

Generic Skills Learned from Domestic Travel Experiences

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Generic Skills Learned from Domestic Travel Experiences

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INTRODUCTION

It has been suggested that all travel is educational because it broadens the mind as people learn from and interpret experiences (Casella, 1997; LaTorre, 2011; Steves, 2009). There is a common belief that people learn when they travel, but the learning effects of travel and tourism have been argued to be under-researched (Falk, Ballantyne, Packer, & Benckendorff, 2011; van 't Klooster, van Wijk, Go, & van Rekom, 2008).

Learning has been shown to result from educational tourism, a subset of tourism. Hundreds of studies, both qualitative and quantitative, have been published on study abroad, which includes travel and educational components. The stated benefits of study abroad include increased self-confidence, intercultural competence, independence, cognitive knowledge and skill gain (Meyer-Lee & Evans, 2007). These benefits have been attributed to “studying abroad,” but only a few researchers have separated the elements of study abroad to determine learning outcomes from the *travel* portion of the experience. During study abroad, travel has been found to be a major source of students’ out-of-class learning (Laubscher, 1994) and students have reported learning more from out-of-class experiences than in the classroom (Gmelch, 1997; Lamet & Lamet, 1982). Yet, these studies did not address *what* was learned.

Learning through educational travel and study abroad does not encompass the whole of learning through travel (Falk et al, 2011). There is also evidence that travelers learn life skills and concrete knowledge from independent travel. Groups reporting that they learned through their travel experiences include backpackers on long-term travel (Inkson & Myers, 2003), students on a gap year (Coetzee, 2009), and college students (Kuh, 1995). However, each of these studies included only international travel (in particular long-term travel). Little research has investigated if similar learning results from domestic and short-term travel.

Traveling with the intent of accumulating knowledge can result in learning, but unintentional learning can occur from any trip (Peterson, 1979). Researchers have begun to relate travel learning with educational concepts, such as transformative (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011; Morgan, 2010) and experiential learning. Kolb’s (1984) theory of experiential learning has been used by several researchers to explain learning benefits from travel or study abroad (Laubscher, 1994; Pagano & Roselle, 2009; Weeden, Wooley, and Jester, 2011), although this theory relates primarily to formal education, instead of serendipitous experiences. The theoretical basis of this research will be Kolb’s experiential learning theory.

Learning content knowledge (e.g. facts) is a common way to measure learning in classroom environments but measuring content knowledge through travel would likely not yield generalizable results (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004), as this knowledge may be gained from visiting a particular destination. Therefore, researchers have devised other ways to measure other types of learning. Pearce and Foster (2007) refined a survey instrument to determine individuals' perceived learning of generic skills through travel. These generic skills, defined as "the abilities, capacities and knowledge one requires to function as a sophisticated professional in an information rich society" (Pearce, 2002, in Pearce & Foster, 2007, p. 1286), include: adaptability, self-confidence, communication, and similar "life" skills. A later survey of students correlated the number of recent international trips with perceived learning of fourteen generic skills, but the research was not generalizable beyond a small college's student population (Scarinci & Pearce, 2012). Because of the drawbacks of measuring cognitive knowledge, this study will focus on perceived knowledge gains of generic skills.

The proposed study will ask individuals to identify perceived learning of generic skills resulting from their travels with a focus on domestic travel. In addition, this study seeks to investigate factors influencing learning, including type of trip (group, individual, or family), distance traveled, and destination. In particular, it will use surveys to determine perceived learning of generic skills of past domestic non-educational (i.e. not study abroad) and domestic educational (i.e. school trips) travel experiences.

Overall, researchers have suggested that learning benefits accrue from travel, but there are several limitations to the current body of research. Because study abroad also has a classroom component, it is difficult to determine how much perceived knowledge gain would accrue from traveling abroad without a study component. In addition, researchers in both study abroad and individual travel learning have focused almost exclusively on international travel and long-term travel experiences. This research is intended to determine outcomes that are not the result of structured educational experiences, like study abroad or classroom learning.

This study will build upon previous research on learning through travel to determine:

- What generic skills do people gain from domestic travel?
- Are there any differences in perceived learning of generic skills based on type of trip (group/individual), distance traveled, or destination?
- Do the number of trips taken influence perceived generic skills acquired?

Investigating these questions will help travel providers identify and offer trip experiences which may better result in achieving learning outcomes. It may benefit educators by providing a better framework for offering enriching out-of-class travel learning experiences to student. It could also help to identify suggested cumulative learning outcomes of multiple trips, and expand upon current research which has focused primarily on long-term and international travel experiences, like study abroad. Additionally, this research seeks to better link experiential learning theory with travel learning, to hopefully shed light on the ways in which travel may result in learning and how to maximize learning outcomes through these experiences.

METHODS

The study will use a non-probability university student (convenience) sample. A student sample is appropriate because these individuals will likely have fewer travel experiences than a similar sample of older individuals. Because learning is cumulative, a younger sample will

likely minimize the effects of cumulative learning. For example, adults may have taken dozens of trips, so it may be more difficult for them to perceive learning from a single experience than from a college student sample. Juniors and seniors will be selected because they are more likely to have taken independent trips (other than family trips) than younger students. A second reason this sample is being used is to compare it with the results of Scarinci & Pearce (2012), who utilized a student population (although their sample overrepresented international students, and their results were only generalizable to the population of one small college).

Limitations of using a university student sample that may result in sampling error are worth noting. They may not be representative of the general population. University students have a higher education level than much of the population. It can also be argued that they are more attuned to learning outcomes because, as students, they are in an active learning phase of their lives. In addition, the number of trips taken and the perceived impact of these experiences may be due to other factors, such as socioeconomic or familial status.

The study will be a mixed methods design, utilizing a validating, quantitative data model. The survey will contain primarily quantitative questions, for easy data analysis and comparison to other studies, while a few qualitative questions will allow the respondents to expand upon the quantitative responses. Although this approach will not result in rich qualitative data, the qualitative data can be used to validate and interpret the quantitative results (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007).

The survey will ask participants to think about the longest vacation trip they have taken in the last twelve months. It is hoped that this will help to isolate learning outcomes by focusing on one travel experience, instead of cumulative effects of all travels (although number of travel experiences will also be considered in analyzing the results). The survey will consist of six major sections:

- Background information.
- Generic skills: This section will include questions about skills learned from a recent trip. There are twenty items (from Scarinci & Pearce, 2012) which will use a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 no change to 5 greatly improved) to measure perceived learning of generic skills from a recent trip. Unlike Scarinci & Pearce (2012), this study will utilize a 5-point scale to provide a central midpoint.
- Cumulative travel experiences. This section will include brief questions about the quantity of travel experiences (domestic and international) within the past three years.
- Open-ended questions: This section will include questions about how they believe learning has/has not occurred from travel, which experiences they believe promote learning, and what aspects of traveling they believe to have resulted in the most learning.

Generic skills learned will be analyzed individually and compared to results of generic skills learned from Scarinci & Pearce (2012). A “total learning quotient” will be devised by totaling up the perceived learning score for each of the twenty generic skills. Two dependent variables will be used: total learning quotient and each of the generic skills learned. The independent variable will be number of trips taken, destination of trips, and role in trip planning. The qualitative data will be reviewed using content analysis to identify common themes and responses throughout the answers.

There are a few limitations to this study. First, it seeks to determine generic skills learned from travel, although other learning outcomes may result. Second, as it focuses on a single

travel experience, the results may not apply to other travel experiences. In addition, use of a college age population may limit generalizability of the study. However, this research is believed to be a building block for the current knowledge of the educative outcomes of travel.

In summary, this study will expand current knowledge about learning outcomes of travel experiences. While previous researchers have focused on learning from study abroad, educational travel, long-term travel, and international travel, this study focuses on shorter-term domestic travel experiences. It is anticipated that this research will add to the body of knowledge in both the tourism and educational fields and may help tourism providers to offer and market experiences that provide learning benefits to travelers.

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