I shared my version of “the right sort of program” at conferences, faculty and study abroad professionals who led or organized island programs cited their own anecdotes about students who had failed when directly enrolled at host universities. At that point, none of us, direct enrollment or island proponents, were offering real evidence in support of our competing claims about “the best” type of program.

By the fall of 2001, when my colleagues and I designed the Georgetown Consortium study, it seemed to us that U.S. study abroad was in the midst of a profound shift, moving from a traditional teaching-centered to a learning-centered paradigm, and that the terms of the central study abroad debate were changing. Most faculty and study abroad administrators were no longer engaging in abstract and unsupported arguments about whether one or another program type was “the best.” They were increasingly focused on student learning outcomes—and arguing about whether students learned more when left to their own devices, or when educators intervened in various ways in their learning.

We can clearly see this shift proceeding in the work of Lilli Engle and John Engle, who in the early 1990s launched the American University Center of Provence, a semester and academic year program for U.S. students in Aix-en-Provence. Engle and Engle designed the program through a “reverse engineering” process. They began by identifying the learning outcomes they wanted visiting U.S. students to achieve—intercultural learning was the *sine qua non* of study abroad for them, and second language study was a critically important part of cultural learning<sup>iii</sup>—and then worked backward to identify and build in the specific courses, activities and program features that would presumably facilitate the students’ achievement of those outcomes.

Engle and Engle’s experience with this outcomes-driven approach led them, in 1998, to create a study abroad classification system that, instead of pigeonholing programs into

traditional “types”—direct enrollment, U.S. island, and so on—classified programs according to the ways that they took into account the seven “defining elements” that they believed were most significantly implicated in student learning:

- program duration;
- student pre-departure second language proficiency;
- the language used in coursework abroad (i.e. the students’ native English or the target language);
- the context of academic work abroad (i.e., whether students take classes with other US students; with host country students; with other, non-U.S. international students; or with a mixture of international, host and U.S. students);
- where students are housed (with other U.S. students, with host country students, with international students, or with a host family);
- whether they participate in guided/structured experiential activities abroad;
- the frequency with which resident faculty or staff provide “guided reflection on student experience”—on-site meetings during which faculty or resident staff help students de-brief and reflect on their intercultural learning (Engle & Engle, 2003, p. 8).

The Georgetown Consortium study aimed to explore whether, and to what extent, a number of program and learner characteristics correlated with gains in student learning. We aimed to measure the extent to which a number of such variables would function as potential “interventions” in the learning of U.S. students abroad. Engle and Engle played a key role here, as we decided to include all of their “defining elements” as independent variables in the study. We were, in effect, testing the validity of their hypothesis that they had identified key program and learner characteristics that were significantly associated with student learning.<sup>iv</sup>

### **The Study’s Design**

We designed the study with two primary goals in mind. We aimed, first, to document the second language and intercultural learning of U.S. students who would be enrolling in

sixty-one study abroad programs, and to compare their learning with that of control students enrolled at several U.S. campuses.

Second, we aimed to identify to what extent a relationship existed between student learning and Engle and Engle's "defining components," as well as several learner characteristics. The latter included student gender, academic major, prior study abroad experience, and so on.

In measuring the gains that students made in second language oral proficiency abroad, we relied on the Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI), a valid and reliable instrument that had, as the study began, already been in extensive use for almost twenty years.<sup>v</sup> Students completed the SOPI twice, the first time during the early days at the program site, and the second time within a few days of the program's end. To test gains in the intercultural development of the study's students, we used the Intercultural Development Inventory, an instrument in wide use that, like the SOPI, had been shown to be valid and reliable.<sup>vi</sup>

Over a period of two and a half years, we tested students' oral proficiency learning and intercultural development at sixty-one study abroad programs. The research sample for second language learning consisted of 968 students. 830 of these students were enrolled in programs that featured seven different second languages: Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Russian and Spanish. The research sample for intercultural learning consisted of 1,297 students, 1,159 of whom were enrolled in the sixty-one programs abroad. 138 students served as Controls both for oral proficiency and intercultural learning. During the two and a half years that we collected data, these Control students were taking classes at three home institutions: Georgetown University, the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, and Dickinson College. The Controls were at the same level of second language instruction as the study abroad participants, but they had not yet studied abroad.

### **Oral Proficiency Findings**

A number of the study's oral proficiency findings clearly provide support for the study's first hypothesis: that is, students enrolled in a wide range of different types of study abroad programs did in fact make significantly greater gains in oral proficiency, on average, than Control students who had studied second languages at home institutions during the study. Study abroad participants improved, on average, one ACTFL sublevel, from just below Intermediate High to just below Advanced Low.<sup>vii</sup> Control students at the home campuses improved, on average, about half as much: from just below Intermediate High to Intermediate High.

It is also worth noting that students in the study (those who studied abroad, as well as Controls) had reached a plateau in their language study at home—no matter how many semesters they had studied the target language prior to participating in the study, their proficiency scores were “stuck” between the Intermediate Mid and Intermediate High ACTFL oral proficiency levels. While Control students didn't advance beyond this plateau during the study, students abroad did: on average, they reached almost an Advanced Low proficiency level—a significant difference in oral proficiency gains between students at home and abroad.

The study fails, overall, to support the traditional view that students learn well when they enroll in programs that aim to “immerse” them in the local language environment by throwing them into the deep end of the study abroad pool. For one thing, not all students were equally able to swim in culturally deep waters. While male study abroad participants learned significantly more than male students at home, it is striking that female students abroad made significantly greater gains than the males. (Female study abroad participants improved one full ACTFL sublevel, from just below Intermediate High to Advanced Low, while males abroad improved about half a sublevel, from just below to just above Intermediate High.) And students abroad who were exposed to presumably beneficial learning environments did not necessarily make greater gains. Students in homestays gained more than students at home only when they spent a large amount of their free time with homestay members: being housed in a homestay was not, in other words, a predictor of improved oral proficiency. These findings suggest that



being exposed to a rich learning environment is for many study abroad participants a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for improving beyond the proficiency plateau where most had gotten stuck when they had studied at home.

Three other oral proficiency findings support the study's second hypothesis, that intervening in student learning can provide this "sufficient condition." Each of these points to specific ways that faculty and study abroad professionals can intervene in order to improve the chances that their students' oral proficiency will improve abroad. First, study abroad participants who attended pre-departure orientations that included an intercultural component made significantly greater gains than study abroad participants whose orientations featured no intercultural teaching or training. Second, students with Pre SOPI ACTFL ratings in the range of Advanced Low through Superior—a relatively small percentage of the students who went abroad—did not make as much progress abroad as students at other, lesser Pre SOPI levels. And third—as we have seen above—the more free time students spent with members of their host families, the higher were their oral proficiency gains.

In the first case, the obvious intervention is to include an intercultural component in pre-departure orientation. In regard to the second of these findings, Engle and Engle (2004) have suggested that students with advanced oral proficiency in the target language might be complacent about their relatively strong language abilities at the point when they began studying abroad, and that such students may benefit from an intervention that encourages them increase their awareness that improved oral skills will help them develop more complex and satisfying relationships with host nationals. A cultural mentor on site would be able to guide them toward an understanding that "getting the point across" in ways that may be acceptable in classes in the U.S. may not be culturally appropriate at the program site—that language performance is a fundamental part of culture, and that foreigners are often judged by more demanding sociolinguistic standards than those that have governed student language learning at home.<sup>viii</sup> Finally, the finding about homestays strongly suggests that faculty and advisors should not believe they have intervened effectively simply by arranging homestays for their students. Instead, they'll

want to make sure that someone at the site will be available to work with students, and perhaps families as well, in order to identify ways to help the students take fuller advantage of this type of learning opportunity—starting by pointing out the advantages that spending more time with family members can bring.

### **Intercultural Development Findings**

The findings in this section also provide strong support for the study's first hypothesis: on average, study abroad participants made significantly greater gains in their intercultural development than Control students.

It is also true, though, that too many students abroad did not learn significantly more than Control students. As was the case with their second language learning, many study abroad participants did not or could not take advantage of the intercultural learning opportunities that presumably presented themselves. As we have seen, the oral proficiency gains of male study abroad students were significantly lower on average, than the gains of female participants—and the difference in learning between males and females was even more pronounced where intercultural development was concerned. On average, females in this study made statistically significant gains in their intercultural development while abroad. Male IDI scores, on average, in fact mathematically *decreased* abroad. And fully 34.8% of female SAPs showed statistically insignificant intercultural gains, or actual declines, between their Pre and Post IDI tests. In short, far too many of the study's students, when left to their own devices, failed to develop effectively, even when they had been “immersed” in another culture. Being exposed to a different culture did not, for a very large number of students in this study, prove to be a sufficient condition for advancing their learning.

Several findings also support the study's second hypothesis: that those responsible for designing and delivering study abroad programs should actively intervene to maximize student intercultural learning. First, program duration is significantly associated with IDI gains abroad—students who studied abroad for about a semester showed the greatest gains in their intercultural development (the optimum range of time was 13-18 weeks).

Faculty and advisors may find these data useful in persuading more of their students to enroll in programs of at least a semester in length. A second finding speaks directly to the importance of providing cultural mentoring to students abroad: those who met with a cultural mentor “very often” or “often” showed significantly greater gains in their intercultural development than those who met “never,” “rarely,” or “sometimes.”

Still other findings suggest that the presence or absence of a cultural mentor who meets frequently with students may be the single most important intervention we can make in student intercultural learning abroad. A number of these findings identify specific ways that mentors might intervene, when they meet “frequently” or “very frequently” with students, in order to help them become more interculturally competent. One finding suggests that mentors should encourage students to continue their formal study of the target language while abroad: students who enrolled in second language classes abroad made significantly greater intercultural gains than those who didn’t continue their formal study of the language abroad. Another finding, in identifying yet another relationship between gains in oral proficiency and intercultural development—students abroad who enrolled in core courses taught in the target language outperformed those that took such courses in English—suggests that mentors should encourage students (those whose language proficiency is sufficient) to enroll in core courses taught in the target language. We have seen that male students, on average, in fact lost ground interculturally when they studied abroad. A finding that identifies another sub-set of students who don’t make significant intercultural gains abroad—Academic Year students whose intercultural learning plateaued—suggests that a cultural mentor should intervene with both groups in order to invigorate their intercultural learning.

Another finding shows that students who lived with international students or with a host family did not show significant gains in their IDI scores—even though students who lived with host families had the highest Pre IDI scores. As was the case with the oral proficiency gains of students in homestays, the intercultural gains of these students increased dramatically as the amount of free time they spent with host family members increased—a finding that clearly suggests that a cultural mentor should find ways to

encourage students to actively engage the host family members in whose homes they are living. Yet another finding suggests that a mentor might help students manage perceptions of cultural similarity and dissimilarity—students learned best when they perceived that the cultural difference they were experiencing were neither “very different” nor “very similar” to their home culture.

Several other findings point to the usefulness of Sanford’s “Challenge/Support” hypothesis in understanding the ways that various learning environments informed student intercultural learning in this study. As Sanford and others argue (Sanford, 1966; Bennett, 2003; Lou & Bosley, 2008a), students learn most effectively in environments that provide them with a balance of challenge and support. If confronted with too great a challenge, students retreat from the learning environment, physically or psychologically—and they become bored if they receive too much support while experiencing too little challenge. The study shows that students who were enrolled in courses alongside host culture university students—the situation typically found when students directly enroll in host university courses—developed significantly less, intercultural, than those who were enrolled in classes with other U.S. students. In fact, the 349 students who studied entirely alongside host university students in this study developed less than students studying in any of the other three “class composition” environments we examined (that is, students who studied alongside other U.S. students; alongside other international—i.e other “foreign”—students; or alongside a combination of other U.S., other international, and host country students).

This finding in no way implies that faculty and study abroad professionals should stop enrolling their students in host university classes abroad or send them only to U.S. island/enclave programs. For students with sufficient second language proficiency, host university courses provide potentially rich environments for intercultural learning—opportunities for them to form relationships with host culture students, and to gain repeated engagement with host university teaching and learning practices that may come, over time, to reveal deeper host culture values and beliefs. The finding does, however, suggest that educators need to intervene and provide support in challenging learning

environments—those that are predictably going to overwhelm the learning capacity of many students. There are students, in other words, who especially need to meet frequently with cultural mentors while abroad—and these include most students enrolled in host university courses. A cultural mentor can intervene to help students begin to understand that the straightforward lectures that they often complain about when enrolled in host universities in most parts of the world don't demonstrate that professors at these universities don't know how to teach. Instead, the mentor can help them understand that the ways that professors and students in other cultures teach and learn are informed by different—i.e. host culture—beliefs and values. In short, a cultural mentor can play a critically important role in helping students balance the intercultural challenges they're facing with appropriate and timely forms of support.

### **Interpretations and Implications**

1. The study provides evidence that most of the “defining components” that Engle and Engle identified are associated with student learning. As noted earlier, Engle and Engle developed their hypotheses about the importance of these components with intercultural learning in mind. However, the study's findings suggest that a number of these components are significantly associated with improving oral proficiency learning as well. The study provides confirmation that learning can be enhanced through: enrolling students in programs that are longer, rather than shorter, in duration; encouraging students to enroll in at least five semesters of the target language prior to departure; urging or requiring students to enroll in content courses that are taught in the target language; and providing intercultural mentoring.

However, two of Engle and Engle's elements – housing and experiential activities - require interventions more complex than simple changes in study abroad program design. As we've seen with the findings about housing, simply placing students in home stays—what we might call a “design intervention”—will not automatically result in their learning effectively, whether linguistically or interculturally. To maximize the potential of this design intervention, a second intervention is needed: facilitation of student

learning by a cultural mentor who, in this case, can work to motivate students to spend more of their free time with host family members. Where the finding that there is no significant association between experiential activities and either language or intercultural learning is concerned: the same “double intervention” strategy will arguably be effective here. That is, students carrying out “experiential activities” (the study tested the possible impact of internships, field experiences, and clinical experiences) failed to learn effectively because they were left to their own devices. Those who designed the programs that featured experiential activities in this study may have believed that students would make significant improvements in their second language and intercultural skills since experiential learning activities are presumed to lead to enhanced engagement with “the other.” However, as we have seen in other findings in the study, merely exposing students to events, whether “experiential” or not, is no predictor that they will learn from them. They need someone to intervene strategically in their learning, someone who can help them reflect on, hypothesize about and actively test those hypotheses. As Hunter puts it, “Programs that do not rely on the haphazard chance of student engaging in this process on their own, but instead very intentionally organize learning activities to encourage it, inevitably will be better poised” to teach effectively (2008, p. 99). We suggest, again, that the second intervention in this case will involve a well-trained cultural mentor who can help students develop the intercultural concepts and skills that will allow them to learn through the internships, field experiences and other experiential activities that their programs provide. In short, the housing and experiential learning findings provide suggestive evidence that sometimes a design intervention is merely a first—a necessary, but not a sufficient –condition for improving student learning.

2. Numerous faculty and study abroad professionals have for more than three decades been designing programs that aim to actively facilitate student intercultural learning abroad.<sup>ix</sup> In the mid-1970s, Bruce La Brack and his colleagues at the University of the Pacific developed the pre-departure and re-entry courses that are still offered today to UOP study abroad participants. Janet Bennett and Milton Bennett designed and delivered systematic interventions for U.S. students going abroad in the 1980s and 1990s. Engle

and Engle, as we have seen, designed and first offered their AUCP program in the early 1990s. In the late 1990s, Kris Lou and Gabriele Bosley jointly developed the intercultural learning course that both teach to some groups of Willamette and Bellarmine university students. Michael Paige, Andrew Cohen and several other University of Minnesota colleagues developed the *Maximizing Study Abroad Guides* for students, teachers and study abroad advisors in the late 1990s; in the early years of this decade they developed the intercultural learning course in which some U of Minnesota study abroad participants now enroll. The Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) is piloting yet another intercultural course, the “Seminar in Living and Learning,” at twelve programs abroad during Spring semester, 2009.<sup>x</sup> The list could go on and on<sup>xi</sup>.

Since the Georgetown Consortium study began in 2002, two other studies have reported student learning gains abroad that occurred in two of these programs. Both feature systematic interventions by qualified faculty, over the course of a semester. In the first, Engle and Engle (2004) report that over a period of six years, their students—who among other things were enrolled in a required “French Practicum” course at the program site that was designed to help them process their intercultural learning—made much greater intercultural gains, on average, than the average gains of students in our study.<sup>xii</sup> Similarly, Lou and Bosley (2008b) report that their Willamette and Bellarmine students also made impressive intercultural gains while enrolled abroad in an intercultural course that was taught at a distance, through the use of Blackboard and email.<sup>xiii</sup>

3. I began this paper by discussing some of the core beliefs of the traditional teaching-centered study abroad paradigm, and a number of the developments that have led increasing numbers of faculty and study abroad professionals to embrace the newer learning-centered paradigm. When we consider that study abroad professionals have been intervening successfully in the learning of students abroad for decades, it is easy to understand why we have been experiencing this paradigm shift. What is more difficult to understand is why the traditional paradigm continues to inform so much current study abroad policy and practice. For example, many U.S. undergraduates continue to participate in reciprocal exchange programs that enroll them in host university courses,

with little or no support provided on site for their learning. Many institutional leaders continue to embrace the notion that students learn abroad through simple exposure, when they urge that 20%, 40%, 50% or even more of their students go abroad, rather than working to maximize the learning of those students when they do. Too many institutions require 3.0 grade point averages of prospective study abroad participants—even though there's no evidence that students who earn good grades at home will learn effectively abroad.

The concept of “the master narrative” provides, I think, an effective explanation for why these and so many other practices continue to endure. As critical theory has taught us, master narratives provide members of a cultural community with a coherent account of the world in which they live and work. The U.S. study abroad community is drawn together around such a narrative. Those of us who design and deliver study abroad programs are of course members of this community; so are the students we send abroad, their parents, the increasing number of employers who hire recent graduates from our institutions, and others. What draws so many of us together at events like NAFSA, Forum on Education Abroad, CIEE, AIEA and other conferences, and what helps policies and practices endure at many of our institutions, is a core of shared values and beliefs about learning abroad.

We don't normally reflect on our master narrative, any more than cultural communities normally do; master narratives remain largely out of sight and mind. Here's my best attempt to bring to the surface the master narrative that continues to inform a lot of current study abroad policy and practice:

*U.S. students are normally transformed through studying abroad. They learn through experience, through being exposed to things that are new and different. The students themselves confirm that this is true: they tell us that going abroad has “changed their lives.” Since the more they're exposed to the new and different, the more they learn, colleges and universities should work to send as many of them abroad as possible. And since students learn best when they're “immersed” in their new experiences, they should*



*go abroad for longer, rather than shorter, periods of time. They should enroll directly in university courses at renowned universities, and they should be taught by well-credentialed faculty. They should live either in homestays or in student residences with host culture roommates.*

*Students who study abroad increase their academic knowledge, disciplinary and multi-disciplinary; this knowledge includes the language and literature of the host country. Knowing about another culture is a potentially useful by-product of studying abroad as well. Students who have performed well academically at home, and who have studied the language of the host culture for a reasonable amount of time before going abroad, are more likely to be transformed than those who haven't. If it happens that students return home without being transformed through the experience, they have no one to blame but themselves.*

Master narratives help us organize the raw data of individual experience into meaningful patterns. They act as a kind of glue to hold cultural communities together. Over time, they can also limit the capacity of community members to adapt to changing circumstances. In serving as a filter between us and experience, in offering us a coherent explanation of “the facts on the ground,” the traditional study abroad narrative has tended to shield us from seeking, or perceiving, alternative interpretations. The master narrative has encouraged us to selectively perceive what we’ve been conditioned to see—and to ignore, deny, or minimize the facts that don’t fit the narrative.

Over time, though, narratives do change, as members of the community, first individually or in small and tightly-knit groups, and finally collectively, discover and share alternative interpretations that provide a more satisfying account of the world in which they live and work. The evidence strongly suggests that we’re experiencing this now. The growing importance of the assessment movement in higher education; decades of research on student learning, in the U.S. and abroad; soaring study abroad enrollments; the dissemination of knowledge about intercultural learning; decades of developing programs that intervene strategically in student learning abroad; and the growing experimental

evidence that such interventions benefit learning:<sup>xiv</sup> all suggest that an alternative narrative is emerging:

*When students study in a culture different from their own, they have opportunities to learn things, and to learn in ways, that they won't if they stay on the home campus. While traditional disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning is important, intercultural learning is foundational: when students experience local teaching and learning practices, they are being offered surface manifestations of deeply-held cultural values and beliefs. Exposure to the new and different is thus a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for learning: students learn in the new culture through actively engaging, reflecting on, and trying out new hypotheses. Thus the primary goal of learning abroad is not only to learn about, but to have an experience of, another culture. Intercultural learning is developmental, not transformational: a rheostat that's slowly turned up, over time, gradually illuminating a room, offers a more realistic emblem of intercultural development than a light switch that, when turned on, suddenly lights up the space.*

*Students who learn well at home do not necessarily learn or develop effectively abroad. Some students learn effectively when enrolled in programs abroad that provide little or no support for their learning, but many don't. Many more succeed when they participate in programs that intervene strategically—throughout the program—in student learning and development. Staff need to be trained interculturally; facilitating intercultural development involves engaging students experientially as well as didactically. Educators need to intervene by balancing challenge and support, by helping students identify their own and program learning goals, and by formatively assessing their efforts to meet those goals. When students return home without having met their or the program's goals, those who organized the program don't assume that the students are at fault. While that may be the case, they're also aware that adjustments may need to be made—in the program's design, in its delivery, in the selection and preparation of students, or in all three—so that future program participants will be more likely to succeed.*

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<sup>i</sup> For a fuller discussion of several of the issues discussed here, a more detailed summary of the Georgetown Consortium study's research findings, and my acknowledgment of the important contributions that several individuals made to this study, see Vande Berg, M.; Connor-Linton, J. & Paige, R. M. (2009, forthcoming). The Georgetown Consortium study: Intervening in student learning abroad. In *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, XVIII.

<sup>ii</sup> Bennett, M. (2004). Measuring Intercultural Competence. Paper delivered at the 11<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the Nordic Network of Intercultural Competence, Kristiansand, Norway, November 28, 2004, p. 5. Bennett uses the sentence in discussing the psychologist George Kelly's "experience corollary."

<sup>iii</sup> Engle and Engle, 2003, p. 4: "... focused and reflective interaction with the host culture is finally what separates study abroad from study at home."

<sup>iv</sup> While Engle and Engle's hypothesis about the impact of these variables focused specifically on student intercultural learning (Engle and Engle, 2003, p. 4, note that their classification is focused on "culture-based study abroad"), the Georgetown Consortium study was designed to test whether, and to what extent, each of these variables influenced oral proficiency learning as well.

<sup>v</sup> Stansfield, C, 1991 and 1996.

<sup>vi</sup> See Hammer & Bennett, 1998/2004 and 2003.

<sup>vii</sup> American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. (1999). *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*. Hastings-on-Hudson, NY: ACTFL.

<sup>viii</sup> Engle and Engle, 2004, p. 234: "Diminishing progress in second language acquisition among second semester students may occur because they have reached a point in the development of their proficiency where "roughly successful communication [is] enough."

<sup>ix</sup> For an excellent overview of the evolution of intercultural intervention in U.S. study abroad, see Bennett, M.J. (in press).

<sup>x</sup> See Vande Berg, M. & Paige, R. M. (2008).

<sup>xi</sup> See V. Savicki for discussions about several other programs that focus intentionally on intercultural development abroad.

<sup>xii</sup> The average IDI gain of all students abroad in the Georgetown study—the great majority of whom were in programs that did not facilitate their intercultural learning—was 2.3 points. On average, AUCP students, between fall 2002 and spring 2008, achieved IDI gains of 12.32 points (Engle, personal communication, September 22, 2008).

<sup>xiii</sup> The IDI scores of 8 Willamette University students who in fall 2007 completed the intercultural course abroad improved by an average of 10.27 points, and the 14 students who in spring 2008 students took this course abroad improved by an average of 9.4 points (for fall scores: Lou, 2008 a; for spring scores: Lou, personal communication, September 25, 2008). The IDI scores of 12 Bellarmine students who in fall 2007 took the intercultural course abroad showed an average improvement of 9.91 points in comparison with a group of students at home who did not take this course. In spring 2008, the 15 Bellarmine students who completed this course abroad improved an average of 8.19 points between their pre- and post-IDIs (for fall scores: Lou and Bosley, 2008a; for spring scores: Bosley, personal communication, September 25, 2008).

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<sup>xiv</sup> See Vande Berg, Connor-Linton and Paige (in press) for a discussion of some of the ways that each of these developments has contributed to changes in study abroad attitudes and practices.

## **Biography**

Michael Vande Berg is Vice President for Academic Affairs at CIEE. He received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. A founding Board member of the Forum on Education Abroad, he is the author of numerous publications, has served as the Principal Investigator of several study abroad research projects, and frequently leads intercultural workshops for faculty and staff in the U.S. and abroad.