

# **Pre-Service Teachers in Finland: Comparative Education through Short-Term Faculty-Led Study Abroad**

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*Study abroad is a popular enrichment of the U.S. postsecondary academic experience with short-term programs providing a cost-effective opportunity to enhance student international travel experiences. In this review, we critically examine a U.S. program we led to Finland with the goal of identifying the pedagogical features from that program that maximize and optimize student learning. We provided thirteen undergraduate and graduate students in a department of education at a mid-sized, public, land-grant university an opportunity to participate in a short-term, faculty-led study abroad program to learn about Finland's public, K-12 educational system. Program learning outcomes included comparing the country's top-ranked educational system with U.S. public K-12 education in order to enhance students' future teaching practices. The purpose of this essay is to deconstruct the pedagogical features from that program to identify what worked well and what could have been improved upon with the goal of providing a critically examined model for consideration and thereby enhance comparative educational practice for faculty-led study abroad programs.*

*Keywords: study abroad, pre-service teachers, experiential education, Finland*

## **Introduction**

Study abroad is an increasingly popular supplement to a university academic experience. According to the Institute for International Education's (2018) Open Doors Report, 285,322 U.S. students studied abroad during the 2015/2016 academic year, representing a four-fold increase from the early 1990's. Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005) identify the primary benefit of study abroad to be "learning about people from different cultures" (p. B20). They further show the following benefits associated with studying abroad: a) students tend to take more classes outside their major upon return, b) students exhibit a greater propensity to travel abroad again, c) students show increased interest in interdisciplinary studies, and d) students demonstrate influenced perception of the costs and benefits of globalization. In short, study abroad provides a unique opportunity for comparative education. The purpose of this essay is to conceptually deconstruct a faculty-led short-term study abroad program to Finland designed to provide its student-teachers with an opportunity for cross-cultural comparative education.

### **Study Abroad Formats**

Study abroad programs have been differentiated by length and purpose. The Institute for International Education (2018) groups study abroad programs by length of duration into: a) short-term (eight weeks or less), b) mid-length (one semester), and c) long-term (academic year). Sachau, Brasher, and Fee (2010) distinguish study abroad programs according to purpose including: academic semester/year abroad, service-learning programs, and short-term programs. Mid-length and long-term programs typically involve students living abroad, independently at a university campus while completing a course of study designed to supplement interests and coursework at their home institution. Service-learning programs tend to be short duration and provide an opportunity for volunteer work abroad by “linking the work students do in the classroom to real-world problems and world needs” (Sachau et al., 2010, p. 656), and thereby supplementing students’ academic experiences at the home institution, often satisfying fieldwork or internship degree requirements.

Short-term programs have gained widespread appeal in recent years accounting for an estimated 63% of U.S. students who study abroad (Institute for International Education, 2018). Prior to the era of short-term programs, study abroad was limited to individuals who could afford the long-term costs associated with attending university overseas. Today’s students tend to be debt averse (Avery & Turner, 2012) and are often worried about financing higher education. Short-term programs are typically less than eight weeks in duration and therefore less likely to interfere with students’ academic trajectories or college-supplementing jobs (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2009) making them more affordable study abroad options (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005; Nguyen 2017). Additionally, short-term programs allow participants to visit a considerable number of locations in a short period of time, maximizing cost/time efficiency (Sachau et al., 2010).

Despite growing interest, as highlighted by Chieffo and Griffiths (2009), some question the academic legitimacy of short-term programs. There is a tacit belief that study abroad provides an invaluable learning opportunity to experience foreign cultures, but key learnings have been difficult to assess. Long, Akande, Purdy, and Nakano (2010) identify an important dilemma for faculty in “how to keep a short trip academic while making sure students were engaged and benefitting from experiential learning” (p. 90). This pedagogical challenge compounds the difficulty in elucidating learning outcomes associated with short-term programs and stresses the importance of deliberate design and implementation to achieve academic outcomes and maximize student learning. Long et al. (2010) suggest a central aspect to the problem of establishing academic relevance is rooted in effectively assessing student learning, which has long been a challenge with study abroad experiences. In general, personal reflection captured through journals and formal written assignments tends to be the primary means of assessment, though Williams (2009) also proposes using student evaluations and a photo contest as a means of reflection to emphasize the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of learning from an intercultural experience.

Because short-term programs are frequently conducted by university faculty based on their specific areas of expertise, short-term program faculty have developed a variety of

pedagogical strategies and assessments of student learning, but there is not consensus on established best practices to serve as a model for short-term study abroad programs. As teacher educators with expertise in pedagogy and assessment, we wished to apply our expertise to a short-term program we led to Finland with the goal of evaluating our program design in order determine key learnings as well as identify areas for improvement.

### **Literacies and Libraries in Context: Finland**

During the spring 2018 semester, we led a short-term study abroad program to investigate Finland's K-12 public education system. We selected Finland due to its internationally recognized, exemplary educational system, lauded by educational researchers for both student outcomes and innovative teaching practices, as well as our interest in studying a Nordic model of education that focuses on social democracy (Ofstedal Telhaug, Asbjørn Mediås, & Aasen, 2006). Our student-participants were interested in learning more about Finland's top-ranked educational system (Ripley, 2013) and comparing those practices with Montana's, as a way of gleaning key learnings related to ongoing and future professional practice.

### *Conceptualizing the Course*

Eighteen months prior to the program, we began preparations, which included: selecting Finland as an exemplary educational model, identifying a third-party provider for our in-country experience, negotiating and gaining permission to co-teach with our department head, and submitting a proposal and budget. Upon approval, we designed the eight-week online course to prepare students for the nine-day in-country experience.

We made a concerted effort in marketing the program by targeting faculty, advisors, student organizations, fraternities and sororities as well as advertising to students via electronic communications and personally reaching out to former students. We visited classrooms and conducted information sessions. Additionally, we nominated prospective students for university financial assistance and we were able to secure over \$11,000 in travel support for five students. In total, the class consisted of thirteen students (ten undergraduate and three graduate) half of which had no previous travel experience outside the United States. None of the students or faculty had previously travelled to Finland.

### *Course Organization*

The overall pedagogical experience consisted of a required eight-week, three-credit online course occurring prior to a nine-day study-abroad trip to Finland over spring break. Given the available opportunities based on university registration protocol, the graded academic portion of the course was completed prior to and independently of travel abroad. Thus, travel abroad to Finland was not part of academic coursework requirements.

The course was designed to provide a comparative study of the Finnish education system, focusing on literacy and libraries. The learning outcomes allowed student participants to:

- Identify aspects of Finnish culture, including that of the indigenous Sami people;

- Compare and contrast the Finnish compulsory education system with the U.S. public education system;
- Describe the history of the PISA assessment and its implications for educators;
- Describe Finland's approach to second language learning;
- Describe and critique the Finnish school and public library systems; and
- Participate in a nine-day experience in Finland, synthesizing what was learned in the class prior to departure (not academically evaluated).

We used *Finnish Lessons 2.0* (Sahlberg, 2015) and supplemental readings to learn about Finland. The graded assignments included a presentation about Finland, online discussions, a summary paper, and a study abroad plan. All course assignments were completed during the first eight weeks of the semester. Because the course ended prior to travel abroad, students were able to fully engage in intercultural activities while in Finland without feeling pressured to split their time between participating in activities and fulfilling course requirements. While in Finland, we toured Helsinki, visited three schools in the Tampere area, participated in facilitated discussions led by the Finnish Council for Creative Education, and engaged in cultural activities. Pockets of free time enabled students to explore the country independent of faculty. This format, we believe, enhanced the perceived economic benefit of the program by providing students with a grounded academic approach and a scaffolded in-country experience while also affording students opportunities to explore the country according to their individual interests.

### *Course Assignments*

The eight-week course used Brightspace by D2L as an online learning platform and consisted of the following assignments: narrated online presentation about pre-assigned categories related Finnish governance, weekly asynchronous online discussions, a traditional academic paper synthesizing key learnings comparing the Finnish and U.S. educational systems, and personalized plan for making the most of the in-country experience.

### *Evaluation of the Assignments*

The Finland presentation enabled students to research and present important information in a structured and easily accessible manner to other class members (e.g., Table 1, Appendix). The narrated online presentations resulted in concise, informative, and durable topic-area overviews accessible throughout the course.

Matched to weekly readings, the asynchronous online weekly discussions provided a mechanism to ensure students completed the reading assignments as well as enable students to critically engage in online discussions. Given the diverse composition of students' academic experiences, the content of posts varied by length and depth. Some students used the online discussions to express areas of curiosity or of concern related to international travel, such as fear about inadvertently violating cultural norms. Other students critically compared differences in Finnish and U.S. approaches to education. For example, one student wrote:

...You raise an interesting point that has simultaneously troubled and intrigued me... Sahlberg (2015) mentioned the usefulness Finns have found with Multiple Intelligence Theory (MIT). Although MIT was an extremely popular educational theory for many years in the U.S., the idea has not been empirically validated (cf. Kirschner, Sweller & Clark, 2006), causing it to be considered invalid. What is occurring to cause an educational concept like MIT to be embraced by a nation doing extremely well, and simultaneously to be disregarded by the nation that pioneered it based on the lack of empirical evidence?

In this manner, the asynchronous online format supported the academic diversity of undergraduate and graduate students alike.

The summary paper provided a mechanism to synthesize key learnings as well as to express areas of confusion or concern. Because the format requirements allowed students to describe their experience in the first person, faculty could pinpoint the relevant aspects of each student's pre-trip curricular experience. One student remarked:

The Finnish educational system is indeed a paradox. In many ways, I am still trying to wrap my mind around what I have learned...Part of the reason I am struggling to synthesize my learnings is because it doesn't feel like the story is complete. Sahlberg (2015) provides a focused depiction of Finland's educational history and yet, he concludes with a discussion of the current problems. This created a sense of incompleteness for me because, inevitably, there is more to come...

A noteworthy aspect about this student's paper lies in the unanswered questions about Finland precisely because the student had not yet visited the country. Because the course ended prior to the in-country experience, we wrestled with requiring a summary paper. Pedagogy aside, the summary paper provided a formal means of making connections between previously disparate ideas. Although this format did not allow students to synthesize the course learning outcomes and in-country experience, it did provide students with a structured means for summarizing the key learnings from the online class and subsequently prepared them for travel abroad.

The study abroad plan provided a mechanism for students to reflect upon their preparation for Finland and conclude the academic portion of the course pre-departure. Students with little international travel experience tended to use it pragmatically (e.g., packing checklist, international flight requirements, and navigating transportation in-country) whereas students with international travel experience used it as a means of structuring their intellectual thoughts to maximize their learning while in country.

### **In-Country Experience**

The in-country experience began with a guided walking tour of Helsinki to acclimate participants to Finland's social, cultural, and political history. Next, the group travelled via train to Tampere to visit three public schools specializing in international education,

Montessori (1917) approaches, and nature-based learning (cf. O'Brien, 2009). After completing school visits in the mornings, the Finnish Council for Creative Education held debrief sessions at the University of Tampere to process site visits by comparing and constating U.S. and Finnish educational practices. Returning to Helsinki, we enjoyed a variety of activities showcasing unique features of Finnish culture including: sampling traditional foods, visiting the Finnish National Library, touring the historic fortress on Suomenlinna Island, and experiencing a smoke sauna.

### **Discussion**

The combination of the online class coupled with the in-country experience provided a focused, educative, and cost-effective way for students to study abroad. Pairing online coursework during the first eight weeks of semester with the in-country travel during spring break mitigated interference with student academic trajectories. The course served as mechanism to prepare students for a journey abroad and focus their attention on pedagogical interests. Moreover, the flexibility of the course curriculum enabled students to research Finland in preparation their in-country experience.

Student costs averaged \$5000, which included tuition, international air fare, and program fees (e.g., lodging, in-country transportation, activities, and some meals). Most students qualified for and received some form of financial aid. While the program was expensive, it provided a high cost-benefit opportunity for students to earn academic credit while participating in a highly structured and unique academic experience, subsequently providing students with the sense that their financial investment was worth the expense.

The course assignments were intentionally designed to provide students with a forum to discuss their own travel (in)experience as well as a structured opportunity to learn about the country. The Finland presentations enabled participants to gain a common understanding of the major aspects of the country and explore areas of curiosity in a format that allowed participants to revisit those topic areas throughout the semester. The online discussion enabled students to engage in formal academic discourse structured around a specific theme according to a fixed schedule, but with enough flexibility to accommodate complex personal schedules. The structure of the discussion topics, paired with the required readings, focused students' attention on relevant parts of the Finnish educational system and assisted students in maintaining focus on the course learning outcomes. Finally, the summary paper invited students to reflect upon their learnings from the class and the study abroad plans spurred students to mentally prepare for departure. The format enabled all students to learn from one another and build a sense of community prior to travel.

The university academic term calendar required that the eight-week course be completed (i.e., grades were submitted) prior to departure, thus limiting opportunities to formally assess students' in-country learning. Study abroad programs have a problematic history with failing to adequately assess student learning (Long et al., 2010) by requiring conformity to the academic term calendar that can prevent assessment of learning outcomes afforded by the in-country experience. Given that reflection is widely regarded as the paramount mechanism for students to synthesize experiential learning (Dewey,

1916; Kolb, 1984; Williams, 2009), formal, required reflective activities would have strengthened this experience.

Although the course was well-aligned with the actual program abroad, the fact that students were not academically required to reflect upon their actual experience abroad was a pedagogical limitation. However, through internal mini-grant funding, we were able to provide several optional opportunities for reflection upon return. These included structuring time to create reflection photo-journals where students came together, shared pictures, dialogued about and debriefed their experience. Additionally, we held a social event where students shared their experiences with the college Dean, the Associate Provost for International Programs, and a columnist from a local paper. Additionally, several students voluntarily created a video depicting highlights from their experience.

Two students who were awarded funding for their independent research shared their findings at the university's annual Undergraduate Research Symposium. The success of this Finnish study-abroad program can also be measured by student feedback as well as through voluntary student attendance of post-program gatherings; student comments were overwhelmingly positive and their attendance at optional post-program gatherings was over 60%.

#### ***Improvements to Future Programs***

Overall, this program was successful, for it provided a unique, enriching opportunity for students interested in international, comparative education. An essential question that emerged as a result of this experience is how to include the in-country experience as part of the formal course, rather than after final grades are given. Determining ways of matching coursework with the in-country experience is important for assessing student learning outcomes.

Although the available options for scheduling the course led to the decision about the course's conclusion prior to travel abroad, more flexibility within the academic term calendar would promote a richer educational experience for the students by prioritizing opportunities for students to reflect upon their experience abroad and link their learnings to important features of their academic coursework, aligning more closely with an established model of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). Given that personal reflection is frequently used to assess student learning in addition to writing a substantive reflective post-experience paper, the program could be strengthened by formally building those pieces into the graded course. Lastly, exploring other timeframes for running the class and traveling abroad (e.g., winter holiday, May, August) may provide the infrastructure that better supports student learning.

Anecdotally, our colleagues have indicated that program participants frequently connect back to their experience while studying additional aspects of the U.S. public education system. We know that several participants are incorporating their learning into their student teaching experiences. While we were pleased with the outcome of our program, we recognize that improvements can be made, which have the potential to provide even richer learning opportunities for students to synthesize this experience with their teaching

practice. We are excited by the potential to incentivize colleagues to explore international learning experiences through future affordable and robust short-term, faculty-led study abroad programs. And it is our hope that this article adds to the ongoing conversation about comparative education by providing an example of a cost-effective way for educators to experience another unique and exemplary educational model.

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**Appendix**

Table 1. Example Information Table Created for the Finland Presentation  
People and Society: Comparing Finland and Montana

	Finland	Montana
Population	5,518,371 (2017)	1,050,493 (2016)
Area	130,666 mi <sup>2</sup>	147,040 mi <sup>2</sup>
Ethnic composition	Finn (93.4%) Swede (5.6%) Russian (.5%) Estonian (.3%) Romani (gypsy; .1%) Sami (Indigenous; .1%)	White (86.5%) American Indian (6.6%) Hispanic (3.6%) Biracial (2.7%) African American (.6%)
Official Language(s)	Finnish & Swedish	English
Age structure	<14 (16.4%) 15-24 (11.4%) 25-64 (51.7%) >65 (21.1%)	<18 (21.8%) 18-65 (60.5%) >65 (17.7%)
Sex	50.7% female	49.7% female
Education	Completed upper secondary (88%)	High school graduate (92.9%) Bachelor's degree + (29.9%)
Education spending per student (USD)	\$12,545	\$11,028
PISA scores (2015) *scores for U.S.	Math: 511 (rank 13) Reading: 526 (rank 4) Science: 531 (rank 5)	Math: 470 (rank 40)* Reading: 497 (rank 24)* Science: 496 (rank 25)*
Median per capita income (USD)	\$29,374 (OECD)	\$27,309
Population grow rate	.36%	~.8%
Poverty rate	5.3%	13.3%
Life expectancy	82 years	~79 years
Health insurance	Universal for citizens	9.8% uninsured