

Chapter 5

Faculty Professional Development Through International Experiences



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Abstract Much emphasis is put on the important benefits for students who engage in international study experiences. This paper outlines the potential benefits for faculty professional development through international experiences such as leading a study abroad class, teaching in an international posting, or conducting research internationally. I highlight the evidence from the literature and my own experience on the development opportunities for faculty pedagogy, career development, and research opportunities. I also recommend some resources for identifying opportunities and best practices to gain the most from your experience.

5.1 Introduction

International experiences abroad for faculty can include teaching, as well as research, and even curriculum development and administrative opportunities. International teaching opportunities, whether leading a study abroad class or short-or long-term international teaching posts, provide opportunities for both personal and professional development. This paper will provide evidence—drawn both from first-person anecdotes and from the literature—of the opportunities and benefits of international teaching, research, and curriculum program development. Professional development benefits include enhancements to pedagogical skills, expanded breadth of global content to share in the classroom, building and broadening your social media brand, as well as opportunities to apply and deepen curriculum development experience. While there are recognized obstacles to faculty teaching and studying abroad, including language barriers, tenure pressures for junior faculty, and logistical challenges for those with family commitments (Dooley et al. 2008), the potential benefits are such that instructors would do well to weigh them thoughtfully and be creative and open minded to available opportunities.

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Personally, I have engaged in international research and teaching thanks to the support of grant opportunities through Fulbright Program and the Marion & Jasper Whiting Foundation, as well as teaching in a study-abroad opportunity through my home institution. In 2018–2019, I spent an academic year (9 months) teaching in an MBA program at the University of Kigali in Rwanda as a Fulbright Scholar. In 2018 I taught a 3-week intensive course in Emmanuel College's Eastern Mediterranean program in Greece and Cyprus. In 2016 I spent 3 weeks in Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa conducting research to enhance my classroom teaching of environmental and urban economics, supported by the Whiting Foundation. The Fulbright Program is a nationally recognized opportunity, while the Whiting Foundation grant is focused on college instructors from the New England region. There are many other resources available for faculty to seek both opportunities and support for international teaching. Available resources include: iie (iie.org); NAFSA: Association of International Educators (nafsa.org); Association of International Education Administrators (aieaworld.org); Council on International Educational Exchange (ciee.org).

5.2 A Review of the Literature on the Benefits of International Teaching Experiences

While the benefits of international teaching experiences are widely and generally recognized, academic research on this topic for college-level faculty is somewhat limited. Much of the literature that does exist focuses on benefits that come from opportunities for primary and secondary level teachers in training, primarily teachers of languages gaining practical teaching experience abroad. For that group, existing research indicates that teaching abroad experiences improve teachers' desirability in the job market (Gilson and Martin 2010). Smolcic and Katunich (2017) note that cultural-immersion field experiences provide teachers opportunities both for developing sociopolitical awareness as well as for personal growth. Willard-Holt (2001) notes that teaching abroad experiences can raise an instructor's awareness of the role of cultural norms and contexts, as visiting instructors are forced to adapt to those of their host country. Savva (2017) provides specific examples of how abstract benefits such as intercultural sensitivity (Alfaro 2008) and broader global perspectives that come from teaching abroad can manifest in the classroom, suggesting that an increased willingness to adapt lessons to different cultural contexts as well as an improved communication style can result. Though Alfaro (2008) cautions that in order for these benefits to result, participants must have a desire to learn from these experiences and to build international relationships during their teach abroad experience. Biraimah and Jotia (2013, p. 433) provide insight into the experience of tertiary-level teaching abroad, finding that while the experience and learning of discipline-related content did not exceed what could be achieved through traditional

research and study at home, participants experienced growth in their “personal and professional development, cultural awareness, teaching methodologies”.

5.3 How Teaching Abroad Enhanced My Teaching Tools and Skills

The most obvious benefit from teaching abroad is this opportunity to expand your toolbox of personal experiences and anecdotes to illustrate economic concepts at work in the world. Being able to relate what you’ve observed firsthand brings the world alive for your students and enhances your credibility beyond what you (and they) read in articles and books. For example, I can now talk about meeting with regulators and water managers in Cape Town South Africa in the context of supply and demand side environmental policies for water management in Environmental Economics. I can speak firsthand about the politics and economics of migrant settlements in Johannesburg in Urban Economics or the use of mobile money in Kigali in International Economics. Lucas’ (1997) survey of faculty at Ohio with international teaching experience supports my personal experience. He notes that the majority of respondents reported benefits from having first-hand narratives and analogies to enhance the teaching of abstract concepts in the classroom. Dooley and Rouse (2009) from their longitudinal study of faculty international experience and Hand et al. (2007) from their study both find similar benefits of improved international examples and teaching techniques. Similarly, other authors report that faculty enhanced both their curriculum content (Sandlin et al. 2013) and its cultural context (Roberts et al. 2016) through such examples. Hand et al. (2007, p. 148) further note that international teaching has “enormous potential for both faculty development, and the development of students with whom they interact”.

5.4 Develop New Perspectives on Your Teaching

Teaching internationally also allows a new perspective from which to reflect on your teaching habits and pedagogical practices. In addition to developing an understanding of the cultural context in the host location, the distance from your own home context can provide you a clearer view on its own cultural context and how that impacts your understanding and instruction of concepts and issues. Roberts and Jones (2009) and Harder et al. (2012) both emphasize that to get the most benefit in terms of perspective and pedagogical awareness and growth, it is important to engage in reflection, such a memo-to-self or journal writing, before, during, and after the international teaching experience.

Similarly, the broader literature on development of successful international teaching programs designed to provide practical experience for student-teachers,

particularly of languages, emphasizes the importance of reflective practices. Numerous studies (e.g. Trent (2011); Vogt (2016); Cunningham (2015); Palmer and Menard-Warwick (2012)) note that teach abroad experiences designed to develop the skills of student-teachers preparing for primary and secondary-level teaching must incorporate reflective practices to be effective. Alfaro (2008, p. 25) notes that reflective practices provide participants the opportunity to “analyze and promote a deeper understanding of international education experiences”. While I found no research available on this, it is likely that a college-level faculty member seeking professional and pedagogical development from international teaching would similarly benefit from purposeful reflection on their expectations and experiences.

International experiences can provide faculty opportunities to enhance how they are perceived by their students, colleagues and administrators at their home institution. Roberts et al. (2016) note the value that the ability to share these first-hand experiences in the classroom adds to an instructor’s credibility, even from short-term experiences. The authors note that these experiences also empowered faculty to speak more confidently about issues they’d observed, perhaps enhancing their professional profile at the home institution. Sandlin et al. (2013) noted that participants in international teaching experiences reported their excitement and passion for teaching were revitalized by international experience, something that is certainly perceived and valued by students and peers alike.

Meeting, interacting with, and learning from new colleagues in the host country is another benefit of international teaching experience. Roberts et al. (2016, p. 34) note that among faculty they surveyed, one of the “most memorable parts of [the international teaching] experience was getting to meet new colleagues”. Similarly, I found the opportunity to learn about and exchange pedagogical practices with my host colleagues one of the most rewarding aspects of the experience

5.5 Engage in Curriculum Development/Evaluation and Faculty Training

A perhaps less recognized international opportunity than teaching is the opportunity to engage in curriculum review and development. As a part of my Fulbright application, I responded to the request for support with curriculum development and faculty training in my host country. I was able to build upon my experience with revising and developing programs at my home institution to then participate in the development of new graduate level programs in Rwanda to meet their burgeoning need for education. I was also invited to participate with host-country colleagues in preliminary reviews of programs at other Rwandan institutions who were seeking accreditation by the government educational authorities. In addition, I provided hands-on pedagogical training for faculty at two campuses of my host university. These curriculum development and faculty training opportunities are frequently mentioned in Fulbright award postings, and are also the focus of programs such

as those organized by the Association of International Education Administrators. I was able to expand my experience providing hands-on pedagogical training, and in shaping curriculum to meet the requirements of accrediting bodies and the mission and goals of educational institutions. I also benefited from active exchange around pedagogical strategies, challenges and successes with colleagues and others in my host country. Such interactions are excellent opportunities to share your skills while building your professional portfolio.

5.6 Use Social Media to Connect Communities Internationally & Build Your Professional Brand

Roberts et al. (2016) also found that faculty who taught internationally expanded their technology usage in their ‘home’ institution in an effort to provide media examples from their international experiences in their classrooms. In my experience, instructors can more intentionally enhance their professional social media profile while simultaneously providing their students at both the home and host institutions opportunities to engage globally through social media. I did not start my professional Instagram until after my time in South Africa, but my intention with the account is to demonstrate that ‘economics is everywhere.’ When travelling for personal reasons, I often shared demonstrations of economic ideas that we discuss in the classroom to reinforce for former student ‘followers,’ and to have a catalog of examples for future classes. This continued while I was teaching in Greece and Cyprus, where my postings demonstrated the variety of applications of economics to concepts in agriculture, tourism, and pharmaceuticals.

While in Rwanda, I even more intentionally used my Instagram and Facebook accounts to remain connected to the students and community at my home institution. I was able to share economic anecdotes from my everyday life, as well as my experience teaching at my host institution, thus sharing both discipline specific content, as well as content to promote international experience and connection more generally. Once I returned from my year in Kigali, I used the same account to remain connected to students who had been in my classes in Rwanda, now sharing with them slices of life and an economic view of the world from Boston and wherever else I travelled. I was also able to pull from the catalog of Instagram posts to develop content for classes and for presentations on my experiences, a benefit also noted by Ellis (2014).

Raczkoski and Robinson (2019) find that one of the key motivators for faculty to engage in short-term study abroad course instruction is to provide students opportunities for interactions with international students. They suggest that faculty can use social media to build a bridge that shares these experiences in both directions—between home and host—to impact not only course content, but also to link students and other community members beyond that limited sphere. Ellis (2014) notes that in leading a study-abroad course to Estonia, he and his student

participants tagged the places visited in their photos, such as the local University, and received welcome messages and interactions through the social media platform. This kind of interaction can also help to build and reinforce global connections for students, faculty and beyond. Gibson and Capdeville (2019) recommend that study abroad offices could also benefit from this kind of social media use to reach and connect with student populations across the world, supporting their missions to build intercultural connection and competencies.

Godwin-Jones (2016) notes, and my experience supports, that the students and members of your host community are just as likely to be digitally engaged as those you leave at home. This not only suggests the viability of building this virtual social media community, but also the potential value for building lasting relationships for yourself, and perhaps facilitating relationships among your student communities in different countries. I have been able to retain contact with students in Rwanda through Instagram and LinkedIn, and to faculty colleagues there via WhatsApp and Facebook as well. In this way faculty can build their professional network and their online brand using social media while teaching internationally.

5.7 Build New Research Paths and Partnerships

International experiences teaching or researching can open new research paths and build new international research partnerships. Dooley et al. (2008) note that the personal relationships established through international experiences are critical for international collaborative research. Harder et al. (2007) highlight the opportunities for professional (as well as personal) growth through engagement in international research projects. Roberts et al. (2016) found that faculty reported these international research collaborations to be an ongoing benefit of their international experience. The authors further note that international experiences seem to provide particular opportunities for multidisciplinary research, which is something that I experienced as emerging from my Fulbright time in Rwanda. Though I was posted in Kigali in a teaching-focused position, I had the opportunity to meet other Fulbrights, including a researcher working in the field of Anthropology on the Rwanda / Democratic Republic of Congo border. We discovered a common interest in economic policy and are engaged in a multidisciplinary research project focusing on a Rwandan case. These kinds of opportunities to network outside your discipline, your typical research field, and your home country are fertile ground for professional development.

5.8 Conclusion

In summary, international experiences provide faculty not only the personal gratification and development from meeting people from a new community and gaining a

new perspective on your home context and behaviors, but also many opportunities for professional development. These include enhanced pedagogical tools, first-hand evidence and anecdotes for the classroom, new perspectives on your practices and cultural context, opportunities to engage in curriculum development and faculty training and exchange of ideas, opportunities to build community and your brand through social media, and potential research paths and collaborations. Instructors interested in broadening their global experience and their professional horizons would do well to seek opportunities to teach, research and work internationally.

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