

Toward a Definition of Study Abroad Success

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Abstract

This paper presents a rationale and method for collecting critical incidents from university students who have returned from studying abroad. There are three main benefits to this process. First, it appears beneficial for students to record and reflect on their experiences abroad. Second, a collection of critical incidents, through analysis, can yield patterns of student experiences that can, in turn, inform decision making about the study-abroad program at a given institution. Third, critical incidents can be incorporated into training session for students preparing to study abroad. This paper includes a sampling of critical incidents and subjective reflections from students attending a women's university in Japan.

Introduction

This paper describes the process of creating a definition of study abroad success for a specific student population. The process, a variation of Flanagan's (1954) critical incident technique (CIT), involves collecting and analyzing over time critical incidents as reported by students who have studied abroad, resulting in a composite picture of meaningful experiences for a specific student population. For the purpose of this study, a *critical incident* is defined as a brief account of significant experiences occurring while a student is studying abroad. Flanagan (1954) described the critical incident technique as the analysis and synthesis of thousands of critical incidents — positive and negative — gathered from many sources to build a picture of optimal performance for a given profession or task. The goal of the current project is threefold. First, considering the individual student, it is hoped each will benefit from the reporting of and reflecting on critical incidents from their time abroad. Second, it is hoped that over time, the collection of critical incidents will yield a set guidelines suggesting how students can maximize the benefits from their time overseas. And

third, it is thought that the collection of critical incidents will be a rich pre-departure training resource.

The Critical Incident Technique

The critical incident technique was first described in Flanagan's landmark 1954 paper, *The Critical Incident Technique* (at the time of this writing, Google Scholar indicates that the article has been cited well over 7000 times), in which he put forward a means of determining optimal performance for a task or job through the collection, analysis and synthesis of objective descriptions of either positive or negative behaviors relating directly to the task or job being described. Flanagan (1954) explains that the critical incident technique is "a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles" (327). These critical incidents are drawn from the experiences of anyone involved in the process under consideration. If, for example, one wanted to apply CIT to liver transplant surgery, the CIT researcher would gather critical incidents from transplant surgeons, surgeons' assistants, transplant recipients, and hospital administrators — anyone in a position to observe the role of the transplant surgeon. These incidents would then be analyzed and would ultimately yield a "factual definition" of optimal performance for the transplant surgeon — in short, a list of dos and don'ts.

Critical Incidents in Cross-cultural Training

In the field of cross-cultural training, critical incidents seem to play two distinctive roles, both of which differ from Flanagan's CIT. There is the "cultural assimilator," first employed by Triandis in the 1960s (Apedaile and Schill, 2008). Briefly, a cultural assimilator is a training tool based on critical incidents describing episodes of confusion or misunderstanding between members of different cultures. By attempting to identify the cultural cause of the misunderstanding, the trainee is thereby prepared to "interact and adjust successfully with members of another culture" (Fielder & Triandis, 1971, abstract).

The second major application of critical incidents in cross-cultural training is seen in students' tracking their own significant experiences abroad in the form of a

journal (Jackson, 2005) or blog entries (Idoia & Oskoz, 2008). These critical incidents can then be put to use in a number of educational activities:

Stories in the form of critical incidents can be used to facilitate and to enhance critical reflection and intercultural competence. They can serve as an exemplar of practice through, for example, the illumination of professional reasoning processes. They can also serve as a stimulus for discussion or learning exercises. (McAllister et al., 2006, p. 371)

In tracing critical incident usage from Flanagan to this type of journal keeping, there is a shift in focus: first, thousands of critical incidents were necessary for the application of CIT and the creation of a composite image of optimal performance; now, however, single incidents in the form of journal entries are given more attention and are often selected for discussion and analysis in various cross-cultural training contexts.

The current project, the amassing over time of critical incidents from students' experiences abroad, attempts to blend these two approaches. Students record critical incidents, which, it is hoped, assists them in realizing what they have gained from studying abroad. In addition, students' critical incidents are compiled over time, thus providing the opportunity to identify trends and to adjust the study abroad program if necessary. Finally, the critical incidents themselves can be employed as pre-departure training materials.

Rationale for Applying CIT

To truly apply CIT, as Flanagan conceived it, to the study abroad enterprise would entail the collection of thousands of critical incidents from anyone in a position to observe some part of that process. This would include students studying abroad (and perhaps those who wished to study abroad but abandoned the idea along the way), instructors and advisors at home institutions, parents, instructors and classmates at study-abroad institutions, and homestay families.

Here is Flanagan (1947) describing his own technique as applied to combat pilots:

Essentially, the procedure was to obtain first-hand reports, or reports from objective records, of satisfactory and unsatisfactory execution of the task assigned. The cooperating individual described a situation in which success or failure was determined by specific reported causes.

This procedure was found very effective in obtaining information from individuals concerning their own errors, from subordinates concerning errors of their superiors, from supervisors with respect to their subordinates, and also from participants with respect to co-participants. (pp. 273-274)

Notice here that Flanagan looks to everyone in a position to provide a first-hand report of the target task in order to develop a picture of what he calls the “critical requirements,” a list of behaviors essential for success at a given task.

In the study-abroad program at the university under consideration in this paper, program administrators have in fact received and applied this type of first-hand observation of their students’ performance while abroad. Instructors from one of the overseas universities reported that students typically struggle with writing academic essays in English. This report is rather similar to a critical incident except that it is a general remark about a trend rather than a first-hand observation of a single incident. In response, program administrators made academic essay writing a focal point of pre-departure training. This can be seen as an example of, in Flanagan’s (1954) words, using CIT as a means of “solving practical problems” (p. 327). This raises the question of how many more issues might be resolved through the continued collection and analysis of critical incidents.

Information such as that about students’ essay writing is a small part of the larger picture of the study-abroad experience. Adding, over time, more critical incidents from all parties involved will yield a fuller, more nuanced picture of students’ experience abroad, allowing program administrators to guide students to make the most of the opportunity to study abroad. More specifically, this information can help students prepare more effectively before they go abroad — as has been done by incorporating an academic writing component to the preparation program; can guide them in specific skills and actions while abroad; and can support them in transitioning back to life in Japan. A variation of the critical incident technique seems the ideal way to produce the fullest and most detailed picture possible. Then, from this picture, means may emerge for “solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles” (Flanagan, 1954, p. 327).

Methodology

To begin the project of applying a CIT variant to the study-abroad program for the current project, I created a survey (see Appendix A), using Google Forms for

students to report their experiences.

In Flanagan's CIT, there was no space made for subjective comments. His interest was in objective accounts. In more recent literature — specifically that focused on cross-cultural experiences — including the subjective accounts of critical incident experiences is common. Butterfield et al (2005), citing Francis (1995) write, "There is evidence that researchers using the CIT are now asking participants to reflect upon and write down the meaning of critical incidents, not just discuss them in a research interview." Feeling that the process of recalling and reflecting on the critical incidents would be of value to students, I made the choice to ask for subjective responses in addition to objective accounts. As should become clear, students demonstrate evidence of learning, positive shifts in attitude, and increased motivation as shown in their reflections under the "Negative Significance" headings.

Once students have submitted their critical incidents, the next step is analysis: looking at the data to see if any categories or patterns are present. Jackson (2005) provides a good example of this practice, as does McAllister et al. (2006). With the small collection of incidents gathered for the current project, we can see only suggestions of patterns. In the future, as new student experiences are added to the collection, these patterns will become more defined, as occurred in Jackson's work. She identified numerous themes present in the journals of Chinese students studying in England, including, "Conflicting Beliefs about Health and Wellness," "Displays of Affection and Emotion," and "Confounding Humor." Some of the themes Jackson observed are present albeit in nascent form, in the current project, as well. Identifying such themes seems to align with the process Flanagan (1954) referred to as "developing broad psychological principles" (327).

What follows are critical incidents and subjective reflections submitted by students, each followed by a short discussion on how the the incident might impact the study-abroad program in the future.

Negative Experiences

STUDENT A

Negative Experience

I have one story about a negative experience. When I was walking along the road with Asian friends, strangers would tease us by calling out things like “*ni hao*” or “China”, and we felt like they were discriminating against us. One day when I was walking with a Japanese friend, a middle-aged woman riding a scooter threw what looked like a can at us. She did not hit us with it, but I felt really sad.

Negative Significance

At first, I did not feel like people calling out to me was discrimination, but a Korean friend said that you could probably call it discrimination against Asian people since it was mostly men who were doing the teasing. I did not feel very good about the woman throwing a can at me, but every country has these kinds of problems with discrimination, so I think it would be difficult to find a solution. There are Japanese people who discriminate against people from China too.

Discussion

Jackson (2005) identified “Perceptions of Discrimination” as a salient feature in the student writing she collected. Student A’s is a single experience — not a pattern; however, over the long term, as student experiences accumulate, a trend may emerge. Identifying these trends is a major goal of the current project to amass critical incidents from students. In the short-term, program administrators must ask whether it would benefit students to introduce consciousness-raising conversations on discrimination and racism into pre-departure training. If those responsible for planning pre-departure training agree that students should discuss the issue of discrimination and racism, for example, they could present students with the incident from Student A above. This could be followed by discussing the issue using several prompts: 1) *Why did this happen?* 2) *What would you do in such a situation?* 3) *What is the best response to perceived discrimination?*

In Student A’s reflection on the incident, she acknowledges that racism and discrimination exist all over the world, including her home country. It would seem that awareness of the issue and a particular attitude would provide the ideal response to the perceived discrimination encountered by Student A. There is

nothing, in other words, that study abroad students would need to do, no action they would need to take in the face of such poor behavior. However, cultivating an attitude of maturity and an ability to not take it personally is perhaps a process that can originate when discussing the experience and feeling captured in Student A's critical incident.

STUDENT B

Note: This student was studying in the Netherlands. Classes were conducted in English.

Negative Experience

When I was in a group class, the students were mostly Dutch, and at some point they started talking in Dutch. It made me feel left out.

Negative Significance

I feel like I did not think through my decision to join that class carefully enough. In the group activities after that, I took the initiative and was able to make friends with the other members.

Discussion

Pre-departure discussions of this critical incident might address some of the following questions: 1) *How would you feel in a similar situation?* 2) *Have you ever experienced this, either as the one feeling left out or as someone speaking a language others could not understand?* 3) *Do you think the Dutch students were aware of Student B's feelings?* 4) *What would you do in a similar situation?* Responding to questions like these might help students view the incident not as a problem but rather as an interesting challenge, best approached with curiosity. Such a discussion would provide the opportunity to consider the event from the perspective of the other party, as in question 3. Chen and Starosta (2000) highlight this ability to put oneself in the place of someone from another culture, referring to it as "empathy," then go on to state that "...the more empathic one is, the more interculturally sensitive one will be" (p.5). Discussing critical incidents such as Student B's, and focusing on a question like number 3 would seem to be a step toward the cultivation of empathy and, thereby, intercultural sensitivity.

STUDENT C

Negative Experience

For the first few months in Canada, I could not understand English at all. People spoke to me at school and in the dormitory, but they spoke much too fast for me to understand, and I was unable to think of anything to say in response.

Negative Significance

Going overseas for the first time, I realized how poor my English ability was and felt that I needed to study more.

Discussion

Student C's experience raises an important question: How far should pre-departure training go toward preparing students for their experiences abroad? Student C identifies this as a negative experience, but it must be asked whether it was avoidable. To some extent, this type of experience is inseparable from the act of studying abroad. The only alternative would be to develop much greater fluency in English prior to arriving in Canada; however, the student presumably views studying abroad as a means of achieving this fluency. What, then, might be the value of students' discussing the experience of Student C prior to their departure?

The greatest value might be found in the cultivation of a certain attitude, prompted by questions: 1) *What will you do when you encounter a situation like this?* Student C writes, "[I] felt that I needed to study more." If she acted upon this feeling and did in fact work to further her English ability, then the negative experience catalyzed a positive outcome. Thus a useful attitude might take the following form: *I know that I'll have times like this. Everyone who is learning a new language feels like this sometimes. I'll use these experiences as a reminder to keep working hard because I know that I want to speak more fluently.* It is worth noting here that positive experiences, such as that of Student D in the next section, offer a different, more optimistic take in a similar vein. It might be useful to present Student C's negative experience and Student D's positive experience together to suggest that attitude is a choice.

STUDENT D

Negative Experience

When I was taking a high level speaking class near the end of my study-abroad activities, we had a debate in class, and I could hardly speak at all while the other students were much better at English than me, so I mostly just stayed quiet.

Negative Significance

Seeing the other students talking without any trouble while I could not speak English well myself, even though we were all exchange students studying English, made me want to work harder. Sometimes, I felt discouraged and frustrated, but I think it was a good opportunity that will help me to grow.

Discussion

Student D describes a common experience. Learners' ability levels will certainly vary. Moreover, a given student's cultural background may predispose him or her to be more outgoing and talkative. What, then, would be the value of presenting pre-departure students with a critical incident such as this?

One benefit of discussing Student D's critical incident would be to give students the chance to envision such a situation prior to experiencing it. Though not all students will participate in debates in class, nearly all can expect to find themselves in a fast-moving discussion with speakers of differing abilities and cultural backgrounds. Students, on their own or guided by an instructor, can create a list of strategies that might help create opportunities for themselves to speak in a fast-moving conversation. Examples of this might include, "Can I add something?" and "Can I say something here?" (Keller & Warner, 1988, p.9). With such simple yet powerful phrases, students might find it easier to participate in conversations that seem to be moving too quickly.

Students who find themselves in a fast-moving conversation or debate, unable to participate fully, may benefit in knowing that other students encountered the same thing while abroad. Sometimes it is encouraging simply to know that there are others who are experiencing the same struggles and challenges as oneself (Schnickel, 2011). Finally, pre-departure students might appreciate seeing the attitude represented by phrases like "...made me want to work harder," and "...it was a good opportunity that will help me to grow." This is an attitude of positivity

and resilience that students can begin cultivating prior to departure.

Positive Experiences

STUDENT A

Positive Experience

I was happy that most of my classmates were interested when I made *onigiri* and introduced them in a presentation. One girl in the class said that she had seen them before in Pokemon, but this was her first time eating one, so I was glad that I made them.

Positive Significance

I had thought that onigiri were well-known all around the world, so I was surprised when my classmates did not know about them. I had a hard time deciding whether to make sushi or *onigiri*, so I am glad I decided on *onigiri*. I was also surprised that Japanese anime and characters are fairly well-known. I would like to introduce more of the good things about Japan to people from other countries.

Discussion

Discussing this incident might give students a chance to consider what elements of Japanese culture they will be asked about while abroad. Using English to talk about Japanese culture and daily life is a ready-made, challenging and often enjoyable activity for students and can easily be incorporated into a pre-departure training course.

STUDENT B

Positive Experience

When I first arrived in the Netherlands, my friend was waiting to meet me. Then, on the way from the airport to Maastricht, a Dutch person spoke to me, and I was able to talk with her in English. I made friends with people from many different countries, we had a lot of parties, and I was able to talk with them about things like our home countries and recent events at school. We are still keeping up those friendships.

Positive Significance

I think a lot of people made friends with me because of my own wish to make friends and talk more.

Discussion

The single sentence under “Positive Significance” conveys a great deal. Discussing this or a similar critical incident might lead to a productive discussion on the role one’s attitude plays in having a satisfying experience in another culture.

STUDENT C

Positive Experience

At the dormitory in Canada, I met someone from Taiwan who was interested in Japanese culture (anime, etc.). We studied Japanese and went out to have sushi together, and we became very good friends.

Positive Significance

By making friends with someone overseas, I experienced firsthand that even though our countries and cultures are different, we share some of the same sensibilities and values. It also made me feel that I should be proud of Japanese culture.

Discussion

This highlights again the role Japanese culture—popular culture, in this case—may play in making connections with others while studying abroad.

STUDENT D

Positive Experience

There were people who volunteered to speak English with the exchange students, and I spent about an hour once a week having conversations with them. When I first started this activity, I mostly just listened to what they were saying and the conversation would often die out, but near the end, just like a regular conversation, I was able to speak up instead of just listening, and I was able to enjoy the conversation too.

Positive Significance

While studying abroad, I worried a lot because I did not know if my English was improving, and while I think living in an environment where I was surrounded by English had an effect, I was able to feel the results of my efforts to study English, and that encouraged me to polish up my English more.

Discussion

This highlights the importance of risk-taking and not simply assuming being in an English-speaking environment will be enough; there must also be a focus on action and production. Student D's experience stands out because of the span of time it covers. We see the effect of sustained effort. Recognizing this may be encouraging to pre-departure students who may be experiencing some anxiety.

Future Directions

This collection of experiences and reflections is what I hope to be the beginning of an ongoing process of gathering critical incidents from our students who have studied abroad. The goal is to amass more critical incidents, thereby adding detail to the collective student experience. In the future, we may solicit critical incidents from others involved in study abroad, including instructors, homestay family members and fellow students. In doing so, we would add the valuable perspective from the outside. Adding these additional points of view would more closely align the project to the original guidelines of CIT.

Conclusion

As Wolf-Wendel writes, "There are few formal college activities that are seen by almost everyone — including the broader public — as being uniformly positive. Study abroad is one such activity" (p. xi). Yet, how much is known about what students actually encounter while overseas? Without a method for systematically collecting experiences from participants in study-abroad programs, there can be no certainty for program administrators. Moreover, students themselves may not fully appreciate their time overseas. Providing students the chance to articulate some of their most significant experiences may provide them clarity that would otherwise be inaccessible.

It is common to see students discussing their study abroad experiences with enthusiasm. With just the slightest prompting (e.g., "What was one of your favorite

memories from your time studying abroad?” or “Please talk about a confusing or difficult situation.”), students immerse themselves in conversation. Jackson (2005) identifies something similar, noting that students’ discussions about study abroad experiences were “lively”:

Anonymous excerpts from their diaries provided further stimulus for some very lively and reflective discussions of both positive and negative experiences. This phase helped them to understand better the possible reasons for the critical incidents. (p. 168)

Students benefit from sharing their critical incidents. As Jackson’s students did, simply recalling, recounting, and identifying the significance of some of their experiences help students see more clearly the valuable lessons of studying abroad.

The individual benefits from sharing critical incidents, and so does the program itself — in two important ways. First, gathering critical incidents provides solid data from which to extrapolate trends. By gathering both positive and negative incidents, it is possible to identify what Flanagan (1954) referred to as the “critical requirements” of optimal performance, or a list of best practices. For study abroad, this is likely to take the form of a set of behaviors and attitudes that will help students optimize their time abroad. Second, the critical incidents themselves can be used as training materials for pre-departure students. Indeed, critical incidents have a long history of such use. McAllister et al. (2006), citing Brislin et al. (1986) and Brookfield (1990), write, “Critical incident approaches are commonly used in cultural competency training to foster critical thinking and transformative learning” (p. 371). Moreover, using the experiences of students in the same university can be seen as a community-strengthening enterprise.

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APPENDIX A: Research Instrument

< 異文化体験アンケートのお願い >

実践女子大学の学生のみなさんの留学先での経験をよりよく理解するために、留学先での異文化体験に関する調査を行なっています。もしさしつかえなければ、以下の表に、留学先でのあなたの体験・経験を、日本語か英語で記入してください。よろしくお願ひいたします。

< 記入方法 >

下の表の客観の欄には、留学先での出来事を書いてください。ここで言う「留学先での出来事」とは、言語あるいは文化と関係のある出来事のことです。[1] の欄には、うれしい気持ちや満足、自信などにつながるプラスの出来事を書いてください。[2] の欄には、みじめな気持ちや戸惑い、フラストレーションなどにつながるマイナスの出来事を書いてください。どちらも、その時の気持ちや感情については書かず、事実のみを客観的に書いてください。

主観の欄には、なぜその出来事があなたにとって意味があるのかということを書いてください。具体的には、あなたがその出来事から何を学んだのか、どのように感じたのか、今でも残っているその出来事のインパクトは何なのか、[3] にはプラス面を、[4] にはマイナス面を書いてください。(あなたがマイナスだと思って記入することでも、後にプラスの学習経験になる可能性があるということを、心にとどめておいてください。)

< 記入例 >

[1] POSITIVE: Experience (Objective) // 体験・経験(客観)

When I first arrived in Paris, I went to a bakery with some of my classmates. In French, I explained to the shop assistant what I wanted, paid for my order, and said “Thank you.” I had a big smile on my face at the end of this exchange.

最初にパリに到着した時、私は何人かのクラスメートと一緒にパン屋さんに行きました。そして、店員に、フランス語で、何がほしいかを説明し、お金を払い、「ありがとう」と言いました。このようなやりとりの最後に、私はにっこり微笑みました。

[2] NEGATIVE: Experience (Objective) // 体験・経験 (客観)

The daughter of some of my parents' friends was living in Paris at the time I was there. I didn't know her, but my parents told me that she had taken a course on

teaching English there and suggested I call her to learn more about the program. I called her home, and her husband answered in French. I successfully asked to talk with her in French but was unable to answer his simple follow-up question: “Who is calling?”. Finally he asked me in English.

私がパリにいた時、両親の友人の娘さんもパリに住んでいました。私は彼女のことを知らなかったのですが、彼女は英語教育のコースをとっているのです。彼女に電話して、そのプログラムのことをいろいろ聞いてみてはどうかと、両親が助言してくれました。そして、私が彼女の家へ電話したら、彼女のご主人が出てフランス語で対応しました。「彼女と話がしたい」ということは、うまくフランス語で伝えることができたのですが、「あなたは誰なのか」という簡単な質問に答えることができず、結局、彼は英語で質問してきました。

[3] POSITIVE: Significance (Subjective) // 意味・意義（主観）

This was my first experience using a foreign language in a real situation. I felt quite empowered to know that I possessed enough linguistic skill in French to accomplish something of importance: buying food. I'll never forget this experience.

これは、私が実際の場面で外国語を使った初めての経験でした。食べ物を買うという重要なことを達成するための十分なフランス語能力があることがわかり、とても勇気づけられました。私は、この経験を絶対に忘れないと思います。

[4] NEGATIVE: Significance (Subjective) // 意味・意義（主観）

I felt very discouraged when I realized that I could not even answer a simple question in French. Moreover, the man finally resorted to using English. This highlighted my feeling of incompetence.

簡単な質問にさえフランス語で答えられないことがわかり、とてもがっかりしました。そして、そのご主人は、最後には英語に頼らざるを得ませんでした。この出来事によって、私は、能力のなさを痛切に感じさせられました。

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