

The UT CIBER has developed a set of materials students can use while abroad to perform a self-guided cultural assessment of a new environment. The materials help them anticipate problems they will face in the new context, solve problems that arise while abroad, and learn from the experience. The toolkit can be deployed with minimal introduction and no in-country supervision. It is suitable for study tours and short-term, semester and year-long programs. It is designed to be used by students from any cultural environment going to any destination, and is available free of charge.

Purpose of the Project

The Cultural Analysis Toolkit was developed as a result of the confluence of several trends in study abroad:

1. Study abroad programs are proliferating in higher education, with a greater percentage of U.S. students studying abroad than in the past.
2. Study abroad programs are becoming shorter in duration, offering students less opportunity for cultural experience and adaptation.
3. Inserting a cultural component into study abroad through in-country coursework or training is increasingly advocated by researchers in the field.
4. Economic factors make adding a cultural component impractical for many institutions.

As we looked for materials to use to enhance cultural learning in our own programs, it was difficult to find any that fit this purpose well. Some materials discussed dimensions of cultural awareness, but did not offer solutions for solving real-world problems. Others identified a set of cultural features associated with particular countries or world regions, which reduced students' incentive to analyze their surroundings on their own.

Development

To address this deficit, we developed a set of materials specifically for study abroad programs in which in-country supervision of cultural learning would not be provided. The research and materials development for the project were conducted by Dr. Deirdre Mendez, who drew on her experience in intercultural teaching and corporate consulting to characterize the cultural features in the materials. Dr. Mendez refined the materials in the context of her work teaching intercultural teambuilding to undergraduate students and executives, and the toolkit was formally introduced in summer, 2011.

Criteria for the Materials

Our goal in creating the Cultural Analysis Toolkit project was to offer students a tool for conducting a self-guided cultural assessment of a new environment. Features we considered desirable included the following:

- In addition to helping students to interpret their new surroundings; the tool should:
 - Help them understand their own cultural orientation.
 - Predict their reaction to the new environment based on differences between their own orientation and cultural features of their destination.
 - Suggest methods for problem solving in the new location and strategies for adapting to and learning from alternative perspectives.
- The tool should be easy to understand and use via a brief introductory presentation, with little or no in-country supervision.
- The cultural analysis completed using the materials during study abroad should be replicable in new environments throughout students' lives and careers.
- Use of the tool should provide points of differentiation for students during job recruitment, a potential of study abroad that is often not realized.

How We Introduce the Toolkit

In our programs, the toolkit materials are provided to students as follows:

1. A two-hour presentation introduces the concept of cultural frameworks, introduces the cultural analysis methodology and provides an exercise that familiarizes students with using the materials. Students receive a printed copy of the toolkit at this time.
2. During the introduction, students also receive an assignment instructing them to conduct an in-country analysis of their destination using the methodology outlined in the toolkit.
3. Students conduct and submit the analysis while abroad.
4. When students return, administrators provide guidance on using the methodology in students' future work and on describing their learning from the project to enhance their resumes and interviews.

Application of the Materials to Date

The toolkit was used in spring and summer, 2011 with the following groups of students:

- 184 undergraduate U.S. business students studying abroad in five-week summer programs
- 37 undergraduate business students from Asia, Europe and Latin America studying in the U.S. on a four-week summer program
- 60 U.S. MBA students traveling to Asia on a one-week study tour

In each case, the assignment was tailored to the academic level of the students and length of time abroad. We are happy to discuss assignments appropriate to other student groups.

Sample Materials

A recent version of the Cultural Analysis Toolkit is provided here, as well as an overview of the tool and a sample assignment and student submission. For this assignment, teams of students each conducted an analysis of a single cultural dimension, and their submissions were aggregated for the final report.

Obtaining the Toolkit

The toolkit is updated as we receive feedback from students and faculty who have used it. The University of Texas at Austin CIBER will gladly make the materials available to you at no charge. Please contact us to receive the most current version as well as a copy of the introductory presentation and sample exercises and assignments. We ask that you collaborate with us by providing feedback regarding your experience using the materials so that we may continue to improve them. For additional information, please contact:

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