

Studying Abroad in Shanghai: Exploring How a Living-Learning Community Impacts Students' Sociocultural Understandings of China

**Stella Erbes
Pepperdine University**

**Rebecca Jackson
Pepperdine University**

**Eunice Sim
Pepperdine University**

This is a qualitative case study that explored how a study abroad program based in Shanghai impacted five undergraduates' sociocultural understandings of China. The purpose of this study was to analyze how the different elements of a living-learning community (LLC) influenced students' preconceptions about their host country. One university's international program seamlessly blended coursework, discussion, and travel experiences in order to encourage students to make deep connections between them. Results found that the immersive nature of the LLC led to a transformative and high-impact experience, in which students were able to develop and document their cognitive and behavioral growth over time and change their previously held biases about their host country.

Keywords: study abroad, education, China, international programs, learning environments

INTRODUCTION

Studying abroad offers an immersive living-learning experience that consistently attracts a large number of undergraduates each year. On its website, Pacific University (pseudonym)—a small, private liberal arts college based in southern California—currently boasts that 80% of its student population participates in at least one of its highly regarded international programs during their undergraduate careers. The mission of these study abroad programs is “to provide students [with] a life-changing international experience designed for intellectual, social, personal, and spiritual transformation.” The international setting, combined with a residential learning experience, offers students both classroom and non-classroom spaces to develop in multiple ways.

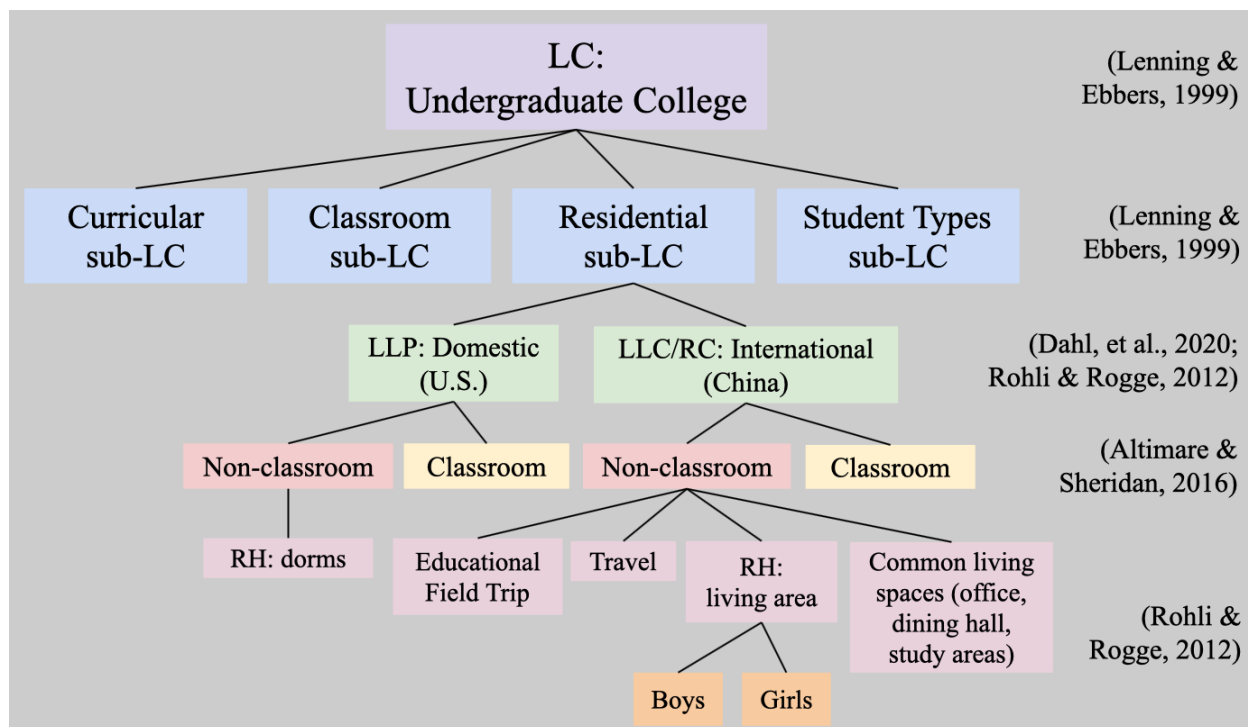
Although there are annual satisfaction surveys for Pacific University's International Programs, empirical studies that capture how these high-impact programs affect student development are scarce. Over the course of one semester, our study collected qualitative data from five American college sophomores who were enrolled in an Instructional Design class in the Shanghai International Program. The purpose of

this study was to investigate how a living-learning community (LLC) in Shanghai influenced students' sociocultural understandings of China.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Researchers previously conceptualized many different learning community models (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Stassen, 2003). For the purposes of this study, we adopted the framework outlined by Lenning and Ebbers (1999) which organized a learning community (LC) into four different sub-categories: 1) Curricular, 2) Classroom, 3) Residential, and 4) Student Types. The researchers cautioned that the categories could overlap and are not mutually exclusive (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1
LEARNING COMMUNITY (LC) DIAGRAM



This study centers on Pacific University, whose residential learning community consists of two types of learning environments. The first type is a domestic living-learning program (LLP), which is a traditional college setting where undergraduates live in conventional residential halls (RH) and attend classes on campus at its southern California location (Dahl, et al., 2020). The second type is a living-learning community (LLC) located in one of its six international locations. Our investigation defined an LLC as “groups of students, faculty members and Student Life staff who partner to integrate a shared classroom learning experience and residence hall living experience” (Rohli & Rogge, 2012, p. 82). In contrast, faculty do not live in the same residential hall with the students in an LLP. Each LLC is a residential college (RC), where classrooms, faculty offices and residence, student affairs’ offices, non-classroom learning spaces, and students’ residential halls are all located within close proximity of each other (Altimare & Sheridan, 2016). Wawrzynski, et al. (2009) found that “living-learning communities are one way to integrate the classroom and residence hall environments, blurring the boundaries of the classroom and students’ co-curricular activities into a seamless whole” (p. 138). Students naturally engage in deep learning because LLCs/RCs blend traditional instruction with common living spaces (i.e., dining hall, study areas, program

offices), gender-designated residential halls (i.e., bedrooms, bathrooms), and travel spaces (i.e., personal travel or program-sponsored travel).

To this end, Pacific University has developed residential colleges (RCs) situated in unrivaled locations in Argentina, China, England, Germany, Italy, and Switzerland. This project focused specifically on the LLC housed in Shanghai, China. Approximately 45 students participate in each international program, where students must enroll in a full load (12-18 semester units) of general education courses. A faculty-in-residence is selected from the flagship institution and is housed in the RC. Additionally, local program staff are actively involved in planning curricular and non-curricular activities. In the Shanghai program, four main buildings make up the residential hall: Building 1 - the main office and lobby, one classroom, one floor of female dormitories, and the faculty apartment; Building 2 - two female dormitories, the community room, and laundry room; Building 3 - the dining room and common area; Building 4 - male dormitories and one large classroom. One of the highlights each semester in every international program is a one-week educational field trip to a distinctive location that students, faculty, and staff all travel to together. Destinations have included fascinating cities such as Tibet and Kyoto. These LLCs were recognized consecutively for the past five years for having met the “Standards of Good Practice of Study Abroad,” which include commitments to: 1) Mission, 2) Student Learning and Development, 3) Academics, 4) Student Selection and Preparation for Learning Abroad, 5) Student Code of Conduct, 6) Policies and Procedures, 7) Organizational and Program Resources, 8) Health, Safety, Security and Risk Management, and 9) Ethics (Forum on Education Abroad, 2011).

Benefits of LLCs

LLCs present a plethora of benefits to college students in their everyday lives, which stem from their common characteristics of shared knowledge, shared knowing, and shared responsibility (Altimare & Sheridan, 2016; Tinto, 2000). This residential learning model not only provides “students with a community to connect personal, professional, and academic experiences on a daily basis,” (McClanahan, 2014, p. 191), but it also produces “more social interaction and extracurricular involvement, higher retention and graduation rates, and better development of critical thinking skills than LCs” (Rohli and Rogge, 2012, p. 84). There has been a significant amount of research about learning communities and their effects upon student behavior in terms of retention, achievement, and social interaction (Dahl, et al., 2020; McClanahan, 2014; Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). Tinto (2000) also confirmed that students involved in LLCs were more likely to form their own self-supporting groups, engage more with others more outside of the classroom, participate more actively in the classroom, demonstrate greater understanding and longer retention of instructional knowledge, and advocate more for collaborative learning. However, fewer studies reveal empirical evidence about which specific elements of a living-learning community have influenced students’ sociocultural intelligence.

Benefits of Studying Abroad + I-E-O Model

Prior to studying abroad, many students have preconceptions of their host country. For example, Tian and Lowe (2014) confirmed that students had negative thoughts and expectations of a hostile or oppressive environment in China, which they attributed to American media. Multiple factors influence our opinions of cultures that are different from our own. McClanahan (2014) found that studying abroad contributed positively to “increased knowledge of other cultures, . . . reduction of prejudice, an ability to think critically about social issues, and increased confidence in uncertain situations” (p. 191). The potential for an LLC to transform students’ misconceptions about other cultures is encouraging, yet leaves us wondering: What specific elements from a living-learning environment impact student development?

We have adopted Astin’s (1984) Input-Environment-Outcome (I-E-O) Model to frame our study. The I-E-O Model “describe[d] how inputs (demographics and pre-collegiate experiences) and collegiate environments influence vital student outcomes” (Dahl, et al., 2020, p. 2). We considered how American students’ inputs affected their learning environments and ultimately their outcomes after participating in an LLC while studying in China. In our investigation, students’ inputs included not only personal factors listed in Astin’s 1984 study like gender, nationality, race, and high school GPA, but also other sources that

affected their views before entering the new environment like media, personal assumptions, and program alumni and staff. The environmental factors are the elements of the LLC that students self-reported as playing a significant role in shaping their sociocultural perceptions of China (Figure 2). Lastly, the outcomes revealed how students' sociocultural understandings of China were confirmed or transformed from their living-learning experiences.

FIGURE 2
INPUT-ENVIRONMENT-OUTCOME MODEL BASED ON ASTIN (1984)



METHODS

In fall 2018, qualitative data were gathered while students were enrolled in an Instructional Design course in Pacific University's Shanghai program. This class met once a week for three hours, adopting a seminar-driven approach as students engaged in discussion about assigned literature, educational theories, guided reflections, travel, and visits to local Chinese schools with the goal of achieving a greater understanding of Chinese culture and educational systems. Given that students and faculty shared experiences seamlessly in and out of the traditional classroom within the LLC, the Instructional Design class provided students a space to metacognitively reflect, discuss, and document how various elements of their living-learning experience affected their understandings about China. The course studied the psychological foundations of the teaching and learning process, which included researching how learning environments affected student outcomes. Recognizing the opportunity and advantages of studying education in China, the education professor strategically shaped coursework to maximize the benefits of the international experience. For example, students visited local Chinese K-12 classrooms to observe the teaching and learning process, and took part in reflective discussions to unpack how elements of the LLC were shaping students' understandings of China as a regular part of the weekly course. Throughout the semester, students' responses to guided reflections on digital forums, written assignments, and in-class discussions were captured on both a collaborative Google document and on poster paper to answer the following questions:

1. INPUT: What did you know about China before participating in the Shanghai living-learning community?
2. INPUT: What shaped your preconceptions about China?
3. ENVIRONMENT: Which elements of your living-learning community shaped your sociocultural understandings of China?

4. **OUTCOME:** What were your new understandings of Chinese education, government, people, and traditions?

Data Sources

Five college sophomores (four females and one male) participated in this qualitative study while enrolled in an education course that explored multiple perspectives of the teaching and learning process, including topics like cognitive, social, and moral development, behavioral learning theories, and learning environments. By applying a grounded theory approach, our research team looked for “small chunks of material that might be put into categories, which [could] be provisionally labeled or named, and for wider themes and patterns which [helped] organize the categories” (Robson, 2007, p. 131). Each week students discussed how their pre-conceptions of China were changing and what caused the transformation. This, in turn, prompted the students to point to specific elements of their living-learning experience that helped shape their new understandings of their host country. For example, after visiting local Chinese schools as an education class, students reflected upon how this experience offered them an insider perspective to observe aspects of the Chinese educational system firsthand. Field trips to local Chinese schools gave students the opportunity to observe classroom instruction and to chat with Chinese students, teachers, and administrators. The students’ reflective data was then coded with a particular highlighted color and systemically categorized by labels such as “education.” This color coding method helped organize and analyze students’ responses. Patterns and themes emerged from the data to reveal that students’ reflections centered mainly upon their changing perceptions of four primary areas: China’s education, government, people, and traditions.

RESULTS

Results indicated that students gained new understandings about the Chinese government, people, education, and culture from their living-learning experiences. Moreover, students confirmed that participating in an LLC while studying abroad immersed them in a seamless web of learning which holistically contributed to their growth. Rather than singling out one particular element of the LLC, students attributed their development to several valuable program elements which synergistically worked together to create an immersive learning and growing experience for them.

Preconceptions Revealed

In response to our first question, “What did you know about China before participating in the Shanghai living-learning community?” students’ responses organically fell into one of four categories: education, government, people, and culture. As Tian and Lowe (2014) suggested, students generally reported negative thoughts and expectations of a hostile or oppressive environment in China, which they attributed largely to American media. For example, four students assumed that the Chinese educational system was strict, which induced a great deal of stress for students. Two students also believed that Chinese schools did not promote critical thinking; instead, they adopted rote memorization methods. In regard to the government, all five students associated communism with the Chinese government. Four students confessed that they did not know the true definition of communism, but they equated the term to something that was “bad.” Additionally, all five students believed that Chinese people were intelligent, and three students expected Chinese people to treat foreigners rudely and their elders respectfully. Culturally, three students shared that there is a social hierarchy that exists in China where younger people must respect their elders, and males hold higher power and authority than females. Two students also noted that the Chinese people displayed a conservative wardrobe. These were students’ basic preconceptions of China before participating in this study abroad program.

Sources of Preconceptions

Interestingly, when asked what contributed to their sociocultural understandings of China, students identified the following sources:

- general priming or unknown (5)
- media (i.e., movies, television, and social media) (5)
- input of family (4)
- international program alumni & staff (3)
- personal assumptions (2)
- school (1)

In regard to topics like the government and communism, students shared that family members, media, and general priming cultivated their fear of the government and living in a communist country. Yet, none of the students could define communism, and none of the students' families had ever traveled to China. It was evident that the sources that shaped students' preconceptions of China were based largely on stereotypes and personal assumptions.

Valuable Elements of the LLC

While studying abroad in Shanghai, all students referred to the following program elements as sources in their LLC that inspired them when deeply reflecting upon the education, government, people, and traditions of China:

- Assistant Program Director - This individual assisted our education class with local field trips to Chinese schools and explained the education system in China. He described issues of unequal access to high-quality education and the impact of high-stakes testing for college admissions in China. His insider's perspective regarding education and life in China offered our class unique experiences and insights that allowed students not only to observe Chinese classrooms but also to discuss the educational system with local Chinese people.
- Classes taught by local Chinese professors - Students appreciated taking classes that were taught by local Chinese professors who offered a native perspective on various issues. Topics regarding sociology, international relations, and business were discussed in the classes and then applied or observed first hand as students interacted with local Chinese people, traveled within or outside of the country, and discussed their classwork within the LLC.
- Educational Field Trip - For the educational field trip (EFT), the students traveled to Tibet and visited several Buddhist temples and monasteries like the Potala Palace. Being exposed to a different faith tradition and watching local people demonstrate their strong faith through traditional rituals like bowing for long distances throughout the city showed the students how deeply committed the Buddhists were. Being in Tibet also inspired questions about the separation of Tibet from China and the details of this part of Chinese history and the influences of the Communist party in this area. The strong tension between Tibet and its fear of the Chinese government could be felt more intensely while visiting this region.
- Field trips to local Chinese schools - Students were able to interact with Chinese students, teachers, and administrators during field trips to local schools. Students observed a Chinese elementary teacher deliver a scripted English lesson. Students also took a tour of various schools, noting an outstanding art program and observing the well-behaved, happy students. All schools were very clean and safe. The instructors were friendly, warm, and welcoming.
- Living Abroad - This international program experience required students to carry out daily routines apart from their families for an extensive time. Living in the city immersed students in the culture. Learning how to navigate daily routines like buying groceries or food, figuring out public transportation, and organizing social past times exposed students to the local people and the culture.
- Personal Travel - Students were able to learn about Chinese culture and history by traveling on their own over the weekends to famous cities like Beijing. These opportunities helped expose them to more local people and historical sites. By visiting different locations, students could observe the traditions and customs of other regions in the country.
- Residential Hall - Given that all the students in the program and the faculty-in-residence lived in the same residential hall, learning naturally occurred in non-traditional settings. Students

regularly discussed topics from their classes or personal experiences in the dining hall, in their dormitories, in the faculty member’s apartment, and in the hallways. Therefore, learning spaces were blurred not only between classrooms but also in social settings. It was common to see learning connections being made across classes, travel experiences, and daily living activities.

Transformative Outcomes

After participating in this living-learning community in China for one semester, students found that their understandings of Chinese education, government, people, and traditions were better informed and/or had changed from their initial pre-conceptions (Table 1). Various elements of the study abroad experience offered unique opportunities for students to have an insider’s perspective about the country rather than accepting previously held stereotypes and misconceptions.

TABLE 1
STUDENTS’ SOCIOCULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA

| | Before | After |
|------------|--|--|
| Education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harsh Teachers • No critical thinking skills • Stressful; High pressure • Strict systems | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathetic teachers • No critical thinking skills • Stressful due to high-stakes testing • Military education/structured classroom |
| Government | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communist government is bad • Dominant military presence • Fearful to work around • Strong censorship by government | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communism (mono-party) works • Military presence noted but not prevalent • Safe to walk around • Strong censorship by government |
| People | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technologically advanced • Crowded/over-populated • Lack of ethnic diversity • Not welcoming | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technologically advanced • Crowded; Don’t practice personal space • Lack of ethnic diversity • Limited social warmth towards foreigners |
| Traditions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservative wardrobe • Traditional - respect for elders • Rich cultural history | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservative wardrobe • Traditional – respect for elders • Rich cultural history; Festivals impact calendar |

Education

In regard to education, conversations with the Assistant Program Director and local teachers and administrators combined with classroom observations confirmed students’ original beliefs that the Chinese education system is strict and that high-stakes testing induces great stress among Chinese high school students. After visiting classrooms, students were able to ask questions about classroom management issues, and the Chinese educators shared that they have very few problems with classroom discipline. If there is a situation with a student who misbehaves or does not perform at an adequate level, then the parents are notified and the situation is usually resolved immediately. Respectful classroom behavior is expected, and teachers are highly revered. Though it was evident that Chinese schools were run efficiently, this did not mean that Chinese teachers fit the stereotype of being mean and harsh. On the contrary, the interactions with all the Chinese educators that the students had met during the semester were pleasant and welcoming. Similar to the findings of McClanahan (2014), one student shared, “It’s amazing how interacting with real

people destroys the biases we tend to hold. After interacting with people in Shanghai, including my Chinese professors, I have a totally new idea of who Chinese people are beyond just the stereotypes I grew up seeing on TV.” This indicated that the LLC helped reshape the students’ misinformed preconceptions and expanded their cultural intelligence.

Sadly, students’ ideas that Chinese education does not promote critical thinking and applies mostly rote learning was evidenced in a lesson that students observed at a local elementary school where the instructor used a scripted English lesson. Chinese students were not allowed to offer responses that did not fit the English script. This is only one example of rote learning that was observed, but conversations with local college students and local people also confirmed these preconceptions.

Students also learned that both America and China struggle with the issue of unequal access to education due to socioeconomic status. Students recalled discussions with local school administrators, homework assignments from the education class, lessons from their sociology class, and conversations with program staff that illuminated their understanding of access to education. A student recalled, “According to our sociology professor, it is hard for rural [Chinese] students to make it through school, if they do it is even harder for them to get to a college, and if they make it that far, they will not be able to go to certain universities.” Though these inequities are typically raised when taking this education class in America, being in China allowed students to investigate these social issues on an international level.

Government

In terms of the government, students felt very safe while studying in Shanghai and did not feel a dominant military presence in the city. This opposed the preconceptions that family members warned students about in terms of being careful because China is a communist country. Interestingly, students shared how they saw that a mono-system of government like communism may be needed to manage the extraordinary number of people who live in China. These types of discussions were also conducted in students’ classes and conversations with program staff and local people. It was interesting for students to witness how the communist government could make decisions like relocating residents to create the Olympic village in Beijing without any pushback from the Chinese people since democratic practices are not in place. It was understood that the government was a dominant and powerful force, but students did not feel fearful of it while studying in Shanghai. In fact, all students reported feeling very safe walking around the city.

People

Living abroad gave students daily opportunities to interact with Chinese people. Students’ initial understanding of Chinese people was that they were smart, and interactions with an array of professional people (e.g., professors, program staff, college students, local school administrators and teachers) allowed students to engage with many intelligent individuals. During classroom observations in local schools, Chinese students demonstrated their respect for teachers and through personal interactions with the program staff, students were able to learn more about how Chinese people are particularly respectful of authority figures and elders. Navigating daily routines like public transportation and social activities helped confirm students’ conceptions that Chinese people’s social skills can be perceived to be inappropriate in contrast to the norms and etiquette of the students’ home culture. For example, on the metro, in trains, and in public areas, Chinese people regularly took videos or photos of American students without permission. In comparison to the diverse ethnic representation that can be found in America, there is a lack of such diversity in China so the people are intrigued by foreigners. Navigating daily interactions with local people and living in an unfamiliar country for an extended period of time helps gain greater insider knowledge about the people and their customs.

Traditions

The rich traditions of Chinese culture can be experienced up close when studying abroad. Before living in Shanghai, students’ comments about Chinese traditions were limited to how people dressed and how they respectfully treated elders. After being immersed in the culture, students experienced Chinese customs

firsthand. While studying abroad, students planned travel around Chinese holidays, ate traditional ethnic foods, and learned about the history linked to special travel destinations throughout the country. After participating in this living-learning experience, students' understanding of Chinese culture has been expanded to include new knowledge about traditional foods, holidays, festivals, and historical events. This confirms that LLCs expand students' global worldviews so that they are not limited by their prejudices and social priming.

CONCLUSION

This study will benefit Pacific University's International Programs Office and community by documenting which elements of these high-impact international programs have contributed to the development of its student participants. The results will assist with program development, curricular planning, and student recruitment. Additionally, this project is beneficial to researchers and practitioners because it confirms the transformative experience that living-learning study abroad communities offer. This particular community promoted a synergistic experience that offers organic opportunities to deepen, refine, and transform knowledge. Studying abroad offers students an independent lifestyle, far away from their loved ones and familiar customs. In this LLC, individuals take classes, travel internationally, and live with local people; whereas, in a typical collegiate resident hall, all the aspects of learning are not as enmeshed or commonly shared. Instead, various elements of one's learning experience like education, social relationships, and personal lives easily exist in silos. On the other hand, this LLC promoted a seamless web of learning that occurred not only in classrooms but also in unique learning spaces like dinner tables, dorm rooms, airports, and supermarkets. This international program accomplished its goal to deconstruct cultural barriers by offering an unparalleled learning environment that naturally blends coursework, discussion, and travel. Given the current international relations of China, analyzing the impact of this study abroad program is timely. It is clear that living-learning communities can serve as an educational pathway to reshape students' preconceptions and to develop more globally-minded citizens.

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