Immersion Librarianship: An assessment of transforming LIS students' professional worldview through a service learning project at an international school library

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Abstract:

This paper is an assessment of the 2012 project which took fourteen students to Russia for just such an experience. This assessment contains a summary of the study conducted as well as several suggestions are offered for designing new and redesigning existing programs. Capitalizing on the concepts of international service learning, this program combined the expectations of study abroad and cultural discovery with professional experience and professional discovery.

Designed as a critical hermeneutic study, the aim was to discern what students actually learned from such an experience, not to prove or disprove an existing theory. Through the review of pre-experience surveys, post-experience interviews, and researcher real-time observation, a rich conversation about the experience was created. From the pre-experience survey, six attributes were collected - time in profession, age group, point in the program, worked with internationals, prior international experience, type of LIS work experience - and used to examine student responses to the post-experience interview questions. The authors, study researcher and lead professor, share: background on the specific program including its history, observations on previous projects, and the course credits in which it is embedded; details about the cohort make-up and selection process, the host libraries, and the project's itinerary; a brief explanation of the methodology employed, critical hermeneutics; findings from analysis as well as directly from students commentary; and spend the lion share outlining suggestions for future projects such as this one and a general list of best practices.

Methodology: Critical Hermeneutics
Analysis: Conversation and content analysis
Population: 14 LIS graduate students (study participants), lead professor, three additional mentors, one researcher
Host Location: AAS of Moscow and AAS of St. Petersburg, Russia
Duration of course: 1 8-week summer semester, with 3 weeks in country

Keywords: study abroad, school librarianship, multicultural, service learning, Russia

Introduction

School libraries provide a unique cross-section of all facets of librarianship. A school librarian on any particular day can engage in teaching young minds, providing patron assistance, cataloguing, collection development, program creation/delivery, collaboration with teachers/administrators, parental education, mentorship, technological advancements, many times without skipping a beat. Furthermore, international school librarians, while constantly developing their cultural awareness and competency regarding their host country, are challenged to provide for mother tongue collections, engage patrons who may hold non-US conceptions of what a library is, support the local ex-pat community, and navigate different political and supply chain issues within the host country for obtaining English language materials. Working within this environment is an extraordinary opportunity for nascent professionals to be exposed to everything a librarian does.

There are many different ways to incorporate real-world professional experience into the Library and Information Science (LIS) curriculum such as practicum, internships, and field experiences. Recently the concept of service learning opportunities has also been introduced as an option. Service learning, according to Bringle and Hatcher (1996), is "a credit bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs" (p. 222). At the University of North Texas's iSchool, they have a yearly offering which allows students to gain the real-world experience through a service learning project at a school library located in an international setting. This program offering gives students exposure to not only librarianship but also a chance to expand their cultural acuity.

Program History

The LIS service learning study abroad program has been delivered through the School Library Certification Program at the University of North Texas (UNT) since 2002 when a professor in the school library program was asked to assist a small school library in an international location. Each subsequent study abroad project responded to an invitation extended by a school library, internationally situated, to provide a variety of services and assessments related to school library programs. These projects offered LIS students an unprecedented opportunity to add to their academic and personal growth by broadening their world experience, meeting people from different backgrounds, and interacting with people who may hold different perspectives.

The project invitations were initiated by students within the program who had contacts working abroad, students in the certification program working in an international school library, and school librarians who learned of the projects and approached the department based on positive feedback from schools where the program was delivered. To-date, the study abroad program has been delivered in 12 locations, including: Jamaica (2002), Thailand (2003, 2004, 2005, 2006), Albania (2008), Ukraine (2010), Peru (2011), Russia (2012, 2013), Germany and Czech Republic (2014), and Germany and Denmark (2016).

The focus for each project depended on the needs of the individual school library, and always involved the introduction or assessment of an automation system and impact of technology. Students earned credit for two courses (six credit hours), with one course focused on *Managing Library Automation Projects* and the second course focused on *Information Resources and Services for Special Clientele*. Applicants from all library disciplines were

encouraged to experience the range of library programs and services in a fully contained setting.

All schools were English speaking, with the exception of the establishment of the first school library in the city of Urubamba, Peru. For that school the project team included Spanish speaking students who facilitated the introduction of the automation system and the design and delivery of the school library space and collection (courtesy of Capstone Books). The experiences have involved a range of participants with as many as 30 students working in three schools in Peru, and as few as 10 students working in the first project location in Jamaica.

Timing of the project depended on the coordination of the university semester with the host school schedule. The ideal time for on-site delivery was between the end of the spring semester (mid-May) and the beginning of the summer semester (early June) and coincided with a time in the school library schedule when school was in session and administrators, teachers, and the school librarian were available for inclusion in the project. This meant that project team recruitment, selection and orientation took place during the months prior to departure when students were focused on other coursework. The time frame for the coursework extended beyond the time onsite. In most cases an additional three to four weeks remained in the semester, and that timeframe allowed for submission of the personal assignments.

The study abroad projects were all student-funded. Airfare arrangements were left to the students, with a coordinated schedule of instructor departures and arrivals, and a specific time to meet at the project location. Each student was assessed a program fee that included shared accommodation, on site transportation, and some special events. Students were free to meet non-program companions after the project concluded, but the time onsite was restricted to UNT students only.

All students received an orientation to the project, project schedule and safety requirements before departure and onsite. Safety was a primary concern with a "rule of three" that precluded individual exploration. The hope was that this would encourage students to reach out to at least two others to join in the pursuit of an individual interest, while ensuring that no student was outside the reach of immediate assistance if needed.

The projects involved students working in teams to assess the individual school library situation in the light of the project goals, develop a plan of action, and carry out the work. Each student had experience with each facet of the project. Interviews with the school librarian, school administrators and teachers were required to understand the context for the planned activities, plans and policies. Each team prepared a report on their activities and accomplishments. A formal final report that integrated the team reports and included recommendations was prepared and presented to the school on the last day of the project.

School library services and assessments included: cataloguing new materials, classroom sets, and/or textbooks; designing and/or assessing the library space, preparing library work plans, performance plans and policies that support the school library and the school curriculum; introducing, assessing or optimizing the library automation system (both open source and proprietary systems); collection assessment, often with emphasis on the science collection; and teaching school librarians and teachers how to use technology, including the automation system.

Outside of the school, emphasis was placed on a cultural experience that included, whenever possible, tours of public and/or academic libraries, museums, art galleries, and local sites of interest; individual time to explore with a minimum of 2 others; and cultural events such as plays, operas, theatre, or dance. Students were assigned a photo journal that was guided by "challenge" questions prepared by the instructors to collect their thoughts and photos that represented their experience throughout the onsite experience, and shared with everyone at the end of the course.

Project evaluation included formative assessments during the project with instruction and follow-up by the instructors, and summative assessments of the photo journal; peer assessment of individual contributions to the team process using the Project Team Evaluation form; and an understanding of the project process in a 1,000 word written paper that identified individual learnings, discussed the project process, identified what worked, what didn't work and why, and identified what could be done differently

Organizing and delivering the study abroad service learning project is an intense undertaking that involves attention to pedagogical goals, multicultural experiences and safety concerns. It requires detailed planning, dedicated resources, and unflagging enthusiasm.

Research

The program was first studied in May of 2010 as a class project (Walczyk & Schultz-Jones, 2010). The researcher was interested in seeing whether students developed cultural competency as a result of their participation. This experience took participants to Kyiv, Ukraine where they worked with Quality Schools International at the Kyiv International School. This study provided the foundation for the validity of data instruments. Independent variables came from the pre-experience survey and were the participant attributes of age, point in their LIS program, length of time in the profession, type of prior LIS work experience, prior international experience, and whether they had worked with people from other countries. Dependent variables came from the post-experience questionnaires and encompassed types of suggestions made, judgements, expectations, professional competencies, personal growth, overall experience comments, library culture, cultural competency, and comparisons. The main document, the post-experience interview, was subsequently subjected to a content analysis using NVivo software. Although some aspects of cultural competency development were identified, what the analysis showed was a deeper understanding of the culture and professional nature of librarianship. This preliminary research showed that students definitely learned something beyond skills as a result of their participation.

In May of 2012, a dissertation research study focused on the program (Walczyk, 2016). That year the international service learning project was conducted with a co-hort of 14 LIS graduate students. All participants travelled to Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russia to work with the Anglo-American Schools in those cities. The project involved an overall library assessment of a larger, more affluent international school consisting of two weeks, and two days working in a small less affluent campus to organize its collection, both physically and within their computer automation system. Participants, divided into five teams to address space planning, cataloging, information technology, classroom collections, and policies, worked with host staff to learn, observe, and analyze the policies, processes, and procedures in place. During the three week visit to Russia, participants also participated in several entire group tourism events and were offered several additional small group opportunities. Some of

these included visits to Red Square, the Kremlin and National Armory museum, the National Science and Technology Library, the Hermitage, the Pushkin Museum, the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library, and the Google offices.

The project culminated in a final report to the school administrators including information regarding the state of their current policies, space utilization suggestions, an analysis of their collection, a review of their technology status, and status of cataloging their classroom collections.

The research study (Walczyk, 2016) was designed to identify what the participants learned from the experience both culturally and professionally. Documents collected were a pre-experience survey, in-situ challenge questions, researcher observations, and the post-experience interviews. The methodology chosen was critical hermeneutics (Roberge, 2011), a style that allows for interpretation and reinterpretation of the corpus as a conversation between the researcher and the documents. The critical nature of this methodology allowed the researcher to view the participants' experiences through a sociohistorical lens. In this way, the participants own voice became a point of analysis.

Study Findings

The 2012 study's instruments and data analysis structure mirrored that of the 2010 study. Whereas the 2010 study (Walczyk & Schultz-Jones) showed that participants learned more in the way of library cultural competency than cultural competency, in 2012 (Walczyk, 2016), the study showed that even though cultural competency, library cultural competency, and personal growth were germane to the success and perceived value of the experience, participant attributes had a greater effect on the results. To understand this difference, it was essential to look deeply at the analysis of the 2012 study.

Specific focus on the themes of cultural competency, professional competency, and personal growth was reported. Cultural competency was broken into awareness developed, expectations challenged, and differences observed. All three parts of cultural competency were observed in participants that had either travelled internationally before, were in an older age group, or were farther along in their LIS program. These participants expressed a greater focus on learning deeply from the experience. Interestingly, those that had been in the profession six to ten years experienced the greatest amount of awareness of the new culture.

Professional competency or library cultural competency – "the development of library specific cultural and professional competencies through interacting with different library settings" (Walczyk, 2016, p. 165), also encompassed awareness, expectations, and differences. This theme was present in 6% of all comments made by participants. The attribute that appeared to make the most difference in participants was whether they had worked with people from other countries. It was hypothesized that by having already addressed their own cultural biases these participants were able to focus on the professional competency components of the experience. The other finding of note was that participants' point in their LIS program affected whether they identified their development of library cultural awareness or focused on the differences in library cultures. Those farther into the program concentrated on awareness of how they could integrate the processes of the host library culture into their work world whereas those earlier in their program fixated on the differences, i.e. "They aren't doing it right".

Personal growth did not show up as strongly as the researcher had expected. Those under 30 did express a development of greater flexibility as a result of the experience. However, most of the remaining growth that participants commented on reflected how their work world would be impacted, i.e. teamwork and office communication skills, rather than their personal life.

Finally, the study (Walczyk, 2016) provided some insight into what participants value from engaging in this type of experience. Students appreciated the opportunity to gain hands-on experience in all of the different tasks a librarian may be asked to perform. By being located within a school library environment, the student was able to see the breadth of tasks performed by a solo librarian and not just focus on one particular area. Students felt that this exposure allowed them to find their place within librarianship. Thus, after seeing many areas of librarianship and roles librarians play during their experience, participants only had to make the remaining decision of type of library would be their preferred environment. Another key value participants expressed was that the international aspect of the experience provided participants with a fresh look at how librarianship can be performed and challenged their expectations regarding what they think libraries should do and how they should operate. This experience allowed participants to face those ideas and see how their profession was practiced in other countries that may not be based on those same assumptions.

Program Assessment

In reviewing the study findings, several hurdles to implementing a successful program were identified. Participant feedback was particularly enlightening when comparing the 2010 and 2012 cohorts. Perceived success of the program on any particular trip seemed to vary widely based on a number of environmental and cohort demographic/attribute factors, as described below.

- Cohort productivity and learning curve depends on attributes of participants.
    - We found that those participants that were excited for the work experience were more engaged throughout the trip.
- More is learned from less affluent locations as it affords the cohort to get more hands-on experience and perform more troubleshooting and analysis tasks
    - The affluence of the AAS libraries in Moscow rivaled the amenities, collection, and staff support of any private school in the US. As a result, the library was well run and lacked for little in the way of resources. This left a short list of projects or tasks for the cohort to address. As a result, more attention was paid to assessment rather than implementation.
- Participants may need some planned downtime during their trip to cope with culture shock.
- Participant impressions of the overall experience depended on their initial expectations and attitudes towards it being a service learning project instead of purely a cultural trip
    - Those participants that expressed their expectations of "seeing more and working less" reported less overall value in the experience.
- Some participants expressed frustration and hostility towards having had to work 8 hour days at the host library. This attitude served to disrupt the work day of other participants.
    - Some participants spent their time focused their attention on the internet or their social network at home than class activities. Others in their group became arguably frustrated in their team assignments.

- Success of the experience depends on the make-up of the cohort.
  - The university requires a minimum of 10 participants in order to receive administrative support from the Study Abroad department. This does not allow for a selection process to be conducted. Any student that meets the academic requirements of the course is automatically enrolled in the experience.

In an attempt to mitigate these factors, the researcher and professor prescribe some best practices to assist future iterations of the program. Additionally, they may serve as a collection of best practices for others interested in implementing such a program. With these ideas in mind, environmental factors and cohort attributes may have a reduced impact on the overall success of all experiences.

- When possible, add non-academic criteria to the selection process.
  - Although any applicant truly interested in gaining hands-on work experience and willing to travel internationally should be considered, we suggest additional weight be given to applicants who:
    - have travelled internationally previously
    - have worked with/supported people from other countries
    - are early in their library program/career
- Choose participants earlier in their program.
  - This would allow participants to experience many different aspects of librarianship and solidify their academic focus throughout the remainder of their program.
- Design a work "contract" for participants to sign acknowledging their commitment to the work portion of the trip.
  - This would ensure that participants were aware that the trip was not solely a tourism adventure and help to focus them on the hands-on professional experience nature of the course.
- Make required vs optional cultural activities explicit.
  - This would allow participants to know when they may have a window of time to recharge or opportunity to explore on their own in a group of three.
- When possible, situate the travel portion towards the middle of the course, instead of the beginning.
  - Ideally, have 3 weeks classroom time (online or in person) to focus on orientation – location background, expected skills, developing cohort cohesion – before the trip, 3 weeks travel/service learning experience, and then 3 weeks post.
- Screen the host location in person.
  - Each location has its own challenges and political hurdles. The project originally designed can change dramatically once the environment is assessed. This would also allow for an initial assessment of the depth of experience the cohort could be expected to obtain.
- Consistently offer opportunities for the cohort to visit local indigenous libraries, outside of the host library.
  - An international school library by definition may offer some familiarity but unless a student can see how the host country runs it libraries, he/she may not see any differences.

The challenges identified did not negatively impact the program. In fact, this program has had resounding anecdotal feedback for its entire life-span. With this examination of the program

through a research lens, the program has improved by incorporating the best practices where possible.

Summary

Delivering an international service learning project can be a rewarding experience for students and instructors. By situating the project within a school library, students are exposed to all of the facets of librarianship. Further, with this experience being placed internationally, students also obtain an appreciation for how other countries implement library services. With attention to student selection, site selection, project orientations, project goals and cultural opportunities the program can result in significant gains for the host school and individual participants.

Acknowledgments

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