ACTION RESEARCH AND ACTION LEARNING: TOURISM EDUCATION ON THE EDGE OF SOMETHING BIG

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ABSTRACT

Study abroad students have been encouraged to study in Australia, providing enormous benefits to universities and the Australian economy. This internationalisation of education enables immersion of domestic students in the globalisation imperative. Large numbers of study abroad students now study at Australian universities. But while mobility has unlocked opportunities for study abroad students, many experience difficulties with both commitment to study and cultural adjustment in their new educational environment. This paper considers how engagement and commitment of study abroad students in higher education have been enhanced using an action research/action learning (ALAR) methodology to make the course better suited to student needs and interests. The paper considers the ‘toolbox’ of new curriculum activities developed and introduced to build cross-cultural relationships between and among domestic and study abroad students, taking a course on tourism, in a Southeast Queensland regional university.

KEYWORDS: Tourism education, action research, study abroad, student commitment, cross-cultural education, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Study abroad students bring cultural diversity to tourism education in regional universities, exposing domestic students to the global environment of visiting students. While cultural diversity may be good for domestic students, studying abroad for one semester only can place stress on visiting international students. They attempt to develop new social networks but this can impact negatively on their educational experience and learning. Study abroad students must also modify their study skills to fit into an unfamiliar academic environment (Russell, 2005). Accordingly, Australian academics must make strategic choices relating to the commitment and support that must be provided to assist short-term study abroad students in this adaptation process (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

This paper discusses an action learning/action research (ALAR) project using an action research methodology in a course for business students of tourism at the University of the Sunshine Coast, a Southeast Queensland regional university. The course methodology, drawing from Revans (1983), enhances the engagement and commitment of study abroad students through a ‘toolbox’ of new curriculum activities developed and introduced to build cross-cultural relationships between and among domestic and study abroad students. Preliminary findings of the project indicate significant benefits of the ALAR innovations through in-class discussions and engagement in cross-cultural presentations by study abroad students. For study abroad students, the new course methodology has improved their ability to prepare and study and thus is playing a significant role in deepening their scholarly commitment. For domestic students too, positive learning outcomes have enhanced their commitment to their studies. Most significant is the very positive student feedback endorsing the success of the new ALAR teaching model.

Study abroad students must deal rapidly with issues impacting on assimilation into their new university courses. Challenges include language difficulties and differing writing and teaching methods (Nambiar, Radha & Noraini, 2012). For Chinese students in western contexts, cultural
differences relate to independence and satisfaction (Yang, 2007). Other factors include “campus weather; landscape; living conditions; traffic; food; people, students and inter-communication” and ‘technical teaching’ (Maazrol & Soutar, 2002, p. 267). The teaching practices of academics can also be a challenge for students from abroad and academics must re-examine their teaching praxis in line with the variety of learning expectations (Cambell & Li, 2008). That understanding is key to the ALAR project concerning methodology for a university course on tourism explored in this paper. Most important is the need for academics teaching in tourism courses to listen to what their study abroad students are saying about their experiences and about the assistance they require to deal effectively with their educational engagement and commitment to it.

Cultural Diversity and Study Abroad Students’ Assimilation and Engagement

To encourage acceptance of cultural diversity both formal and informal relationships need to be developed between academics and study abroad students (Trice, 2003). Educational diversity with the support of engagement and participation were found to help reduce homesickness in study abroad students (Kwon, 2009), while engagement in discussion and peer interaction enhanced development of language skills (Scheyvens, Wils & Overton (2003). Academics who provide personal monitoring as well as academic feedback can contribute to engagement and commitment (Crose, 2011).

METHOD AND ANALYSIS

This ALAR project examined the experiences of 45 study abroad and 48 domestic undergraduate students undertaking a business / tourism course. Consistent with ALAR methodology, our research method was triangulated across literature review, focus groups and open ended survey questionnaires to inform the inquiry. Bazeley (2007) suggests this is the most appropriate method for a study of this kind. The researcher chose the ALAR paradigm of Revans (1983) with its six phase methodology Revans’ work was about and advocated Action Learning. In Phase 1 the problem was identified: the difficulties that international and domestic students experience in cross cultural engagement. In Phase 2 focus groups and an open ended survey of both domestic and study abroad students were used to obtain data. In Phase 3 data was coded and the transcripts were analysed using NVivo. In Phase 4 changes were identified and introduced to engagement activities in the curriculum of the business / tourism course. In Phase 5 students were surveyed about the curriculum interventions and outcomes from their cross-cultural learning experiences through the revised course. In Phase 6 it is intended to conduct a peer critique in preparation for the next ALAR cycle.

Using NVivo for coding and analysis of transcripts, the transcripts were organised by importing them into ‘Sources’ in the internal domain. First, word frequency queries were run to categorise key words, which were identified as ‘presentations’, ‘group’, ‘tutorial’, ‘discussions’, ‘interactivity’, ‘different’, ‘cultures’. These key words denote the prominence of presentations and other interactive discussion activities in the multi-cultural learning experiences. Further analysis was supported by ‘Transcript general notes’ to increase the rigour of our analysis. We also transformed imported survey transcript data on both domestic and study abroad students to nodes to make comparison easier.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This ALAR project was a response to the findings of a previous ALAR project that identified the difficulties of both domestic and international students in cross cultural relationships and study commitment (Cameron & Allen, 2012). The findings from that pilot ALAR project were used to inform the research question and understanding of how to address it in the present project. The question was: What can be done to engage, strengthen and build student commitment in classes containing both domestic and study abroad students? This is in line with the recommendations of Menkhoff & Bengtsson (2012) who suggest that academics should work with students to identify
what contributes to engaging them in the study program and thus nurturing student learning. All students in the course were asked to identify course characteristics that they felt could contribute to cross cultural peer engagement and improve their commitment to the course both inside and outside the classroom. This approach was in line with the work of Ramsden (2007).

Students’ main ideas were to have students work in groups, to engage in cross-cultural discussions with the support of teaching staff who students can consult, and to make topics of class discussions interesting. These ideas were developed into a new narrative to inform curriculum design and enhance student engagement and learning. The new curriculum design includes student self disclosure; student story telling; compulsory cross cultural pairing; encouragement of innovation and creativity in presentation activities (for example, students were given free rein to present their case in any manner they chose – some created YouTube clips, others designed interactive activities while others used fund games, to name but a few). These activities were designed not just to increase student commitment but also to build peer relationships and help study abroad students to further develop their language skills.

We used NVivo analysis to compare domestic and study abroad students’ understanding of what contributed to their commitment to the course (see Figure 1). Our analysis identified that for domestic students ‘positive learning outcomes’ was the most significant contributor to their commitment. On the other hand, study abroad students identified ‘their own personal study’ as a significant contributor to commitment. This could reflect the differences between curriculum design with which European students are familiar and that which they have experienced in the course. In contrast, tools used to engage students were far more important for domestic than for study abroad students, aligning with the findings of Kwong’s (2009) study examining study abroad students in the United States. The ‘toolbox’ of compulsory interactive activities forced students out of their comfort zones, in line with the findings of Scheyvens, Wild & Overton’s (2003) study of international students pursuing postgraduate study in geography. Domestic students appreciated the academic encouragement by their teacher, commitment and participation, which were part of their multi-cultural learning experience. This aligns with the study of Trice (2003) who recommended building both formal and informal relationships to help peers and academics to understand and help study abroad students (Nambiar, Radha & Noraini, 2012). The significance of working with industry on a real life project was particularly successful with study abroad students, but was of little significance to domestic students (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Domestic vs Study Abroad Students: Commitment Fulfilled through Course Participation](image-url)
There appears to be differences between Australian and European curriculum design and application that may account for the differences between domestic and international students in curriculum related activities identified in Figure 1, above. Study abroad students are more comfortable with more traditional structured lecture / tutorial formats that do not encourage creative interaction in class such as those which they experienced in the action learning activities conducted in this class.

The extent to which academic staff attempted to engage, and were effective in engaging students interactively in a multi-cultural learning experience and relationship building was also examined. Most significant for all students were ‘in class discussions’ (see Figure 2). New curriculum engagement involved storytelling and personal self disclosure in groups where participants were deliberately cross-cultural. Powerful experiences from these two activities evoked positive comments from all involved. International study abroad students found ‘presentation activities’ to be significant multi-cultural learning experiences involving development of language skills. This finding is consistent with Nambiar, Radha & Noraini’s (2012) study examining Korean study abroad students in a Malaysian classroom. The presentations require student innovation and team work, consistent with Campbell and Li’s (2008) study which suggests that academics need to diversify students learning expectations.

Findings from our analysis indicate that the new course framework prepared using an ALAR methodology has been transformational for both teaching staff and students of this tourism course. The new compulsory cross-cultural experiences enhanced student commitment to the course and enabled students to build lasting relationships. Confirming the positive outcomes of this ALAR project identified by the NVivo analysis, student feedback on the revised course was also very positive. Student Feedback Teaching (SFT) scores increased by 14 percent on the previous semester. The results of this ALAR project are in line with the observation of Zuber-Skerritt (1982) that:

Through systematic, controlled action research / action learning, higher education teachers can become more professional, more interested in pedagogical aspects of higher education, and more motivated to integrate their research and teaching interests in a holistic way. This, in turn, can lead to greater job satisfaction, better academic programmes, improvement of student learning and practitioner’s insights and contributions to the advancement of knowledge in higher education. (p. 15)
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Our project at University of the Sunshine Coast illustrates how students of business and tourism studying at an Australian regional university can benefit significantly through the enhancement of cross cultural study experiences that are likely to be less available to them than to their city-dwelling student cohort. Actively engaging domestic and study abroad students with each other in study activities inside and outside the classroom exposes the students to the experiences of global education. This work to improve the business tourism course at University of the Sunshine Coast has conceptualised these strategies as beneficial to student engagement and commitment, and has thus integrated the strategies through action learning steps into a transformational project. The outcomes for both domestic and international students have been holistic, adaptable and transferable, enhancing students’ social engagement, commitment and learning particularly through building cross cultural relationships. The cyclical features of action research methodology have also served to develop academic professionalism. Here we see a clear example of how an ALAR project has moved tourism education to the edge of ‘Something Big’.

REFERENCES


