# Enhancing Global Learning through Online Education Abroad Experiences

**Daniela Fenu Foerch, Flavia Iuspa**
Florida International University, United States of America

## Abstract

*Promoting global learning in students is a priority for higher education institutions. Education abroad is one avenue to provide students with an experience to expand their views. According to the Open Doors 2017 report, "although the total number [of students] is at an all-time high, it is still the case that only about 10 percent of all U.S. undergraduate students (including community college students) will study abroad by the time they graduate" (Institute of International Education, para.13). The need to promote global learning through study abroad is also present in online courses. The paper shares our experience introducing an innovative curriculum design and inclusion of a two-week study abroad experience in Trento, Italy, in a fully online six-week course in early childhood education for the past three years. The presentation will expand on the existing literature on study abroad by providing a different program design and address the need to make study abroad experiences more accessible to all higher education students- including online students.*

**Keywords:** *Study Abroad, Online Learning, Global Competencies, Curriculum Development*

## 1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEI) face the need to educate citizens who would work, make decisions, and engage in problem-solving across nations and cultures. To provide students with learning experiences that help them develop such soft skills and content knowledge, HEIs have embraced internationalization efforts across the university. Internationalization is defined as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education" [1]. HEIs internationalization process can be seen in universities through the offering of international activities such as study abroad. The purpose of this paper is to share an innovative curriculum design, a six-week online course titled Developing Learning Processes in Early Childhood: An Italian Perspective that includes a two-week study abroad experience in Trento, Italy.

## 2. Literature Review

Studying abroad refers to students' learning activities as part of their degree program through educational activities outside the United States. According to the 2020 Open Doors report, 437,099 students participated in study abroad during the 2018/2019 academic [2]. Yet, the number of students participating in study abroad remains low overall. According to NAFSA, only 1.8 percent of all U.S. students enrolled at higher education institutions in the United States, and about 10 percent of U.S. graduates have participated in any form of study abroad. Furthermore, when the number of students going abroad is viewed through the lenses of ethnicity/race, the report shows a disparity among races. By large, Caucasian students accounted for 68% of students going abroad during the 2018/2019 academic year, followed by Hispanic/Latino American with 10.9%, Asian/Pacific Islander with 8.9%, and African American or Black with 6.8% [2a]. This data highlights the need for HEIs to develop innovative and flexible study abroad programs increasing the opportunities of college students to participate in global learning activities. For a highly globalized society that will require future generations to work together on addressing global issues, activities enhancing global competencies are a must.

### 2.1 Global Learning at Florida International University

Florida International University (FIU) adopted as part of its re-accreditation process global learning as a foundational learning skill for all its students. FIU's university-wide global learning initiative requires that all undergraduate students engage in two global learning-designated courses to meet three essential student learning outcomes: (a) Global Awareness: Knowledge of the interrelatedness of local, global, international, and intercultural issues, trends, and systems, (b) Global Perspective: The ability to conduct a multi-perspective analysis of local, global, international, and intercultural problems, (c) Global Engagement: Willingness to engage in local, global, international, and intercultural problem-

solving. FIU defines global learning as "the process of diverse people collaboratively analyzing and addressing complex problems that transcend borders" [3]. This definition aligns with the need to promote intercultural competence, where students will have the soft skills and attitudes to behave and communicate across cultures and take action [4]. Most importantly, focusing on global learning enhances the implicit understanding of cultural nuances and the interconnections of issues between the local and global levels.

## 2.2 An Innovative Study Abroad in Italy

The study abroad program is a six-week fully online program, where weeks 3 and 4 are spent in Trentino, Italy, observing Nido and preschool centers in two different settings (borgo and Trento). Students spend 6 hours a day observing and reflecting on their observations and philosophies. Marx and Moss (2011) believe that "engagement and immersion within other cultural contexts may be an essential element in the process of transformation from an ethnocentric to an ethnorelative worldview" (p.2). Vigotsky (1980) [6] also indicated that culture is a factor in seeing the world. Thus, understanding one's own culture is the first step to moving away from an ethnocentric view.

The study abroad program in Italy allows our students to immerse themselves in the curriculum and instruction practices of early childhood and Nido centers in Italy. The selected centers introduce students to an early childhood curriculum based on three learning contexts: small group contexts, group discussions, and collective reasoning. Through the interactions with teachers and students and classroom observations, students reflect on the teaching practices and philosophies and build conceptual relationships with the American system. The study abroad aligns with FIU's global learning initiative in fostering students' cultural awareness and culturally responsive teaching disposition.

## 2.3 Conceptual Frameworks

This study uses two frameworks to address the research questions: the Global Perspective Inventory (GPI) and grounded theory. The GPI is a sixty-four-item survey that measures students' global competencies along with the cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal domains and subdomains [7, 7a]. The GPI was selected because it allows for a holistic human development review encompassing two theoretical perspectives essential for global competencies: cultural development and intercultural communication. The researchers also chose a deductive grounded theory approach to identify emerging themes in the data under examination.

## 3. Methodology

The researchers implemented a sequential mixed-methods design to conduct this study [8]. The paper uses the GPI conceptual framework to answer question 1. Questions 2 and 3 were answered following a grounded theory approach based on students' reflections.

The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics on the GPI's six scales and subscales. Braskamp, Braskmp, Merril, and Engberg (2013) suggest a holistic approach to intercultural development based on the three critical domains: *Cognitive Domain*, *Intrapersonal Domain*, and *Interpersonal Domain*. The *Cognitive Domain* addresses the question "How do I know?" and includes a reflection on what we know or do not know to be true; the *Intrapersonal Domain* requires the ability to question, "Who am I?" and relies on self-awareness and integration of one's self-identity; and the *Interpersonal Domain* indicates an individual's ability to engage with others, as they contemplate the question "How do I relate to others?" [7]. The GPI survey used a 5-points Likert scale where one means strongly disagree, and five strongly agree. Descriptive statistics provided a preliminary summary of the respondents' central tendencies for each of the items measured. This analysis addressed research question 1. The students' reflection was initially open coding, which involved generating primarily descriptive labels for occurrences to address questions 2 and 3. Qualitative grounded theory research designs were used to investigate how this study abroad contributed to the students' global competencies. The researchers systematically identified, transcribed, and entered the data into a qualitative software program, NVivo, version 11.1. Strauss and Corbin's (1998) [9] theory aimed to construct new theories when redeveloped this form of analysis, which was initially created by Glaser and Stauss (1967). The researchers utilized a similar coding process to examine themes surrounding the students' competence and their perceptions about the study abroad. A deductive grounded theory approach was used to identify all emerging themes in the data under examination systematically. For this study, the researchers used the sequential coding utilized by Harry et al. (2005) [10], which includes the following phases of coding: open coding, focus coding, conceptual

categories, and thematic coding [11]. The researchers used the following questions to guide the research study:
1)    What is the global perspective profile of the students attending the study abroad?
2)    How does study abroad experience contribute to the students' global competencies?
3)    What are students' personal perceptions about study abroad?

### 3.1 Participants
The study used a purposive sampling (N=11), female students registered in the course in the summer of 2017 and 2018. 40% of the population were teachers, 50% hold a Bachelor's degree in education, 50% reported Education and Social Education. Additionally, 100% of the participants reported not having participated in study abroad. The data was collected through the students' completion of the GPI and the student's reflections.

## 4. Results
### 4.1 Quantitative Results
The research was evaluated using the following quantitative data analysis: (1) one-sample t-test was conducted to investigate and describe the levels of cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dispositions in participating students associated with the study abroad. The results indicated that students had a high level of awareness in the Cognitive Dimension (M=2.46), in the Intrapersonal Dimension (M=1.48), and in the Interpersonal Dimension (M=2.13) after participating in the study abroad experience.

### 4.2 Qualitative Results
The data collected for this study were transcribed and analyzed using the grounded theory deductive design to systematically identify all emerging themes in the data. Strauss and Corbin's (1998) [9] theory aimed to construct new theories when redeveloped this form of analysis, which was initially created by Glaser and Stauss (1967) [12]. For this study, the researcher used the sequential coding utilized by Harry et al. (2005) [10], which includes the following phases of coding: open coding, focus coding, conceptual categories, and thematic coding [11].

### 4.2.1 Open Coding
All transcriptions were chronologically analyzed during the open coding phase [10]. These reflected an ongoing analysis of participants' experiences and reflections about the experiences that fostered global competence and the effects on their personal and professional development. Throughout the data collection and analysis, the researchers created descriptive codes based on the experience of empathy it was representing. Descriptive codes are suggested to be used concretely and linked explicitly to the experience that demonstrates the code [9]. An example of open coding from the data is: "I do as you know how to do" attitude!" letting the child try and do things the way he/she can do it without too many academic requirements" was coded as *socio-cognitive philosophy*. Another example of open coding from the data is: "the younger children went and removed their clothes and put them in a box, sometimes helping each other or passing each other the box for clothes or the pacifier" was coded as *social-awareness*. The use of the exact participant quotes is an example of "N-Vivo," which refers to the optimal description of the representing experience or concept [9]. The first round of open coding revealed a total of 381 codes for the data under examination. After reviewing these codes, the researcher condensed them to 10.

### 4.2.2 Focus Coding
The researchers developed focused codes after a thorough comparison process in which codes were congregated together according to similarities [13]. The purpose of the data was to investigate if the experience of this study Abroad nurtured global competence in our student participants with a particular focus on personal and professional development. Therefore, focus coding resulted in codes that reflected participants' reaction and reflection and the development of the components of global competence: *socio-cognitive philosophy, social-awareness, classroom and time management, aesthetics, development of compassion, and community building*.

### 4.2.3 Conceptual Categories
Through constant comparison, the researchers created conceptual groups of categories based on similarities [9]. The entries differ within each categorical group of open codes but confirmed similar

meaning.  For instance, open codes "spaces are open" and "spaces are connected to each other" belonged to the same c*lassroom and time management* category. When the conceptual coding process was done, the researcher had a total of 6 conceptual categories.

### 4.2.4 Thematic Coding

Conceptual categories were analyzed by property and dimension during the thematic coding to create thematic statements to investigate relationships between concepts [9]. For example, after examining the documentation and the videos, an emergent theme was "developing compassion." To nurture global competence, student participants emphasized how and what they observed impacted their own personal and professional lives. There was a strong relationship between experiencing and observing first-hand empathy and how that caused their own development of compassion". Through deep reflection, student participants shared that was one of the essential factors in their shift.  After examining the relationship between conceptual categories and codes from the themes, the researcher had five themes: *socio-cognitive philosophy, social-awareness, classroom and time management, development of compassion, and community building*.

## 5. Discussion

Based on the quantitative results, participating students reported (1) a high level of awareness toward the importance of cultural content when making decisions, (2) a high level of awareness of cultures and current issues, (3) a high level of awareness of who they are (identity), (4) a high openness towards respect and acceptance of other culture, (5) a high level of concern for others (attribute for global citizenship), and (6) a high level of interaction with other cultures and cultural sensitivity. Participating students in the study abroad program scored high on all three dimensions of the GPI, demonstrating that the program deepens global competence dispositions in students.

Students completed 2 Reflections using the FPSM Observation Reflection Guidelines throughout their study abroad experience for the qualitative portion of the data. From their reflections, key conceptual categories emerged, such as socio-cognitive philosophy, classroom and time management, social awareness, development of compassion, and community building. These categories showcased the students' enhancement of global competencies based on interaction, engagement, and reflection of their cultural values with the teachers and students from the Nido and preschool centers. At the same time, students' perceptions on study abroad indicated that they were open to experience other cultures and its implication in the classrooms. Their responses show alignment with the GPI's inventory intrapersonal effect and interpersonal social interaction subscales.

## 6. Conclusion

Study abroad provides an invaluable opportunity to enhance students' global learning skills as well as personal growth. Universities need to develop study abroad programs that would promote students' participation, especially for underrepresented students. According to Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill (2009), the "GPI is most effective when the results are used to begin a conversation, discussion, and debate about what characteristics, events, activities, and interventions in the lives of student studying abroad are most apt to influence the desired changes in the three domains of student learning and development" [14]. Therefore, as faculty engages in designing activities to enhance global competencies, faculty and higher education administrators would benefit from aligning the three dimensions of the GPI to the program's desired goal.

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