



**THE EVOLUTION OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR
DIVERSITY EDUCATION IN A LIBRARY SCIENCE PROGRAM
THROUGH SHORT-TERM GLOBAL EXPERIENCES**

Andrew J. M. Smith

Prof. Dr., Emporia State University, Kansas, USA

asmith37@emporia.edu

Abstract

The professional standards of library and information science organizations emphasize the importance of diversity education in the preparation of new information professionals. Short-term global experiences can enhance diversity education in library science programs. The evolution of one program is described, as it moved from observation-based trips, through service learning, with students as experts, to its current interactive learning model. Assessment of student learning is now conducted by a three part process that includes individual reflection, small group work and whole group discussion.

Keywords: *library science education, diversity education, international exchange programs*

INTRODUCTION

The foundational tenet of library science is the idea of providing equal access to information for all library patrons, regardless of age, location, national origin, or any other defining characteristic. This is evidenced in the various statements from library and information organizations, such as the American Library Association's (ALA) *Bill of Rights* (ALA, 1996) and the *Code of Professional Practice* of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), the parallel professional body in the United Kingdom, (CILIP, 2009). In order to facilitate this, it is helpful if librarians and informational professionals have an understanding of and appreciation for the diversity within their patron communities, and have some form of experience of alternative views of the world other than their own.

During the long history of immigration into the United States, the emphasis was on assimilation of the immigrant populations into the population and an adoption of American values and practices. Children learned English at school and the whole community concentrated on becoming "American" and in complying with the American cultural norms. Although cultural heritage was



preserved within the immigrant communities, this heritage was largely confined to the community itself, and was not promoted outside it, and it is only in the more recent past that there has been a move away from an assumption of assimilation to one of integration, where the immigrant populations retain, celebrate, and promote their own cultural heritage.

DIVERSITY EDUCATION

Although there is much emphasis on diversity within the educational realm, (e.g. see *Standards for accreditation of master's programs in library and information studies*, ALA, 2015), diversity is often defined in terms of diversity within the American culture rather than diversity of national culture itself, from an international perspective. Even within this definition, diversity education may be difficult because of the homogeneous nature of the population. The State of Kansas, for example, has a population that is 87% white according to the latest census figures (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). This limits the exposure of library science students to people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs, and narrows their understanding of the variety information needs and how to serve them.

Another problem for educators of librarians in the United States is the sheer size of the country and the limitations this often has on the experience of their students with cultures other than their own. From the midpoint of the country, it is possible to travel almost 1,000 miles in any direction and still be within the continental United States. The latest statistics from the U.S. government show that on average only 38% of the U.S. population holds a passport, with passport ownership being lower in the middle and south of the country and higher in the northeast and on the west coast (United States of America State Department, 2016). It is within this context that universities that educate librarians and other information professionals must devise ways to increase their students' knowledge and understanding of culture and diversity to enable them to perform the duties of a librarian to the highest ethical standards.

Global Experiences in Library Science Education

A review of the professional literature within the discipline of library and information science shows relatively little has been written about the idea of global experiences as an integral part of the education of librarians. While there is a considerable body of literature within the general education field that discusses international education, the majority of this is focused on the impact on universities that have large populations of "international students" i.e. students who are not native to the country in



which they are receiving education. This impact is often focused on the demands the presence of such students puts on a university's resources and the problems encountered in teaching students studying in their second or often third language, rather than discussing the ways in which these students enrich the educational atmosphere and bring diverse viewpoints to the classroom. Within the library science literature there are discussions of the globalization of education from the perspective of the completely online program that technically has no restrictions on participation by students outside the country of delivery, again focusing on the teaching aspects, but there are few descriptions or examinations of global education programs whose purpose is to enable students to develop a global perspective.

One of the few available articles, by Houston (2006), describes the use of short-term international exchange programs within a program for educating school librarians. She argues for the importance of students developing such a global perspective through exchange programs, and details the initial processes of developing collaborative programs, in this case between a university in the U. S. and one in Spain... She notes that the process involves "significant travel, research, professional dialog, personal reflection and growth," (p. 213). This statement in itself may reveal some of the reasons that there is not a greater body of literature on the subject, as this reveals the necessity for time, for financial resources, and for a commitment from the faculty members involved to invest in the long-term project that the establishment of such programs requires.

This contrasts with the approach described by Hirsch et. al. (2015), where technology is used to provide virtual global experiences. While this may be seen as a logical extension of the idea of the online program with no borders, we are not given enough information from either this example or the previous one to understand the impact of such global experiences on the participating students, or whether there is a qualitative difference in the achieved results of a program that requires actual physical presence of students in a different culture and one that provides virtual presence in a different culture while students are still located in their own culture.

The Development of Global Experiences in SLIM

The School of Library and Information Management (SLIM) at Emporia State University (ESU) has gradually developed a program of global experiences like that promoted by Houston (2016). SLIM teaches its blended master of library science degree program at two centers in Kansas, as well as at centers in Colorado, Oregon, and Utah. Each center begins a cohort of students every year, and the students take core classes together in a blended face-to-face and online format, developing a strong cohort identity and forging relationships that will last throughout their professional careers. The majority of students in the library science master's degree program have full



time or part-time jobs, and so the blended classes meet for the face-to-face components in a format that uses weekend intensive instruction, consisting of ten hours of instruction in Friday evening and all day Saturday classes, twice a semester for each course. The remainder of each course instruction takes place online, so students are able to maintain their regular employment while continuing their studies. Later in their program, students may choose to take elective courses with students from other cohorts, expanding their networks in the library community. All elective courses are offered online, as students from any of the geographically dispersed cohorts may participate, and this also allows a broader range of elective courses to be offered. One of the possible electives is a course in Global Information Infrastructure, which is a semester-long course that includes a ten-day field trip to one particular country that is the main study subject of the course. Since 2006, global experiences have been offered in a variety of locations, including Bulgaria (4 visits), Croatia, England (3 visits), Mexico, Scotland (4 visits), Serbia (6 visits), Paraguay, South Africa, and Ukraine.

The State of Kansas has a strong outward focus, and encourages its universities to engage in international programs both by bringing students into Kansas, and by sending our students out into the world. ESU maintains a strong international program and in addition to aggressive recruitment of students to attend the Kansas campus, offers support to departments and faculty to plan and implement travel outside the United States for students at all levels across the university. In addition, ESU offers travel scholarships which cover part of the trip cost and reduce the cost for students. Generous legacies to SLIM have enabled additional scholarship support that puts international education within the reach of all SLIM students. As a result of this, SLIM has for several years offered students the opportunity to participate in the Global Information Infrastructure course with funding that covers the majority of the travel portions of the class, so that lack of funding is not a barrier to students who wish to participate.

Over the years the guiding philosophy of the trips has evolved from a visitor perspective, through service learning, with the students providing professional services, to the current idea of immersion learning through cultural exchange. The original global experiences were often organized around a conference or symposium where students accompanied a professor who was a participant presenter, and the students were more spectators than active participants. Although there were opportunities for discussion and exchange, the SLIM group could be quite large, up to 20 students, and so it was easier for the students to remain in an intact group and thus not derive as much benefit from the experience. Some early experiences did give students the opportunity to visit libraries and archives, but again the presence of the large group limited the amount and type of exchange that was possible. The effect of the large group tended to characterize these trips as opportunities to see and observe rather than to interact and do.



The next development was the move from the tourist-centered model to trips that focused more on service learning, and on students engaging in a particular task or project. Although this is a useful and well-documented instructional strategy, there can be several problems with implementing it in an international trip, and these were evident in each of the SLIM service learning experiences. One of the greatest limitations is time, and the nature of most of the projects we were invited to do meant that the students were unable to complete a whole project, or even make significant progress on a single project within the confines of the trip. (As the majority of SLIM students remain in full-time employment while they pursue their master's degree, and often have only 10 days of vacation a year, there are strict limitations on the amount of vacation available for school work and therefore the length of time a trip can last.) The other time-related problem is that there is a tendency with limited time for students to focus on the project itself to the exclusion of all else, and what is therefore lost is any sense of the context in which the project is taking place, or the importance of spending time with our colleagues from the host country and institution and learning about them and from them of the importance of the task and its long-term effects and benefits.

Lack of expertise and language difficulties were other limiting factors. Often, the students were asked to provide services that were beyond their competence, or where the local staff had the competence but had difficulty explaining the process to the students because of the technical language required and the students' lack of language skill. Students may be capable of cataloging to a high standard in English, but do not have the language skills to catalog adequately in Spanish. Even if they have adequate language skills to catalog in modern Spanish, they may not be able to deal with older forms of the language or with dialect. Equally, neither the local staff nor the SLIM faculty or students may have possessed the degree of expertise required to undertake specialized projects, or there may simply not have been adequate resources or equipment to do the project well. Students often reported frustration at the limitations of the service learning opportunities, while also expressing regret at the lack of time for professional exchange or engaging in cultural experiences.

Since 2011, as a result of an analysis of student and faculty feedback, trips have focused on interaction with local librarians in the destination country, on a professional exchange of ideas, and of the students seeking to understand the opportunities and problems of the information world in the country they visit. The emphasis is on the students as learners, rather than outside experts, and the students gain a much more rounded understanding of the country and its culture, as the most important factor in the trip is being present in the country, rather than doing, visiting, or participating in any particular event. Students and faculty do have opportunities to participate in library activities such as storytelling to young children, and have shared their expertise on topics such as social media marketing and library advocacy and fundraising, but the emphasis is on cultural immersion, on



observation of libraries and information services, and on spending time with local people. Student feedback has become more positive as the amount of interaction with local librarians has increased, as they acknowledge that their level of knowledge of both librarianship and the visited country increases as they spend more time talking and listening and being more a part of the culture.

Assessment of Student Learning in Global Experiences

Assessing this kind of learning experience can be difficult, as each student comes to the course with different expectations and prior experience, and each student's actual experience of the trip may be quite different. However, over the past few years we have developed a three-part procedure where each student is encouraged to process the experience on his or her own, each student collaborates with a small group to produce a joint record of the trip and all students also share their responses together in a moderated discussion forum.

The largest component of the assessment is the personal journal that all students are required to keep. The journal records the experience of the whole course, which includes the preparation time before the field trip, the actual experience in-country, and their thoughts and learning after their return to the United States. These journals reveal the extent of their learning and the major impact of this one class on their whole outlook of the library and information profession. The journal is private, in that only the individual student and the professor see it, and this is particularly important as students are encouraged to record all their experiences, both positive and negative, and to reflect on the changes they observe in their own understandings and attitudes over the course of the semester. This is a critical part of the debriefing process, as it is necessary to help the students make sense of their learning and to put everything in context as they return to the United States, for just as they have learned a great deal about the country they have visited, they also return with new eyes and must get used to seeing their own country from a different perspective.

The other two parts of the assessment program involve students sharing their experiences. The collaborative journal allows students to work together in groups of three or four to develop a portrait of their global experience and to describe their learning and put it in context. The debriefing discussions are also a valuable tool, as they help the students understand the differences of each trip participant's experience and learning, even when they were all technically on the same trip. This further emphasizes the diversity of experience and understanding and the need for students when they become professional librarians to recognize the differences that exist within their library patrons, and the corresponding requirements for their collections and services, as well as their professional skills.



Although the creation of each global experience class takes a great deal of planning and organization, as well as requiring a major investment of time and resources on behalf of SLIM, the whole process is made worthwhile by the fact that the majority of students who take advantage of these global experiences feature this class in their cumulative master's portfolios and cite the class as their most significant learning experience within the MLS program.

CONCLUSION

Over the past few years changes to the program have been made in response to analysis of student feedback from individual trips. However, there is now a significant body of material from the 17 courses that have been conducted in the past five years, consisting not only of direct student feedback to operational aspects of each trip, but also the individual and collaborative journals. This material is now being analyzed to identify recurrent themes and to document the patterns of learning of the students, with a view to proposing a model of the short-term global experience for diversity education.

While there is general agreement on the positive effects on student learning of these types of educational experiences, more work still needs to be done to document the actual impact on student learning and attitudes and to propose best practice. However, there is no question of the importance of expanding the world view of future librarians and information professionals, as they must learn to provide high quality information services in a rapidly expanding global information world. This type of educational experience provides one effective way of helping students to achieve this.

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