

ePortfolios for Study Abroad Assessment and Improvement: Monitoring Students' Use of a Target Skill While Abroad

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Abstract:
ePortfolios, which are becoming a prominent tool for collecting experiential and developmental evidence during study abroad, need more research as a means of assessment. Our study made a systematic analysis of students' ePortfolios while abroad to understand how they used a target skill taught in pre-departure training, applying Kirkpatrick's training evaluation framework. The findings were then used to discuss how to improve the training. Contextualized analysis of ePortfolio revealed various cultural engagements in which the target skill was used. We found that ePortfolio also captured students' perspective changes and self-realizations as well as affective and behavioral aspects in their learning. Furthermore, a progressive trend in difficulty level of students' questions regarding culture was observed. Quantitative data of the survey results were then added to bolster the results. The evidence suggests that contexts simulated during pre-departure training matched real-life situations abroad but did not sufficiently cover the diversity of settings in which students can exercise the skill. We conclude that by employing a systematic assessment approach using ePortfolios, rich learning evidence to improve pre-departure training can be obtained.

Key words: ePortfolios, Assessment, Training evaluation, Education abroad

STUDY ABROAD ASSESSMENT

In this global era where people increasingly work across national boundaries, often interconnected virtually, higher education has been tasked with preparing students to better live and work together with people from different backgrounds by providing quality international education, such as study abroad programs. However, outcomes in international education, such as intercultural competence, defined as "behaving and communicating appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations" (Deardorff 2006, p. 255), are complex and therefore challenging to assess (Deardorff 2015, Fantini 2012). Despite the nature of intercultural competence being experiential, developmental, and interactional (Deardorff 2015),

institutions tend to over-rely on pre-post surveys, standard instruments, and self-report Likert items, which do not adequately capture students' learning and development, behavioral aspects, and evidence to explain the outcomes (Griffith et al. 2016, Deardorff 2015). Furthermore, evidence of student learning should be used to understand and improve their learning (Suskie 2018), yet in the area of study abroad, research to indicate how assessment can lead to program improvement is lacking (Salisbury 2015). To capture evidence of complex learning outcomes during study abroad, it is essential to determine which specific aspect to assess and how to monitor its development (Deardorff 2015, Fantini 2012). However, accessing direct evidence of students' learning, and monitoring development while the students are overseas, is not straightforward, especially if faculty or staff are not accompanying them.

In the midst of these challenges, ePortfolios, which are web-based and can gather artifacts of learning and reflection that focus on learning and development (Eynon & Gambino 2017), are an emerging means of assessment in international education allowing for collection and tracing of direct evidence of students' learning over time (Deardorff 2015). However, as Griffith et al. (2016) point out, a weakness of using portfolios is that no standard assessment exists which enables meaningful comparisons among groups or students' submitted work, since content, platforms, and scoring methods are different across institutions, research, and contexts. In higher education in Japan, many institutions are still struggling with the implementation of ePortfolios (Morimoto 2015), and in study abroad research, discussion of how to use ePortfolios for measurement is still scarce (Shoraku & Yoshida 2018). With the expectation that ePortfolios can assess complex learning outcomes during study abroad, research on the use of ePortfolios to systematically assess students' learning development overseas and to improve programming is needed.

In one of the few studies to examine study abroad ePortfolios in Japanese higher education, Cutting et al. (2020) analyzed students' daily reflections in ePortfolios documented abroad to see the impact of pre-departure training. The researchers employed Kirkpatrick's (2006) training evaluation framework, part of which evaluates participants' behavioral change "after" the training, so called Level 3 (Behavior) evaluation, and examined how frequently students wrote about using the target skill taught in pre-departure training.

RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODS

This research moves beyond the study of Cutting et al. (2020) to examine how the same target skill is used and how it develops over time. It also adds self-ratings from students about their use of the skill to bolster results. Then, the findings are used to discuss how to improve pre-departure training.

Research questions:

- 1) What does the evidence in students' ePortfolios tell us about how they use the target skill and how it develops?*

2) How can we improve our pre-departure training from the evidence?

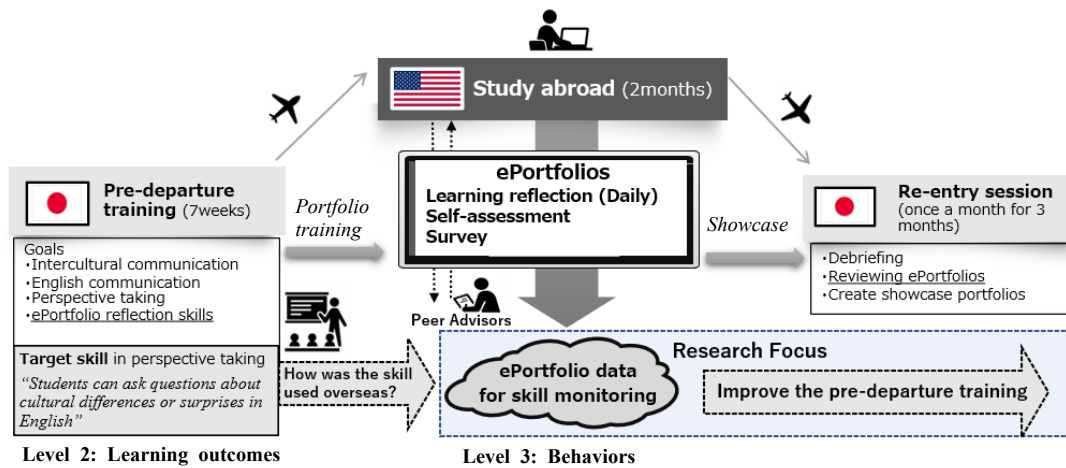


Figure 1: Design of ePortfolio Assessment for Study Abroad

PROGRAM BACKGROUND

The study is based on the same short-term study abroad program as in Cutting et al. (2020), operated in a local private university in Japan, but in the following year with different students. The program dispatches a group of Japanese students to a US institution for 2 months for credit-bearing courses. Enrollment requires completion of an intermediate English class in the home institution and students' TOEFL (itp) scores range from 440 to 480. The program aims to equip students with communication skills and intercultural competencies to work with people of diverse backgrounds in global society according to the institutional mission. The participants are 15 students (4 male and 11 female; 4 second-year and 11 third-year).

FRAMEWORK FOR MONITORING

To optimize the study abroad experience, pre-departure training (7 weeks for 14 class hours) and re-entry sessions (3 times) are provided by the first author in the home institution (Figure 1). The pre-departure training course aims to promote intercultural communication and learning while abroad based on the program goals. This includes "perspective taking," in which students learn how to step out of their ethnocentric perceptions to see others' viewpoints, and it is divided into sub-categories for practice and evaluation (Table1). The study uses the framework of Kirkpatrick's (2006) training evaluation and examines how students use what they learned from the pre-departure training while abroad. In pre-departure training, students practice each skill in Table 1 in a simulation with a TA who acts as an American buddy and their performance and attainment levels are evaluated as learning outcomes (Kirkpatrick's Level 2: Learning Outcomes). After the training, we examine if students are exercising the new skill (Kirkpatrick's Level 3: Behaviors). In this study, we focus monitoring on Skill b), due to its criticality in intercultural understanding as well as its observability (Cutting et at 2020). *Skill b) "Students can ask questions in English about cultures, such as cultural differences or surprises."*

Table 1 “Perspective Taking” Goals divided into Attitude/Knowledge/Skills for practice and evaluation

Goal	“Perspective Taking” Students possess the knowledge, attitude, skills, and English ability to attempt to broaden their perspectives.
Attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suspend own judgement of others’ attitudes and behaviors. • Being curious and inquisitive to seek understanding through observation, questioning, and researching .
Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students can differentiate facts, interpretation, and evaluation. (the D.I.E. method: Describe, Interpret, Evaluate).
Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Students can suspend their own judgement of others’ attitudes and behaviors. b) Students can ask questions in English about cultures, such as cultural differences and surprises. (appropriately, not based on their own judgement). c) Students can explain their own views to others (appropriately) to help mutual understanding. d) Students can critically reflect and express their own views, assumption, and/or their perspective change.

(Adapted from Cutting et al. 2020)

ePORTFOLIOS

Throughout the program, ePortfolios are employed to deepen students’ learning through self-reflection and to provide evidence for learning assessment. In the pre-departure course, students learn how to reflect on their experiences and why it is important. While abroad, students write daily reflections and set daily goals as a non-compulsory yet highly recommended activity (Figure 2). Upon their return, students review their ePortfolios and create showcase portfolios. Figure 2 shows an example of students’ daily reflections during study abroad. The top column contains instructor’s guided reflection questions with motivational messages posed daily and the second column has students’ writing. The bottom column is feedback from a trained peer advisor, who was a program participant of the previous year.

[ePortfolio during study abroad]

- *What did you experience today? What did you notice or learn from the experience? Why is it important and how will you utilize it in your life?*
- *How was your achievement of the day? What is your goal tomorrow?*

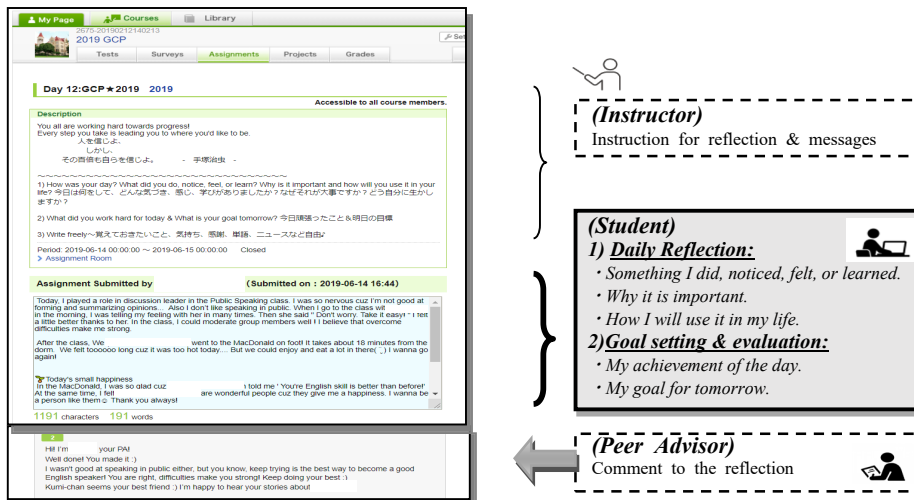


Figure 2: ePortfolios during study abroad

ePORTFOLIO ANALYSIS

The first phase of data analysis was to thoroughly read students’ daily ePortfolio reflections and extract descriptions which referred to their use or intended use of the target skill following Cutting et al. (2020). This qualitative coding was conducted based on the deductive approach of Sato (2008), first by pre-

setting a code label for the target skill, and then allocating the code to segments which specified students' use or intention to use the skill (Cutting et al. 2020). A researcher in the field of international education supported the first author in extracting appropriate segments. When agreement was reached on all selected segments, we concluded that theoretical saturation had been achieved. The segments were then set in chronological order and use of the target skill over time was analyzed. 15 students' reflection entries, from days 1 to 19, were analyzed. Then from day 19 to 29, a self-rating survey which asked if they were using the skill or not was collected. The total number of entries for 15 students over 19 days were 226 entries, average of 79% submission rate per day. (The total participants was 16. However, one student who did not submit a self-rating survey was excluded from this study to align with reflection data.) Prior to this research, all participants provided written and verbal consent to make use of their ePortfolio submissions.

RESULTS

The extracted segments showing students' use or intended use of the target skill are listed, student by student, in Table 2. 8 students out of 15 (53%) wrote about using the skill, and there are 12 segments in total. While these do not represent every experience they had, their authentic contexts where the skill was used are captured in detail. First, students asked their cultural questions to their "buddies" the most, who are student volunteers at the hosting institution to support the international students. The findings signified that buddies acted as important cultural guides for international students. In addition, ePortfolios discovered other interlocutors, such as "RAs," "volunteers," and a "dorm resident." Variety of cultural questions was also documented, for example, personal observations, local recommendations, and politics.

ePortfolios importantly captured students' perspective changes and self-realizations. For example, Student C (day 19) who asked about World War II to an American dorm resident reflected on the realization of his/her narrow views. Furthermore, this student felt the need for academic vocabulary. Student D (day 11) also asked about politics and reflected on the necessity of listening skills. Although here we see students' recognition of the need for language skills in complex cultural dialogues, Byram & Golubeva (2020) claim that many models of intercultural competence "do not take account of linguistic competence" (p.74). More models of intercultural competence which integrate language aspects need to be developed. ePortfolio entries also capture students' feelings, as in "thankful," "exciting," and "frustrating" in their cultural interaction, providing additional aspects related to their learning. Griffith et al (2016) refute that existing measures in intercultural communication often do not sufficiently collect affective and behavioral evidence which are essential in viewing interactions with local hosts. These ePortfolios provide affective and behavioral evidence which are hard to capture by standard instruments.

Table 2 Extracted descriptions from ePortfolios on using the skill to "ask questions about culture"

	Students' descriptions	context
Student A Day 1	About cultures, I felt there are so many people who are half naked. Texas is surely hot, but Japan is ...I don't know what makes such difference , so I will try to ask a buddy about it.	△ Buddy Observation
Student A Day 7	I asked a buddy about a kick skater . Lots of people are riding them and I learned people can rent one after installing an application.	✓ Buddy Observation

Student B Day 4	After class, I sent a message to a buddy and asked which coffee shops he recommends around school. Since I am in the US, I felt I should explore different coffee shops to study. ... <u>I truly respect our buddies' spirit to help. So thankful.</u>	✓ Buddy Local recommendation
Student B Day 14	I asked my buddy about politics in the US , because I couldn't understand the pros of the Republicans in my Multicultural Society class. He told me that ... <u>I wanna know about politics of the U.S. more and more.</u>	✓ Buddy Politics
Student C Day 6	(The RA) asked questions and asked about Japanese language to me. Using this time, I asked the same questions back to her and explained using drawings and photos. With these, she talked to me a lot.	✓ RA What was asked (language)
Student C Day 19	Most shockingly, when I asked him (a dorm resident) about bombing in Hiroshima , he said American aircrafts ... I wasn't taught such a thing, so later I looked into it. It seems Japan was banning people to.. <u>World is big. My view is narrow. And topics are difficult. I really felt I need more vocabulary for academic conversation, but it was a lot of fun!</u>	✓ Dorm resident War
Student D Day 11	I asked (volunteers) about the election in the US which I learned in class because I wanted to see if I can talk about something academic. <u>However, their vocabulary was difficult, and speed was fast, so it was hard to catch all. But they explained some words to me and gave various examples, so I was thankful. I still lack listening skills. I will work on it.</u>	✓ Volunteer Politics
Student E Day 4	Because of a comment from my teacher, I learned my gestures could give a negative image to some people. I also asked questions about an expression I know to a buddy and <u>found out people may consider it as racist. Asking questions is surely important and I want to ask questions more.</u>	✓ Buddy Expression
Student F Day 7	I talked to our buddies on the street. Starting from "it's hot again," I kept asking questions about whatever I saw in town . This is my first time to stay this long overseas, <u>so this new culture is very exciting</u> My goal for the day was proactively communicating with buddies and <u>I feel I achieved it well.</u>	✓ Buddy Town observation
Student G Day 10	I will write about the questions I asked to RAs today and what I thought about their answers. Question 1: In the parking lot , it seems... Question 2: In Texas, do Republicans Then I heard Texas is Republican, but.... <u>Their answers were interesting. I want to keep asking more questions from now on.</u>	✓ RA Observation, Politics, etc.
Student H Day 6	After the tour, some students were asking questions to the guide and understanding by nodding. However, I couldn't understand and felt terrible. I had lots I wanted to ask about this organization but <u>not being able to understand what they say was frustrating</u> . I have a few things I want to ask, so I will ask the staff next time I go there.	× Guide at Volunteer site
Student H Day 18	(At a volunteer site, in a freezer room) There was a foreign volunteer next to me and I wanted to ask various questions about volunteering to the person. But I was so cold that no word came from my mouth.	× Volunteer Volunteering

(Interlocutors and question content are highlighted. Students' reflections of their action are underlined. Japanese entries were translated into English by the first author)

Next, to explore the development of skill usage over time, we chronologically arranged the segments from day 1 to 19 (Table 3). From day 1 to day 9, students tended to ask questions about observations in town and local recommendations as in student A, B, and F. From day 10, questions about politics arose as in student B, C (war), D, and G. This progression is not rigid, but thinking of cultural learning, questions about personal observations are relatively easy to ask and "visible" part of cultures. Politics are more complicated to discuss and comprehend, thus requiring elaborate interaction. Furthermore, intricate discussions involve certain English levels. Therefore, it is not difficult to guess why political questions start to emerge later than town observations and this may show developmental stages in this skill.

Table 3 Context for skill use in chronological order (students' cultural questions and self-ratings)

	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student E	Student F	Student G	Student H
Day1~3	△ Buddy Observation							
Day4~6		✓ Buddy Local recommendation	✓ RA What was asked (language)		✓ Buddy Expressions			× Guide at volunteer site Volunteer site
Day7~9	✓ Buddy Observation					✓ Buddy Observation		
Day10~12				✓ Volunteer Politics			✓ RA Observation, Politics, etc.	
Day13~15		✓ Buddy Politics						
Day16~19			✓ Dorm resident War					× Volunteer Volunteering
Day19~26	Self-rating: "I ask questions about cultures (cultural differences and/or surprises)"							
	Strongly agree			Somewhat agree			Don't agree much	

△: Intention to use the skill, ✓: Used the skill, ×: Couldn't use the skill

SELF-RATING

From days 19 to 26, a self-rating survey with the question “I ask questions about cultures” was conducted to collect quantitative data. In Table 3, Students A, B, and C, who wrote about using the skill most frequently had the highest self-rating. Whereas, Student H, whose ePortfolio revealed no success in asking questions rated the lowest, which matches the ePortfolio evidence. The ePortfolios of Student H showed that his/her difficulty in comprehending English hindered asking cultural questions. Since Jackson (2020) states that researching “host-sojourner interaction” to identify what facilitates or hinders “intercultural communication and relationship building” is still new (pp.448-449),” this area needs to be examined further. It must also be noted that there were 7 students who did not refer to using the skill in their ePortfolios; 4 of these answered, “Strongly agree,” 2 “Somewhat agree,” and 1 “Don’t agree much.” One of the main reasons there are no such references is likely that some of these students missed submitting reflections several times, and some entries were brief and lacking detail. Therefore, ePortfolio assessment requires adequate submission as well as content, and thus motivating and encouraging students to document their learning in ePortfolios is imperative.

USE OF DATE FOR COURSE IMPROVEMENT

Lastly, we discuss how the findings help improve the program. According to Suzuki (2015), it is crucial to make the training context similar to real-life settings in order to promote learning transfer (Cutting et al 2020). To examine how much our training context resembles real situations, we compared both. In pre-departure training, students practice the target skill with a TA acting as a “Buddy” by asking questions about “things they saw” in a simulated environment. The ePortfolios revealed that interaction with “Buddies” and asking questions about “observations” are the highest frequency (Table 2), which indicate our training context matches students’ real-life situations. However, ePortfolios also showed that use of the skill extended to more diverse situations and involved other interlocutors. To optimize affordances in the host environment, we will embed such elements in simulation practice in pre-departure training. As discussed earlier, cultural questioning tends to progress from simple observations to deeper topics such as politics, and English comprehension is integral in cultural discussions. This suggests that we can add levels in our simulations following this pattern and integrating advances in English.

CONCLUSION

Our study attempted to use ePortfolios to perform a systematic assessment of study abroad participants’ learning, by honing in on a target skill taught during pre-departure training and monitoring and analyzing students’ use of that skill during study abroad, using Kirkpatrick’s framework. We then discussed how to use the findings to improve the pre-departure training. Contextualized qualitative analysis of ePortfolios revealed diverse situations where cultural questions emerged and local people engaged with, all of which expanded the scope of students’ sojourn experiences. ePortfolio importantly captured students’ perspective

changes and self-awareness, as well as affective and behavioral aspects in learning. Furthermore, a trend toward transition in difficulty levels in students' cultural questions was observed. The evidence suggests the pre-departure training context matches students' sojourn experience but does not sufficiently cover diverse situations and complexity levels of the context of their skill use. According to Jackson (2020), the future research should investigate intercultural discourse in study abroad in a systematic and in depth way to inform "types of interactions" students routinely engage in, "learner speech act behavior in various situations," intercultural misunderstandings and negotiation strategies (p.452), and to use the evidence to provide pre-departure training with examples of real-life scenarios. Although this study is limited by its scale and focus, we hope our examination took a step in that direction using ePortfolios.

ePortfolios enables study abroad researchers and practitioners to open the door of students' life abroad, filled with excitement, struggles, and surprises in their intercultural encounters. By having a clear focus in assessment and monitoring students' learning in a systematic way, complex evidence of learning abroad can become a rich and solid resource for improving pre-departure education and beyond.

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