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Chapter 7

This Isn't What I Expected in Cuba: Challenging the Imaginative Geographies of Students Through Study Abroad

James Chaney

Note: Section II includes Chapters 4-14. These chapters use a standardized template to discuss the details of their respective study abroad programs and reference Deardorff's (2012) framework for intercultural competencies. The use of this template and the intercultural competencies framework are described in the Section II introduction. All courses in this section (except for Chapter 6) were taught through Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), a mid-sized state school located in Murfreesboro, Tennessee (USA).

This chapter covers the short-term study abroad course *Global Studies: Special Problems and Topics—Cuba in the 21st Century* (GS 3200). The main goal of this program is to challenge the imaginative geographies of students in a study abroad context. A unique aspect of this course is its development in different academic subjects (e.g., geography, political science), which casts a wider net for recruitment. The program's curriculum is designed around service learning, place-based education, and active learning activities. This 12-day study abroad program includes the cities of Havana, Viñales, Trinidad, Santa Clara, and Varadero (the itinerary is listed in Appendix 7.1). The program ran in January 2016 and 2017 and again in June 2018 with a total of 44 participants.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

In both research and pedagogy, geographers emphasize firsthand experience through fieldwork. Accordingly, going abroad presents a variety of experiential opportunities for geographers to educate students about other societies, places, and ways of life. Study abroad programs that require frequent interactions with the local denizens in another country encourage students to challenge their preconceived notions about the world, appreciate cultural differences, and enhance their understanding of global processes and outcomes (Jokisch, 2009). Furthermore, programs that prioritize immersion activities involving casual, day-to-day activities of host community members give students a unique frame of reference regarding the routines and challenges of everyday people in societies outside the United States (Keese, 2013).

Geographers often approach the presumptions that one society holds about other societies through the concept of imaginative geographies (or imagined geographies). Imaginative geographies refer to how humans perceive and represent other places, peoples, cultures, and landscapes that, “articulate [their] desires, fantasies, and fears...and the grids of power between them and their “Others”” (Gregory et al., 2009, p. 370). The origin of the concept can be traced to Said’s (1978) seminal critique of Western society’s depiction of the “Orient,” which referred to the lands and cultures located east/southeast of Europe. Said’s work on imaginative geographies was pivotal in the establishment of postcolonialism as a focus of study and has been re-conceptualized to analyze a wider range of geopolitical relationships and issues. As Beech (2014) interprets it, “imaginative geographies arise from perceived power relations between two nations or regions, where the more dominant of the two produces representations of the ‘Other’” (p. 174). Thus contextually, imaginative geographies can operate asymmetrically

within an “us versus them” perspective, where one society or members of a society compare what they understand as familiar or “normal” regarding their culture or ways of life with the norms, politics, or customs of another society, which they see as exotic, different, or even undeveloped and unsophisticated. Since Cuba has long held a prominent place in the imaginative geographies of U.S. society, it affords students the perfect study abroad location to question, analyze, and rework these deeply embedded misconceptions based on unequal power relations and sociocultural differences.

While the pedagogical framework of this program covers a host of topics and issues to give students a broad understanding of the development, character, and struggles of the Cuban people, my focus in this chapter is to elaborate on the experiential learning activities and critical reflection assignments we employ during and after our trip to promote cross-cultural understanding, hone intercultural skills, and develop global awareness. Our strategy to achieve this utilizes an instructional methodology that challenges the imaginative geographies which U.S. citizens often have of Cuban society. That is, we set out to encourage students to critically think about their preconceptions of, and assumptions about life in Cuba. Additionally, we encourage students to consider how the dominant narratives about Cuba, which have been and still are being constructed and conveyed in U.S. media and politics, influence their perceptions. Our method is twofold. First, we have students participate in different types of experiential learning practices as identified by Wurdinger and Carlson (2010), such as service learning, place-based education, and active learning. Second, we require critical reflection discussions and exercises that take different forms during and after the program. For example, after each day’s activities in Cuba, we debrief as a group to discuss our experiences and perspectives.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The purpose of this course is to explore contemporary Cuba, delve further into the challenges and changes taking place on the island, and critically engage the imaginative geographies that U.S. society holds about Cuba. As such, the pedagogical framework of this program is designed to cover a host of topics and issues to give students a comprehensive understanding of the development, character, and struggles of the Cuban people. This requires an understanding of the historical context and uniqueness of the problems the country faces. The program combines experiential learning activities (visits to museums and historic sites, landscape interpretation, local guest speakers, volunteering with a community-based organization) with readings, discussions, and research before and after the field experience. The two required texts are *Cuban Landscapes: Heritage, Memory, and Place* by Joseph L. Scarpaci and Armando H. Portela (2009) and *Cuba: What Everyone Needs to Know* by Julia E. Sweig (2016). These predeparture readings provide a comprehensive knowledge base needed to understand and appreciate the places we visit and issues we engage with while on the island. Homestays and engagement with local Cubans in urban and rural communities are fundamental components of this program as they give students a unique frame of reference regarding the daily routines and challenges of everyday people in societies outside the United States. These types of encounters broaden a student's worldview and enlighten their perception of "other" people(s) and places.

Course Learning Outcomes

At the end of this course, the students will:

- a. Be able to read cultural landscapes and understand the sociocultural, economic, and political processes that form them.
- b. Understand the complexity of other societies in relation to geopolitics, history, geography, economics, and culture.
- c. Understand the role media and popular culture play in the construction and maintenance of national and cultural identities.
- d. Be able to recognize, analyze, and reflect on the impact of one's culture and society on one's values, assumptions, perceptions, expectations, and behavior.

COURSE HISTORY

Cuba: Perhaps no other country in Latin America shares such a long, complex, and often contentious relationship with the United States. Since its days as a colonial possession of Spain until the present, Cuban society has been influenced by the geopolitical and economic interests of the mainland United States (Chomsky et al., 2019). During the first half of the 20th century, Cuba developed into a popular tourist destination for Americans, while U.S. companies gained control of much of the island's economy. However, following Cuba's 1959 Revolution and its geopolitical pivot towards the Soviet Union, U.S.-Cuba relations deteriorated. In response, U.S. media and political discourse about Cuba turned negative, altering public perceptions about Cuban society. And, as U.S. sentiments soured, misconceptions and uninformed opinions

developed about the island nation and its people (Chomsky et al., 2019). For these reasons, Cuba is a compelling destination for any educational endeavor concerning international politics, intercultural understanding, and global awareness.

My interest in Cuba originated in 2007 when I began working on a book project that explored the historical, cultural, and migratory ties between Cuba and New Orleans. As travel restrictions between Cuba and the United States loosened during the Obama administration (2009-2017), I traveled to the island for research purposes. During my three-week stay there, I made several important contacts and started contemplating a short-term study abroad that would include both excursions to well-known sites and interactions with Cubans in places outside of the typical tourist's gaze. As a cultural geographer who specializes in Latin America, my objective for this program was to explore the sociocultural fabric of the island and to interpret how it is represented in historical and current landscapes. Yet, Cuba is well-suited for a myriad of didactic foci, and any educational excursion to the island aiming to examine its society should include a political component in its curriculum. Simply put, political and economic interests are so deeply entwined throughout Cuba's colonial and post-colonial history that they cannot be excluded from any contemporary analysis of the nation and its people. For that reason, I asked a political scientist from my university to co-lead the program. This colleague conducts research on Latin American politics and was particularly interested in creating a course that looked at the impact that Cuba's 1959 Revolution had on its identity. This idea complemented the program's theme and was easy to integrate into its course of study. Furthermore, it facilitated an interdepartmental and interdisciplinary collaboration in the creation of the course used in the program.

We were awarded money from MTSU's Office of International Affairs to travel to Cuba for a site evaluation during the summer of 2015. On our preliminary visit, we met with several of my contacts to discuss our objectives for the trip, which included understanding the geopolitical situation of Cuba and how it affects the livelihoods of everyday Cubans. Our method to achieve this was through immersion, utilizing homestays, service and place-based learning activities, landscape analysis during excursions, and free time to explore non-tourist places and spaces in the locations we visit. My primary contact in Havana serves as a coordinator for Candela Tours, a U.S.-based tour operator run by a geography professor at Texas State University. Candela Tours was our third-party provider and handled our logistics (including flights between Fort Lauderdale and Havana), visas, lodging, excursions, and some meals. Since Candela Tours is run by another academic, our pedagogical approaches were easy to implement into the program's itinerary. Candela Tours utilized the "People-to-People" category, which was one of the authorized travel options to Cuba through the U.S. Department of Treasury before being restricted in 2019 (Aguilera, 2019).

COURSE LOGISTICS

Although I had initially planned to offer this course under a geography designation, I opted to use a 3-credit hour *Global Studies: Special Problems and Topics* (GS 3200) course and titled it "Cuba in the 21st Century." This designation meets the upper-division course requirements for all majors and minors in my department and allows me to attract more students. My colleague and I have cross-listed the course with a political science course titled *Advanced Studies in Comparative Politics* (PS 4850) to meet the requirements of political science and international relations majors and minors. We also work with a Spanish professor at our university who offers

Spanish majors and minors participating in our program a 3-credit hour upper division independent study course. Therefore, certain students can earn a total of 6 university credit hours. This also allows us to cast a wider net for recruitment. The program's course requirements include readings, participant observation, reflection assignments, and three post-trip meetings.

PRE-PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

For the first two years of this program, the trip took place in January before the spring semester started. As a result of this scheduling, other than a predeparture orientation, we were unable to assign in-person activities before the trip. We also followed this schedule during the third year, though this took place in June. Our predeparture meeting covers the program's itinerary, planning for a service-learning activity, how to pack, common etiquette with host families, how to convert currency, and what to expect in Cuba. Students are required to purchase two texts before the trip: *Cuban Landscapes: Heritage, Memory, and Place* (Scarpaci & Portela, 2009) and *Cuba: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Sweig, 2016). The first book examines the human-environmental relationship between Cuba and its people. More importantly for this course, the book's authors lay out how identity and politics are displayed in landscapes. This text was a great companion for students as many of the places we visited were discussed in its chapters. The second book focuses on the geopolitical history between Cuba and the United States. Both books serve as necessary primers for the program and give students a foundation for many of the themes we engage with during and after the trip. In their formative journal entries and summative research paper, students must include citations and information from both texts.

We also require students to watch the documentary *Black in Latin America: Cuba, The Next Revolution* (Pollack et al., 2011) before departure. This documentary investigates how the concept of race is/was constructed in Cuban society and how Cuba has tried to mitigate racism since the 1959 Revolution. This documentary is found on the course's D2L page (the learning management platform used at our university) along with instructions for keeping a journal in Cuba and the final essay assignment. The final essay assignment is a research paper involving a geopolitical, sociocultural, environmental, or economic issue affecting contemporary Cuban society. Students have the freedom to choose whatever topic they wish to research; however, it must be approved by the program's instructors and based on questions from assigned materials and field observations.

CLASS ACTIVITIES & INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCIES

Homestays

Homestays are an important component of the program's experiential, place-based learning process. While studying abroad gives students the opportunity to learn about local customs and practice a language with native speakers, Cuban homestays also enable students to experience firsthand the significant impact that the U.S. embargo has had on the day-to-day activities of regular Cubans. The 60-year-old embargo restricts almost all U.S.-owned or majority-owned businesses from trading with or operating in Cuba (Sweig, 2016). As a result, Cuba has been isolated from global commerce and suffered from continual shortages in products such as basic foodstuffs, building materials, machine and automobile parts, and so on. Likewise, the embargo makes it harder for Cuba to access international financial resources, which, in turn, significantly

stifles the island’s economic development. Since students stay in the homes of native Cubans, they directly observe how international sanctions complicate the daily lives of their hosts and the human toll of the embargo on Cuban society.

Students report that staying with host families gives them a unique perspective on how Cubans overcome challenges brought on by shortages and economic hardship. Some students accompany their hosts on errands, helping them find daily essentials such as toilet paper, food, or shampoo by visiting state-run stores in Havana or by buying products on Cuba’s informal market. Participating in these activities teaches students adaptation skills, empathy, and cultural understanding. The intercultural competencies gained by the students through this activity are listed in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1. Intercultural Competencies for Homestays

Knowledge	Skills	Attitudes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural self-awareness/understanding • Understanding other’s worldviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Listen, observe, & evaluate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy • Adaptability • Patience • Withholding judgment

Navigating Havana

With over two million inhabitants, Havana is the largest city in Cuba. Like other urban areas in Latin America, the city is compact and designed in an orthogonal grid-like pattern with narrow streets, alleyways, and plazas. Yet, while seemingly organized, Havana can be disorienting to first-time visitors. For that reason, one of the first activities for students is to walk the neighborhood of Vedado with me and learn about the different transportation options, as well as

the locations of Havana's Wi-Fi zones. The main transportation options in Havana are coco taxis, private taxis, *almendrones* (ridesharing taxis), state-run public taxis (Cubataxis), public buses, and city tour buses that follow a very limited route. Each transportation option has advantages; however, destinations and budgets must be considered when choosing how to move around the city. For example, metro buses are inexpensive (10 pesos or \$.40). Yet, they are crowded, and deciphering bus routes is confusing. Cubataxis are nicer vehicles with air conditioning that can take passengers anywhere in the city, but they are expensive. Coco taxis charge between \$3 to \$5 to travel between neighborhoods and their main station is a few blocks from our homestays.

While showing students the different transportation options in Havana, I explain how to access the internet. Most homestays do not have access to the internet, and, because of the embargo, U.S. cellular plans do not cover Cuba. Therefore, students must use Cuba's public Wi-Fi platform which can only be accessed in certain public locations and hotels. To access the internet, students must use a Nauta card that can be purchased at any Telecommunications Company of Cuba (ETECSA) offices. I walk with students to an ETECSA office and help them buy their first card.

Most MTSU students participating in this program are unfamiliar with public transportation; thus, relying on Havana's public transportation options is an immersive problem-solving activity that requires figuring out how to be mobile in an unfamiliar city. Likewise, students must also engage with Cubans to both buy Nauta cards and find Wi-Fi zones which are rarely marked. These tasks promote information gathering and cognitive flexibility in a new environment as described in Table 7.2.

Table 7.2. Intercultural Competencies for Navigating Havana

Knowledge	Skills	Attitudes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Culture-specific knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Problem-solving• Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Risk-taking• Cognitive flexibility• Stepping out of one's comfort zone

Service Learning through Volunteer Work

Kaye (2004) states that a service-learning activity requires three components: 1) planning to assist in filling a community need, 2) action, and 3) reflection on experience and outcome. We incorporate these three components into our volunteer activity restoring a school in Havana with the nonprofit organization Proyecto Espiral. In the program's predeparture meeting, we discuss the activity, what it entails, and what supplies we can contribute from the United States. Considering that certain supplies (e.g., paint brushes, latex gloves, tools) are not readily available in Cuba, students are asked to plan among themselves what supplies they will bring. We meet with local Espiral volunteers at a school in the morning and begin working on the restoration project. Later, we eat lunch with the volunteers. This gives students a chance to converse informally with Espiral members—most of whom are of the same age.

This is one of the most popular activities of the program. During debriefing sessions in Cuba and the in-class seminars after returning to the United States, students regularly convey that they enjoyed getting to help with a community project and working alongside local volunteers. Some students exchange contact information to stay in touch with the Cuban volunteers, and they often plan to meet up with them during their free time in Havana. This activity is designed to develop intercultural competencies such as relationship building, teamwork with people of a different culture, empathy, and conversing in another language since

most of the volunteers do not speak English. The intercultural competencies from this task are listed in Table 7.3.

Table 7.3. Intercultural Competencies for Service Learning through Volunteer Work

Knowledge	Skills	Attitudes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding other worldviews • Academic content knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teamwork • Communication • Listen, observe, & evaluate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect • Empathy

Voluntary Outings with Locals

We purposely organized the program to give students free time at night and on some afternoons to encourage them to explore Cuba on their own. Although this is not an assigned task, students must venture out on their own to buy food or personal items or for entertainment options not included in the program. Because Cuba is generally a safe country, students (in pairs or groups) are relatively safe to go out without a faculty leader (Sweig, 2016). In fact, students often make friends with the Cubans we interact with during the program activities or with members of their host families. The Cubans we meet are often open to inviting students to see and experience Cuba outside the program's itinerary, like concerts, salsa dancing, or spending time on the Malecon (Havana's famous boardwalk). Thus, students get the chance to plan their own cultural activities that fit their specific interests while interacting leisurely with local Cubans.

This non-programmed task is empowering for students in that they are free to decide what they want to do. These types of engagements help develop curiosity, discovery, and risk-taking by making students step outside their comfort zone. Likewise, students must utilize their

language skills to successfully interact with Cubans while on their own. The specific intercultural competencies acquired through voluntary outings are listed in Table 7.4.

Table 7.4. Intercultural Competencies for Voluntary Outings with Locals

Knowledge	Skills	Attitudes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural-specific knowledge • Cultural self-awareness/understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curiosity • Discovery • Risk-taking • Stepping out of one's comfort zone

Place-Based Learning in Viñales

During our first full day in Viñales, students spend the afternoon with a family on their tobacco farm learning about tobacco cultivation and cigar production. That evening, the family prepares dinner, and we eat with them at their home. Before arriving at the farm, students are required to read from their assigned texts about tobacco landscapes and farming and to prepare questions to ask family members about their farm, profession, and life in general. Students also are asked to observe how life in rural Cuba differs from that in Havana. This activity allows students to juxtapose urban and rural life on the island. Students note how their conversations with residents in Viñales are different from those they have in Havana, suggesting that perspectives seem more relaxed. Yet students observe that life in a Cuban farm community is hard work. For example, tobacco farmers are mandated to sell 90% of their tobacco crop to the government for a set low price. The remaining 10% is sold to tourists and is an important source of additional income (Chomsky et al. 2019) . Consequently, farmers are reliant on tourism and must develop ways to market their product, which is usually in the form of cigars. This activity teaches students specific knowledge about agriculture in Cuba and gives them a cultural understanding

of rural life on the island. Table 7.5 outlines the intercultural competencies gained while visiting a tobacco farm in Viñales.

Table 7.5. Intercultural Competencies for Place-based Learning in Viñales

Knowledge	Skills	Attitudes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic content knowledge • Cultural-specific knowledge • Understanding others' worldviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Observe, listen, & evaluate • Analyze, interpret, & relate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect • Empathy • Withhold judgment

POST-PROGRAM ACTIVITIES AND ASSIGNMENTS

Study abroad programs should be conceptualized as an immersive and introspective undertaking where students apply a critical perspective to what they observe, encounter, and participate in while abroad and, upon their return, reflect deeply on their experiences (Keese, 2013). For this reason, post-program reflection activities are fundamental for the meaning-making process after returning from abroad because they obligate students to draw comparisons from their experiences abroad with their lives in the United States. In doing so, students contemplate, question, and often alter their prior presumptions and attitudes about the societies they return from (Sharma et al., 2011). This is a crucial step in deconstructing the imaginative geographies held by students before departing and replacing those preconceived notions with a more comprehensive and factual interpretation of the culture(s) and society they encounter during their time abroad.

This program utilizes post-program activities to not only help students examine (and challenge) their preconceptions about and observations in Cuba but also consider the role that geopolitics—particularly U.S. foreign diplomacy—has played in the shaping of Cuban society as well as how Cuba is portrayed in U.S. media. We want students to contemplate and share their experiences in a group setting so that they can listen to other points of view and perspectives regarding what they observed during the program. To achieve this, we require students to attend three in-person, post-trip seminars on campus. The seminars are student-led. My colleague and I guide the discussions with pre-selected topics, but students drive the conversations based on their interests, impressions, and opinions derived from their readings, assignments, and experiences in Cuba.

In the first seminar, students discuss their predeparture assumptions about Cuba and explain how their experiences in Cuba challenged these preconceptions. They must give three examples that they have included in their journals. While many of these experiences have been touched on during the daily debriefings in Cuba, students are asked to flesh out their thoughts on these experiences and share how they have internalized different observations and encounters while abroad. This approach encourages students to think critically about their prior beliefs concerning Cuban society and contrast them with what they experienced during the trip. Likewise, students share how they learned to navigate (socially, economically, and geographically) in another culture. This includes examples of what students did outside of the program's scheduled itinerary, such as going out at night, shopping in local stores, or conversing with host families or other Cubans they met. Students often mention how venturing out on their own or having conversations with Cubans in their free time helped them build the confidence to

operate in a different culture. Finally, at the end of the first seminar, students must identify a research topic for their final essay.

For the second seminar, students write a précis on the documentary *Black in Latin America: Cuba: The Next Revolution* (Pollack, 2011) and include their own thoughts regarding how Cuban society has handled racism as compared to U.S. society. The video demonstrated how racial polemics on the island are entangled with politics—both past and present. We discuss things that we observed about race and racial categories while in Cuba and juxtapose those observations to themes presented in the documentary. We also consider what U.S. society could learn from Cuba about mitigating racism as students return from the island with a deeper understanding of the fluidity of racial conceptualizations in other societies and cultures outside of the United States.

In the final seminar, students briefly discuss the research they have conducted for their essay assignment. We talk about why each student became interested in their topic and how/if researching that topic changed their opinion about Cuban society or the United States' policies towards Cuba. While the themes that students choose to research vary widely from topics about cigar production to gender roles in tourism, this exercise gives students the opportunity to develop culture-specific knowledge about Cuban society and convey what they have learned. Students are expected to finish their essays by the end of the spring semester and upload them to the online learning management system.

On the next trip, I plan to lengthen our time in rural areas and have students volunteer in local farming communities we visit to learn more about horticulture practices in less-developed countries. This would give students service-learning opportunities in urban and rural

settings, allowing them to better juxtapose different ways of life in Cuba. An activity we are tentatively planning for our next program is an excursion to the coffee farming communities in the Sierra Maestra Mountains of eastern Cuba. Since this program primarily runs in January, students will be able to work with Cuban farmers during the harvest season and learn about one of Cuba's emerging lucrative exports. This type of experiential learning activity would further enhance the intercultural competence development of students not only through exposure to new cultural environments and practices but also through active participation. We expect this exercise to build skills in listening and observing as well as to promote openness towards adapting to different intercultural communication and learning preferences, thus increasing intercultural awareness and expanding understanding of different worldviews.

EVALUATION AND ASSIGNMENTS

The criteria for participation and the research essay are discussed earlier. Participation is a formative assessment of the learning outcomes that takes place in the field and during our debriefing sessions on the island, as well as in post-program seminars (refer to Appendix 7.2).

The research essay serves as a summative assessment that, while focusing on a particular issue, requires students to incorporate and analyze how different sociocultural, economic, geopolitical, and geographic processes affect their paper's theme. Journals are a formative assessment that allows us to evaluate students' intercultural competencies acquisition. Journal entries must include accounts of the students' experiences, reactions to these experiences, new/old perceptions about Cuban society, and critical reflections about their own imaginative geographies. Thus, journals primarily evaluate the course's learning outcomes, particularly

objectives C and D shared previously. The course's percentage scheme and assignment instructions are listed in Appendix 7.2.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

The standard university evaluations of the course(s) and instructors demonstrate that students generally have positive opinions about the program. Of course, journals and discussion sessions provide much richer, more nuanced descriptions of students' views of the trip. Unsurprisingly, each student's experience is different, so what is meaningful varies per individual. While excursions are popular, the excursions students prefer vary not only by student but also by group. Nevertheless, most students state that the most impactful activities were interactions with Cubans either during a planned event or in their free time. This includes visits to farms in Viñales, our hike in the mountains, volunteering, time spent with homestay host families, or venturing out on their own time. The following anonymized quotes from student journals illustrate the positive reaction students had when engaging directly with Cubans which exhibit some of the intercultural competencies gained through these experiences. After each quote, the program year and the intercultural competencies gained by the students are listed.

“Although there was a small language barrier [with the Espiral volunteers], because we were so eager to learn more from people our age—and vice versa—this was not an obstacle. It was thrilling to learn about the history of the Afro-Cuban religion, the most popular religion on the island, as it was created after the freeing of the first slaves. All and all, today was a great experience that gave us insight into the lives of Cubans that like us were college students eager to learn more about another culture.” (*Student 1*,

service-learning project, Havana, 2016, cultural self-awareness/understanding; cultural-specific knowledge; academic content knowledge; curiosity)

[After touring the farm] “we walked to a small outbuilding near the dining area to watch real Cuban cigars being handcrafted by a third-generation tobacco farmer. This was a wonderful experience of education, conversation, and laughter.” (*Student 2, Tobacco farm tour, Vinales, 2017, cultural-specific knowledge; academic content knowledge; listen, observe, and interpret; communication skills*)

“In Santa Clara, we talked to our host dad and he told us to ask him anything we wanted to know about Cuba. I asked him what changes he has seen in his life in Cuba and he talked for a couple of hours about it! It was really amazing to hear from a Cuban what he thought.” (*Student 3, conversation with host family, Santa Clara, 2018, understanding others’ worldviews; curiosity; communication skills*)

“This study abroad not only helped my Spanish-speaking skills, but it also helped me to feel more comfortable in an environment where everyone has a culture and language different from mine.” (*Student 4, upon return, 2017, adaptability; communication skills; tolerance for ambiguity*)

During seminar sessions, we asked students which locations they enjoyed the most. Two discernable opinions emerged regarding urban and rural destinations. Many students stated that they would like more opportunities to visit rural locations and engage with people in those communities. Others indicate that they would prefer to spend most of the program in Havana to gain a deeper immersive experience in one place.

CAVEATS AND REFLECTIONS

Overall, this program has been a success. Its objectives align with the mission of the Global Studies and Human Geography Department, which includes the development of critical thinking, communication, and complex analysis skills that enable students to work effectively across cultures—all of which are skills needed to work and thrive in multicultural societies. Many of our majors are interested in Latin America and improving their Spanish. This program gives them a unique opportunity to engage both educational goals. Furthermore, partnering with political science and Spanish professors permits more students to earn credits applicable to their majors/minors and allows us to cast a wider net for recruitment. Working with professors from other disciplines also facilitates academic synergy which strengthens the program and enhances the pedagogy.

One major concern for this program is the lack of assignments before the trip and a need for more predeparture meetings. As aforementioned, the original dates for the program prohibited formal course meetings, so students were expected to read material on their own before departure. Root and Ngampornchai (2012) posit that to fully develop intercultural competence through study abroad programs, predeparture training is necessary to effectively leverage the experiential benefits of being in another culture. Certainly, frequent meetings before departure to discuss themes and issues pertaining to the trip would make the program more effective and impactful for students. A potential remedy for this is to implement mandatory predeparture meetings using a video conferencing platform, such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, or simply to run the program during dates that allow sufficient time for in-person predeparture meetings.

Another concern is the precariousness of being able to conduct a study abroad program in Cuba. Because of the contentious geopolitical relationship between the U.S. and Cuba, the program was put on hold in 2019. This uncertainty complicates the planning, recruitment, and execution of the program. Nevertheless, the precarity of travel to Cuba is the allure for many students, as it stokes their imaginative geographies of a place that they see as off-limits. As such, a well-orchestrated study abroad program on the island can effectively challenge students' misconceptions about Cuba, demystify their beliefs about Cuban society, and foster fundamental intercultural skills they will need in an ever-globalizing world.

As student participation in short-term study abroad programs continues to grow in the United States, it is increasingly important for program directors to consider innovative ways to encourage students to not merely visit sites but rather meaningfully engage with the people, places, and cultures they encounter while abroad. This chapter describes five on-site activities that require students to learn about Cuban society through interactive experiences. Post-trip seminars allow students to critically examine, reflect upon, and share their observations, thoughts, and viewpoints of modern Cuba. This approach can serve as a framework for other short-term study abroad programs that seek to enhance students' intercultural understanding and competence, while challenging the imaginative geographies they held predeparture.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 7.1: Program Itinerary June 5–17, 2018

Date and Location	Morning Activities	Afternoon and Evening Activities
Tuesday, June 5 Ft. Lauderdale to Havana	Meet at Ft. Lauderdale Airport to check in/receive visa for flight to Havana – program begins	Arrive at Jose Marti International Airport in Havana; Meet host families; Tour Vedado Neighborhood and welcome dinner
Wednesday, June 6 Havana	Meet at Coco taxi station Tour of Old Havana – on foot and by bus with Cuban architect/urban planner, overview of the growth and development of the city	Afternoon – late lunch in state-run restaurant Evening – debrief and free time.
Thursday, June 7 Havana	Take public transportation to Museum of the Revolution. Lecture on Revolution	Afternoon – excursion to Hemmingway’s countryside residence. Evening – return to Havana and tour El Hotel National Debrief and free time
Friday, June 8 Havana	Visit to U.S. Embassy Lunch with host families or on your own	Afternoon – pool party at country home, salsa lessons, lecture on Cuba’s healthcare system from local medical doctor Evening – debrief in Havana and free time
Saturday, June 9 Havana	Lecture on Cuban educational system, service activity (renovating public school) with community members from Proyecto Espiral.	Afternoon –debrief Evening – optional cultural activity (modern dance or other musical performance) and/or free time
Sunday, June 10 Viñales	Depart for Viñales Visit Soroa waterfall, Las Terrazas bioreserve, and botanical garden	Afternoon – meet host families and tour organic farm Evening – dinner at organic farm and debrief
Monday, June 11 Viñales	Hike through karst topography of Viñales and lecture on physical geography Debrief during lunch	Afternoon/Evening – visit to tobacco farm and have dinner with family

Tuesday, June 12 Trinidad	Depart for Trinidad Stop at Playa Girón (Bay of Pigs) to visit museum and have lunch	Afternoon – arrive in Trinidad, meet host families in Trinidad Debrief
Wednesday, June 13 Trinidad	Walking tour of colonial Trinidad, accompanied by city historian.	Afternoon – visit to sugar mill and colonial plantation Optional snorkeling in Trinidad Debrief in Historical town plaza
Thursday, June 14 Santa Clara	Depart for Santa Clara Lunch at Laguna de Guanaroca and lecture on Mangroves	Afternoon – Che Memorial, visit with Cuban official to explain Cuban political system Evening – debrief and meet host families
Friday, June 15 Varadero	Depart for Varadero Walking tour of the Varadero tourist complex	Afternoon/Evening – meet host families and free time
Saturday, June 16 Havana	Free time in Varadero Return to Havana, tour of Soviet-style housing community (Alamar)	Afternoon – Lunch with Cuban family in Alamar apartment Meet with members of CDRs (Committees in Defense of the Revolution) Evening – debrief and Farewell dinner in Sancho Panza restaurant
Sunday, June 17 Havana to Ft. Lauderdale	Depart for Jose Marti International Airport in Havana – program ends	Arrive at Ft. Lauderdale Airport.

Appendix 7.2: Assignments

Percentage Scheme for Participation and Assignments

The percentage scheme for this course is determined by two assignments and student participation during the program:

Participation: 35%

Research Essay: 30 %

Journal: 35%

Note: Participation includes field activities and participation in group discussions.

Assignment Instructions for Participation

Participation: Each student will be evaluated on their level of participation and engagement during the program. That is, students will be expected to participate in all outings and activities while in Cuba. Missing excursions or service-learning activities will result in a lower participation grade.

Assignment Instructions for Research Essay

Research Essay: Each student will focus on a particular topic during the course and work one-on-one with one of the instructors to produce a short 5–6-page essay. The essay should describe a particular challenge facing contemporary Cuba, lay out the historical context, analyze recent developments, and discuss the many implications. This essay should draw on supplemental readings and research.

Assignment Instructions for Journal

Students are expected to maintain a **study abroad journal** recording notes, ideas, commentary, insights, observations, etc. We will have informal debriefing meetings almost daily to discuss insights, reflections, and interpretations.