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TEACHING NOTE

Cultural Immersion and Student Perceptions of Jordan

Sarah Thomas and Christy Lyons Graham

In March 2017, nine students from Bridgewater State University [BSU] spent one week in Jordan. In this article, we highlight some of the ways a cultural immersion experience can be transformative for our students and how this trip, particularly, resonated with them. After the trip, students completed an online questionnaire and from their responses, we learned that three areas most influenced by cultural immersion in Jordan were: (1) an increased awareness of social justice; (2) a changed worldview; and (3) empathy for others and personal growth. These outcomes suggest that individuals who participated in the Jordanian study tour may have more cultural empathy for individuals from the Middle East and who practice Islam, hence leading to the development of global citizenship, a major education goal at BSU.

Educating college students for the sole purpose of gaining a set of pre-determined job skills is no longer sufficient in our increasingly global society. In order to be successful, college graduates will need to possess a greater understanding of the complex world in which they will be employed. Furthermore, a more global understanding can lead to an awareness of the importance of overcoming cultural difference and of developing cultural sensitivity in order to work together to address critical, universal needs. Cultural immersion experiences that challenge existing worldviews and assumptions may provide an efficient means to this end (Canfield, Low, & Hovestadt, 2009; Pope-Davis & Coleman, 1997).

Planning for and experiencing the tour

The idea for a study tour to Jordan began after two BSU professors participated in a faculty exchange program with Tafila Technical University (TTU) in March 2016. The faculty exchange program was an effort to forge a collaborative partnership between the two universities. The faculty who participated in the exchange were moved by the kindness of the Jordanians and amazed by the wealth of history in the beautiful country. They were also struck by the similarities in the hopes and fears expressed by TTU students when compared to BSU students. The experience had such a strong impact on the visiting professors from BSU, that we thought offering a cultural immersion study tour to Jordan would provide BSU students with a similar opportunity to learn about Jordanian culture from Jordanians. After a year of planning, students took part in our study tour in March 2017. While in Jordan, we stayed in the city of Tafila at an off-campus hotel populated by students from TTU. Many of the participants remarked that the time in the hotel was especially important



Camels in Petra (Photo Credit: Sarah Thomas and Christy Lyons Graham).

because they were living in close proximity to Jordanian students, which enabled them to forge friendships with young people from that culture. The experience of living and socializing with students from TTU thus allowed the American students to reflect on their perceptions of individuals from a different country as well as look inward and confront their own biases.

The tour was designed to allow students interaction not only with Jordanian college students but also with people and organizations in several parts of the country. Students had the opportunity to visit government elementary schools as well as a private elementary school.

trip was to develop global citizenship, a major education goal at BSU, it was not surprising that our students developed cultural empathy for individuals from a Muslim-majority country.

Cultural immersion challenges beliefs and worldviews

Given the divisiveness of today's political climate, understanding different cultures through immersion experiences is a critical way people can become better informed global citizens, an extension of one of the historical aims of education: cosmopolitanism. Global citizenship requires thinking

(Reimers, Chopra, Chung, Higdon, and O'Donnell 2016). In order to significantly reconstruct one's worldview, individuals must encounter situations that challenge their existing paradigms; situations requiring them to reexamine existing perspectives (Mezirow, 1990). There may be no better way for individuals to learn about another culture and to think more deeply about themselves within their own cultures than by working and living in another country, a highly effective form of experiential education. Our students reported that they gained a greater sense of cultural empathy from their interactions with the students and professors from TTU. One student stated, "It is one thing to



Visiting with students at the Abu Bana School (Photo Credit: Sarah Thomas and Christy Lyons Graham).

The trip to the schools was included because one of the goals of the program was to expose students to the educational system in Jordan in an effort to see the similarities and differences between U.S. and Jordanian schools. Future tours plan to provide students with the opportunity to teach English lessons to students. Students were also able to experience the natural beauty of Jordan by visiting the Dead Sea, Jarash, Petra, Amman and the Dana Nature Reserve. These experiences enabled the students to feel first-hand what it is like being the "other" as well as broadening their knowledge of another part of the world. Since one of the goals for the

beyond one's own set of experiences, working together to solve world problems and to create a more inclusive society. Changing demographics of the United States means that U.S. students must be prepared to work with individuals from different countries, regardless of location, employment, or socioeconomic status.

Research has shown that for individuals to become citizens of the world, they must develop a keen understanding of their own worldview and develop cultural empathy. A good way to do this is through interaction with people who are not from the United States

strive to learn about other culture, but meeting people from that culture is the most important thing you can do to understand [the culture]."

Historically, there have been concerns about the lack of global awareness Americans have compared to their counterparts from other countries, which can lead to stereotypical beliefs and misunderstandings (Unger, 2015). If Americans do not learn from and about other cultures, their ability to be productive members in an increasingly global society decreases. How is one able to work effectively with members of another culture if one's worldview is

so insular that stereotypes of those who are different are at the forefront of one's mind? Without a broad worldview, individuals are cutting short social and economic opportunities, which could impact future generations across the globe. Fortunately, beliefs are influenced by practical experience and practical experience influences beliefs.

The concern that Americans lack a broad worldview is one reason it is essential for universities to provide opportunities and encourage student participation in cultural immersion programs. Every student on our Jordan trip reported that their participation in this program changed their worldview,

female and one was male. After the tour ended, we provided students with a 10-question online survey. Eight students started the questionnaire. Seven students completed all ten questions. Though it is a tiny, non-generalizable sample, students' reflections provide clear evidence for the importance of cultural immersion opportunities. Their responses illustrate the impact an immersion experience had on their worldviews, feelings of social justice, and cultural empathy.

The ten survey questions focused on how and in what capacity the cultural immersion experience changed them. Of the seven respondents, three (43%)

participant stated, "having actual interactions with [people] from a different culture than my own is the easiest way to gain an understanding and empathy of their worldview."

We asked participants if their involvement in the study tour would influence their future actions, conversations and/or decisions and all responded yes. When asked to explain, participants stated they would use the experience to educate others about people from the region and dispel the Muslim terrorist myth that is perpetuated in the media, while others said the experience would have a direct impact on their work with disadvantaged groups and influence their pursuit of social justice. A participant remarked that the experience completely changed their perception of the Middle East as a "bad place", to an area of a world that they would like to visit again. And finally, a participant stated that the experience "caused me to be bold in conversation regarding culture", leaving us to speculate that the participant has grown more comfortable challenging disingenuous stereotypes of Muslims by some Westerners.

Perhaps the most poignant responses were provided in answer to the following fill in the blank: "Regarding my perception of the Middle East, before I went to Jordan I used to think _____, but now I think _____." Answers varied from focus on travel and religion to US intolerance of Muslims and commonalities, for example:

I used to think "*That our cultures have nothing in common,*" but now I think "*our cultures have more in common than we know.*"

I used to think "*Religion dictated every aspect of [Jordanian] people's lives,*" but now I think "*but now I know I was wrong.*"

I used to think "*it was a horrible place*" but now I think "*they are the kindest people.*"

Study participants were consistent in reporting that they now have a better understanding of Islam and are able to view Islam through a lens that is not afforded to most Americans.

which could ultimately enable them to look at individuals from other cultures with more empathy. For instance, one student said, "[Prior to this experience I was exposed to] many misconceptions about a Middle Eastern culture and Muslims and now I have a much more complex understanding of Jordan and their compassionate people."

Students' reflections on their learning

Our paper considers survey responses from the nine students who participated in our immersive Jordanian study tour. One student had recently earned a master's degree; six were undergraduates and two were enrolled in a master's program. Of these students, eight were

said that their participation in the Jordan study tour caused them to be more accepting of differences between people. Interestingly, a slightly higher response of four (57%) respondents said the experience caused them to want to search out and cherish the differences in people, which was not expected. When they elaborated on these themes, a participant said they were "nervous" to visit Jordan, but once we arrived and met the inhabitants their worldview changed "100 times over," and that they "fell in love with it." Two other respondents suggested that the experience enabled them to learn about Islam and recognize that the stereotypes regarding Muslims that permeate the media are not necessarily true. One

From these and other responses, it is evident that participation in the cultural immersion study tour had a profound impact on participants. Many of the students suggested that this experience provided them with a new perspective on people in the Middle East, Muslims in particular, and this knowledge will be beneficial in their chosen professions. Terms such as advocate, social justice, and empathy were routinely used in the responses, as well as the words kindness and compassion.

The final survey question asked participants to state the most significant takeaway from the experience, and answers highlighted the depth and breadth of the impact. One participant responded that conflict was caused by people and not religion, while another said the experience illustrated the kindness of the people and had a lasting impression. It should be noted, however, that



Visiting a school in Jordan (Photo Credit: Sarah Thomas and Christy Lyons Graham).

case, understanding and acceptance of Islam, what cannot be overstated is the personal growth participants experienced while in Jordan. Study participants were consistent in reporting that they now have a better understanding of Islam and are able to view Islam through a lens that is not afforded to

learning from people who are different from them. In providing these opportunities, BSU will play a role in creating cross-cultural awareness, but, more importantly, will provide a powerful influence on students' perceptions of the world around them and their abilities to bring about positive change.

The concern that Americans lack a broad worldview is one reason why it is essential for universities to provide opportunities and encourage student participation in cultural immersion programs.

the majority of the responses touched upon how an opportunity to experience another culture is what enables someone to truly understand another culture, and this is what ultimately had the most impact on our students.

The importance of study tours and study abroad

While the findings of our small pilot study support the idea that participation in a cultural immersion study tour impacts one's worldview, and in this

most Americans. The friendships created and the desire to return to Jordan can only support the belief that participation in a cultural immersion project has lifelong implications for those who participate and, by extension, for people who later interact with participants. The results of this cultural immersion study tour provide an impetus to challenge BSU and other institutions to encourage students to visit places where they may be the "other" so they can confront their beliefs and worldviews,



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