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Teaching Cultural Competence: A Comparison of Outcomes Between In-Class and Study Abroad Programs

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Abstract

This study examined whether students develop cultural competence in classrooms and study abroad programs by comparing three groups of students: students in a Cross-Cultural Human Development Class (CCHD), Study Abroad programs (SA), and the control group. Participants were 106 undergraduate students from a predominantly White institution in the United States. CCHD students took a semester-long course in culture and human development, and SA students attended a short-term study abroad program. Students took pre- and post-surveys to examine their cultural competence skills. The results demonstrated that the cultural competence skills of the SA students were significantly improved after the program. CCHD students also demonstrated similarly increased cultural competence after completing the semester long course emphasizing cultural diversity, while the control group did not show an increase in cultural competence. Implications for teaching courses in cross-cultural psychology are discussed.

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The world is becoming increasingly multicultural. The number of international migrants, people living in countries other than where they were born, was estimated at 244 million in 2015 (United Nations, 2015). This was a 41% increase compared to 2000, and it was almost twice as much as the population of Japan. As indicated in the theme of the 23rd IACCP: "Honoring Traditions and Creating the Future," educating people to understand and celebrate traditions across cultures in our increasingly diverse societies is a critical role for researchers in the field of cross-cultural psychology. Cultural competence can be discussed at the institutional level (e.g., governmental policies, healthcare and educational systems, organization) and at the individual level. In this study, we focus on individual cultural competence, which can be defined as the ability to develop and maintain relationships, to communicate effectively and appropriately with others, and to work in cooperation with people of different cultures (Fantini, 2005). The current study examined whether students increased their cultural competence in a variety of educational contexts: Cross-Cultural Human Development Course, Study Abroad Programs, and a control group who did not experience either of these educational programs.

Why is it important to increase cultural competence? There are a variety of examples which demonstrate that a lack of cultural competence has costs for our societies and the well-being of individuals. Diversity is increasing across the world. For example, in the United States, it is projected that children of color will soon represent 57% of the student body. Without cultural competence, intercultural contacts can lead to prejudice, discrimination, and racism. There have been numerous reports covered in national and international media that demonstrate tensions created by intercultural conflicts. One benefit of increasing education in cultural competence is to potentially decrease these incidents. Another benefit of educating undergraduate students is to increase cultural competence in the community. Undergraduate students will be participating in our community by taking many roles, such as teachers, healthcare providers, policymakers, volunteers, and parents. It is thus important to start developing cultural competence at the undergraduate level.

Existing research shows that students' cultural competence and cultural understanding are significantly increased when they participate in study abroad programs (Kitsantas, 2004; Watson, Siska, & Wolfel, 2013). For example, studies have shown that students strengthen creative thinking skills, problem solving skills, and have higher levels of emotional resilience, openness, flexibility, and personal autonomy due to their study abroad experience (Kitsantas, 2004; Lee, Therriault, & Linderholm, 2012). Another study by Douglas and Jones-Rikkers (2001) found a positive impact of study abroad programs on students' development of worldmindedness, which is the habitual thought that considers global issues and values global perspectives.

The development of cultural competence has also been observed in classrooms. For instance, Lenchuck and Ahmed (2013) discussed the positive role of increased cultural competence in the context of language learning. Students who developed better cultural competence more readily learned English as a second language in Canada. Another study conducted content analyses among undergraduate physical education students when they completed a service-learning program in which they taught physical education to African-American and Hispanic children from low socioeconomic neighborhoods (Meaney, Bohler, Kopf, Hernandez, & Scott, 2008). Examining students' experiences via daily logs, weekly reflections, and focus group interviews, their findings indicated that daily interaction with the children broadened students' understanding of under-served children, changing their preconceived stereotypes; improved their language and communication skills; and impacted future teaching expectations.

Previous research indicates a significant and positive impact of study abroad programs on students' development of cultural competence. Would we be able to mimic this positive impact in classroom education? While the development of cultural competence has been widely discussed in education for specific professions such as teachers and social workers (e.g., Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004), empirical research examining students' development of cultural competence in general education courses is limited.

The current study examined the development of students' cultural competence in one of the university's general education courses: Cross-Cultural Human Development. While this is an upper level course in Human Development, many students from a variety of backgrounds take this course as part of their general education. The learning outcomes for this course were: 1) explain how culture shapes human development across the lifespan, 2) approach cross-cultural human development research with a critical eye, 3) apply students' knowledge about cross-cultural development in everyday life, and 4) communicate students' knowledge to others effectively in a variety of methods such as discussion, presentation, and/or writing. In addition to lecture, readings, and exams, the students took part in a variety of culturally focused assessments, such as a "Norm Breaking Paper" where they had to break a cultural norm and reflect on their experience. In another important assessment, "Hot Topics Debate," students chose a topic and completed a debate on a variety of issues in relation to intercultural conflicts. The goals for this assessment were for students to gain awareness of their own values as well as others and to expand their critical thinking skills.

We compared students' cultural competence between those who completed a Cross-Cultural Human Development course, short-term study abroad programs, and the control group. It is important to note that cultural competence requires continuous education, and we do not make a claim that students become completely culturally competent after taking the course; however, we predict that students' cultural competence increases after taking educational programs that encourage cultural diversity.

Methods

Participants

There was a total of 106 students from a mid-sized Midwestern university in the USA that participated in this study. These students were divided into three groups: Cross-Cultural Human Development Class (CCHD), Study Abroad programs (SA), and the control group. CCHD students consisted of 52 students (45 female; M = 19.5 years; 48 White and 4 Hispanic; 9 freshmen, 18 sophomores, 17 juniors, and 8 seniors). The SA group consisted of 27 students (21 female; M = 21.0 years; 26 White and 1 Asian; 2 freshmen, 7 sophomores, 13 juniors, and 5 seniors). SA students completed short-term study abroad programs (ranging from 2 weeks to a semester) in a variety of countries (Argentina = 2, Ecuador = 7, Germany = 6, Italy = 4, Mexico = 5, South Africa = 3). Finally, the control group consisted of students who were in a different course (Infancy and Early Childhood) who had not completed either the Cross-Cultural Human Development course or a study abroad program. There were 27 students in this group (24 female, M = 20.5 years; 25 White, 1 Black, and 1 Asian; 3 freshmen, 6 sophomores, 13 juniors, and 5 seniors). For the CCHD and control group students, we only included those who were born and raised in the USA. For the SA students, only one student was an international student in the U.S. while all other students were born and raised in the U.S. prior to their study abroad experience.

Table 1
Intercultural Abilities Items

I can cite a definition of culture and describe its components and complexities.
I know the essential norms and taboos of other cultures (greetings, dress, behaviors).
I can recognize signs of cultures stress and some strategies for overcoming it.
I know some techniques to aid my learning of other cultures.
I can contrast my own behaviors with those of other cultures in important areas (social interactions, basic routines, time orientation).
I can cite historical and socio-political factors that shape my own culture and other cultures.
I can describe a model of cross-cultural adjustment stages.
I can cite various learning processes and strategies for learning about and adjusting to other cultures.
I can describe interactional behaviors among people in other cultures in social and professional areas (family roles, teamwork, problem solving).
I can discuss and contract various behavioral patterns in my own culture with those of other cultures.

Materials and Procedure

This study utilized a subset of questions from Fantini's (2005) Assessing Intercultural Competence Scale. The scale is intended to measure the outcomes of intercultural education (such as studying abroad) on students and is a valid and reliable measure in assessing normative, formative, and summative indicators of intercultural competence (Fantini, 2005). For the current study, we focused on the intercultural ability section. Items used in the current study are listed in Table 1.

Students rated themselves on a 0-5 Likert scale to the degree in which they believed or agreed with the statement about their intercultural abilities, with 0 being "none" and 5 being "highest." SA students completed the survey before and after they completed a study abroad program. Other students (CCHD and control) completed the same survey at the end of the semester. All the surveys were completed online.
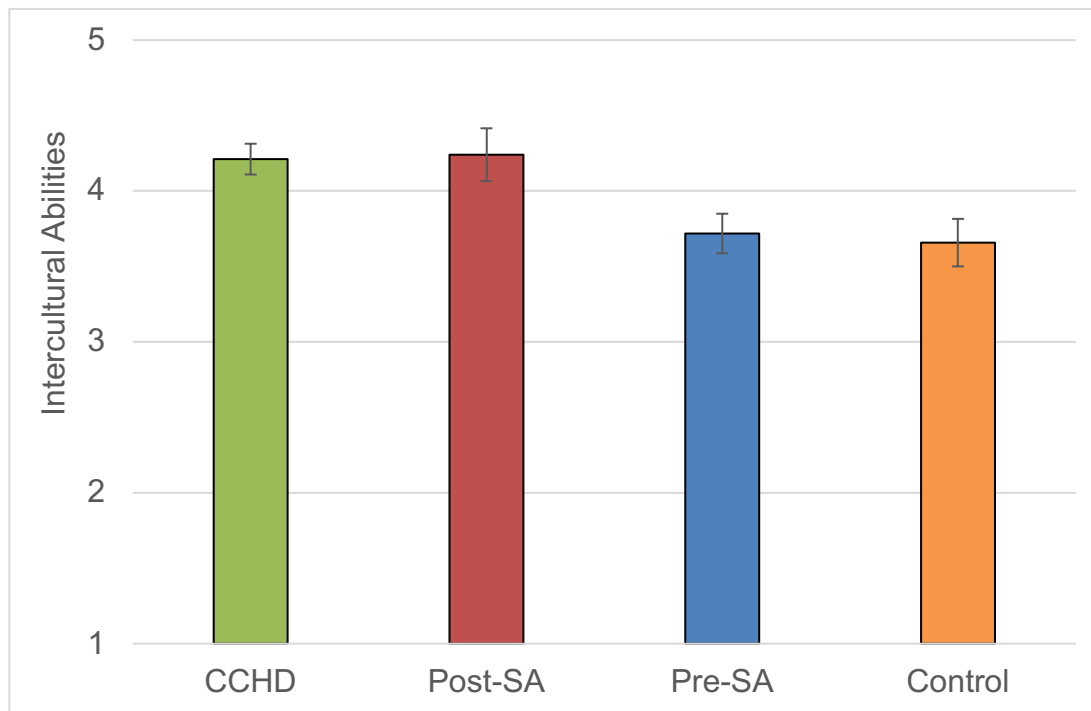
Results

To compare the outcomes of cultural competence skills, we conducted a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) comparing post-SA, CCHD, and control on intercultural abilities. The results revealed a significant effect of group, $F(2, 103) = 4.47$, $p = .014$, $\eta_p^2 = .080$ (Figure 1). The planned post-hoc analyses with Tukey HSD found that there was a significant ($p = .016$) difference between CCHD students ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.74$) and the control group ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.82$), while CCHD students and post-SA students ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.95$) did not differ in their intercultural abilities. The outcomes of post-SA and control students were also significantly different ($p = .045$).

We also conducted a repeated-measure t-test to compare pre-SA ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.68$) and post-SA intercultural abilities, and there was a significant increase in their abilities, $t(26) = 3.03$, $p = .005$, confidence interval (CI) = [0.18, 0.94]. When comparing pre-SA and CCHD students, the difference was also significant, $t(77) = 2.89$, $p = 005$, confidence interval (CI) = [0.17, 0.49].

Discussion

The current study tested students' development of cultural competence by examining the intercultural abilities of three groups of participants: Cross-Cultural Human Development course students (CCHD), Study Abroad (SA) students, and the control group that did not participate in either of the educational programs. To our knowledge, the current study was the first study to compare students who completed a cross-cultural course vs. those who completed a study abroad program in their cultural competence skills. Our results indicated that both CCHD and post-SA students demonstrated increased cultural competence compared to pre-SA and control students. Furthermore, since pre-SA and control students

Figure 1. Mean intercultural abilities (and SE) across groups: Cross-Cultural Human Development (CCHD), Post- and Pre-Study Abroad (SA), and Control.

showed similar cultural competence, these results suggested that the increase in post-SA students' cultural competence could be attributed to their participation in the program, rather than other confounding variables such as the selection bias. Overall, our findings are in line with findings of Fantini's (2005) study.

CCHD students demonstrated similar outcomes as the post-SA students in their cultural competence. This finding suggests that the course strengthens students' intercultural abilities as much as a study abroad experience. It is possible that CCHD students were exposed to an in-depth analysis of a variety of cultures, in comparison to the SA students who had an exposure to one culture.

The limitation of the current study was that cultural competence was tested with a self-report. It is thus possible that students may have had a perception of strong cultural competence without actual abilities. This is a critical issue in the field, as most assessments for evaluating cultural competence rely on self-reports (for review, see Kumas-Tan, Beagan, Loppie, MacLeod, & Frank, 2007).

It is also important to note that we do not assume that cultural competence is acquired quickly nor causally. Research indicates that the roles of awareness, reflection, and continued change in striving toward cultural competence are essential (Diller & Moule, 2005). In fact, one of the first steps may be to realize that you are probably not culturally competent.

Despite these limitations, our results provide an insight into the role of undergraduate education in helping students develop cultural competence. In an increasingly diverse world, cultural competence is an essential skill for not only professionals but also for all citizens. Diversity brings challenges and opportunities. Future research should investigate how a variety of undergraduate programs, both inside and outside of classrooms, can help students take these challenges and turn them into opportunities.

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