Study Abroad and the Spiral of Silence: Does encouraging participation create apprehension for those who don’t participate?

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that study abroad strengthens students’ worldviews, reflective thought, and self-confidence (Kitsantas, 2004); accordingly, universities are placing greater emphasis on study abroad. However, little is known about the effect this increased emphasis has on those who do not study abroad. Using spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), this study investigates student participation in courses that invite discussion of international experiences to determine whether students who have not studied abroad experience communication apprehension (CA) as compared to those who have studied abroad. College students at a Midwestern university with a heavy emphasis on study abroad responded to an electronic survey about their study abroad experiences and their behaviors in classes where study abroad is discussed, and ranked their communication apprehension using McCroskey’s scale (1982). It is possible that students who have not studied abroad experience CA when discussion of international experiences occurs in class. Results can be used to foster a more collaborative learning environment for both students who have studied abroad and those who have not.

RESULTS

- RQ1: Students feel more pressure to study abroad when the frequency of messages about study abroad is high, (r = .17 p < .05).
- RQ2: Student perceptions of the value placed on study abroad by the university is positively correlated with perceptions of elite group status, (r = .15 p < .01).
- RQ3: Perceptions that those who study abroad possess elite group status are related to:
  a. perceptions of an academic disadvantage for those who do not study abroad, (r = .31 p < .001).
  b. perceptions of a professional disadvantage for those who do not study abroad, (r = .28 p < .001).
- RQ4: A study abroad experience is related to communication apprehension in university courses in which other cultures are routinely discussed. An independent groups t-test revealed that those who have studied abroad (M = 2.53, SD = .67) were significantly lower in communication apprehension than those who did not study abroad (M = 2.90, t(203) = -2.90, p < .01).

LITERATURE

- Communication Apprehension is defined as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (as cited in McCroskey & Richmond, 1979, p 111).
- Spiral of Silence states that individuals fear social isolation and this fear is a major aspect of the processes of creating public opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).
- The following research questions were presented:
  - **RQ1:** Is frequency of exposure to messages about study abroad associated with students’ felt pressure to study abroad?
  - **RQ2:** Is the perceived value that a university places on study abroad associated with students’ perceptions that those who do study abroad are part of an elite group?
  - **RQ3:** Is the perceived value that a university places on study abroad associated with perceptions of those who do not study abroad as being:
    a. at an academic disadvantage compared to those who did study abroad?
    b. at a professional disadvantage compared to those who did study abroad?
  - **RQ4:** Is a study abroad experience related to communication apprehension in university courses in which other cultures are routinely discussed?

METHOD

- An online questionnaire was conducted and sent to students of a Midwestern Liberal Arts College by e-mail and Facebook invitation.
- Of the 207 participants surveyed, 53 (26%) reported that they have studied abroad and 154 (74%) have not participated in study abroad.

Measures

- McCroskey’s Personal Report of Communication Apprehension was used to measure the students’ degree of communication apprehension within a classroom that routinely discusses other cultures (α = .95, M=58.9, SD=16.75 ).
- Example: “Generally, I am comfortable while participating in a small group discussion in this class.”

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

- Students who have studied abroad have lower levels of communication apprehension in university courses that routinely discuss other cultures than students who have not studied abroad.
- Spiral of silence is traditionally used to explore opinion expression on the macro-social level, but these results point out the utility of using spiral of silence theory to help explain potentially silencing behaviors in the classroom context.

Implications

- The communicative environment about study abroad may create a marginalized group.
- Self-esteem was also explored in connection to communication apprehension. Results suggest that in an environment where study abroad is valued, individuals who have low self-esteem may become a sub-group within the marginalized group of those who do not study abroad.
- Those in positions of power at the university should exercise caution when discussing study abroad to avoid marginalization of students who have not studied abroad, and should inform students of experienced-based learning opportunities other than study abroad.

REFERENCES