

CASEBOOK OF IDG IMPLEMENTATION INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

Synergistic Sustainability: Integrating Inner Development Goals into Experiential Education in Brazil

Rafaela Rolim

Brazilian Experience, Brazil
ORCID: [0009-0000-3183-4858](https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3183-4858)

Nicholas Roster

Northwestern Michigan College, United States of America
ORCID: [0009-0000-2136-7600](https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2136-7600)

Abstract

This chapter examines the pedagogical efficacy of integrating the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) framework within a short-term, experiential study abroad program conducted by Northwestern Michigan College (NMC) in partnership with Brazilian Experience (BE) in Brazil, Spring 2024. The aims of the program are twofold: 1) to cultivate student competencies in sustainability and conservation through immersive, hands-on experiences, while 2) simultaneously fostering personal growth through structured reflection and application of the IDGs. While the aims of this program seem lofty, we feel the goals of a study abroad should be high to offset the environmental impacts of any travel. This analysis critically evaluates the program's design, implementation, and outcomes, demonstrating the potential of integrating IDGs into experiential education to enhance student development and promote global citizenship. Student comments collected at the end of the study abroad program capture the deep change accomplished by structuring a short-term program from the ground up, centred on the IDGs.

Keywords/key phrases: study abroad, experiential learning, sustainability, Inner Development Goals, higher education

1. Introduction

The imperative for holistic education, one that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries to foster both cognitive and affective development, has gained increasing prominence in contemporary pedagogical discourse (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991). The integration of Inner Development Goals (IDGs) into educational frameworks has been a growing trend in recent research, particularly as it relates to the concept of experiential learning.

The IDG framework emphasizes personal and relational dimensions within sustainable development, highlighting goals such as "Being," which focuses on one's relationship to self, and "Relating," which underscores caring for others and the world.

This theoretical underpinning is crucial for fostering empowerment and compassion in educational settings, as noted by Adler in her examination of women's empowerment journeys (Adler, 2024). Experiential learning, characterized by its emphasis on active engagement and reflective practice, offers a potent framework for cultivating such holistic development (Dewey, 1938). In fact, research suggests that experiential learning is a vital pedagogical approach in achieving both IDGs and sustainable outcomes. For instance, Nordén's (2024) study on student teachers reveals that integrating IDGs with innovative teaching methodologies can transform students' mindsets toward sustainability, thus enhancing their educational experiences through practical engagement. Similarly, Wamsler et al. (2023) emphasize that experiential learning not only supports the practical implementation of sustainability education but also facilitates personal growth and the development of leadership competencies essential for fostering sustainable practices within global.

The connection between experiential learning and personal development is echoed in various studies, including those assessing how experiential methodologies can effectively enhance students' competencies and engagement (Chineme et al., 2019; Rahmawati et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2022). These methodologies prioritize real-world applications, enabling deeper connections between theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Interestingly, the significance of experiential learning extends beyond individual educational outcomes; it also serves to align higher education with the broader goals of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. For example, Chineme et al. (2019) demonstrate how community engagement through experiential learning creates pathways for achieving multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), showcasing the interconnectedness of educational practices and global sustainability efforts. Furthermore, the incorporation of experiential learning strategies in various disciplines has proven essential for developing competencies that effectively address both individual and community needs (Kimura et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2022).

Given that experiential learning is so integral to deep learning and understanding, it would seem only appropriate to incorporate the IDGs into a short-term study abroad program. Study abroad programs provide fertile ground for experiential learning, exposing students to diverse cultural contexts and fostering intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). However, the integration of structured personal development frameworks, such as the Inner Development Goals (IDGs), within these programs remains relatively underexplored. Furthermore, designing a study abroad program from the ground up with a conscious focus on creating an experience that "offsets" the environmental impact of travel is novel. As Wamsler (2020) points out by actively considering challenges, we can transform educational experiences for improved social change. We believe that the study abroad program should be designed in such a way as to make the investment in environmental impact worthwhile, especially within the framework of the IDGs and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations.

The IDGs, a framework encompassing five dimensions — Being, Thinking, Relating, Collaborating, and Acting — articulate the critical inner capacities required for sustainable development (IDGs, 2021). These dimensions, grounded in psychological and educational

theory, highlight the importance of self-awareness, critical thinking, empathy, collaboration, and agency in addressing complex global challenges. While mindfulness has been introduced in many areas of education, like: adult learning, kindergarten, and to help improve student resilience (Frank et al., 2020). These concepts have not been formally introduced into a short-term study abroad. This chapter analyses the application of the IDGs within a short-term study abroad program designed to enhance student understanding of sustainability and conservation in Brazil. It also seeks to determine if building a short-term study abroad program, aligned to the Inner Development Goals, is effective in creating a transformation of the students' mindsets toward sustainability, thus enhancing their educational experiences through practical engagement. Furthermore, generating some long-term behavioural changes towards sustainability from a short-term investment in ostensibly, unsustainable travel.

2. Program Design and Methodology

The Northwestern Michigan College – Brazilian Experience (NMC-BE) study abroad program was meticulously designed to integrate experiential learning with the IDGs framework. The program's methodology centred on a cyclical process of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application, aligned with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory. The program was a short-term study abroad that lasted 9 days. Included on the trip were 13 students, 2 faculty from NMC and 1 travel guide from BE.

2.1. Immersive Experiential Learning

Experiential learning has long been recognized as one of the most effective methods for fostering deep understanding and long-term engagement with complex issues. In the context of environmental conservation, immersive experiences provide students with firsthand exposure to pressing ecological challenges, allowing them to connect theoretical knowledge with real-world applications.

Students were engaged with site visits to diverse ecological environments, exposing students to real-world conservation challenges, including plastic pollution, invasive species removal, reforestation, and animal rehabilitation. These site visits were carefully selected to illustrate the interconnectedness of environmental systems and the impact of human activities. For example, students visited marine wildlife conservation sites, engaged in beach clean-ups, and analysed the sources of plastic and other materials debris. They were then asked to draw connections between consumer behaviour, waste management policies, and marine biodiversity loss. At reforestation sites, they learned about native species restoration efforts, local reforestation methods, and the forest's role in carbon sequestration, reinforcing principles from climate science and ecology.

Hands-on activities, such as tree planting, animal enrichment creation, and participation in flood relief efforts, provided students with direct engagement in sustainability practices. Beyond observation, hands-on activities allowed students to become active participants in conservation efforts. Studies have shown that direct involvement in reforestation projects increases environmental stewardship behaviours (Ardoin et al., 2020).

Similarly, students engaged in designing animal enrichment activities at wildlife rehabilitation facilities, applying principles of animal behaviour and welfare. This interactive approach aligns with research suggesting that experiential learning strengthens problem-solving skills and fosters a sense of agency (Kolb, 2015). These activities fostered a sense of agency and demonstrated the practical application of environmental knowledge. One of the most powerful outcomes of immersive experiential learning is the development of a deep personal connection to environmental issues. When students participate in flood relief efforts or assist in habitat restoration, they witness the direct impact of collective action. This aligns with studies indicating that experiential education enhances civic engagement and pro-environmental attitudes (Ballantyne & Packer, 2011). By integrating site visits with hands-on conservation work and community service, students move beyond passive learning to active problem-solving, positioning themselves as change agents in their communities. These experiences not only build knowledge of how to engage in these types of efforts but also cultivate a lasting commitment to sustainability.

2.2. Structured Reflective Practice

Reflection is a critical component of experiential learning, allowing students to process experiences, internalize lessons, and develop a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. Structured reflective practices provide a framework for students to engage in meaningful introspection, transforming their experiences into lasting insights.

Daily guided reflections, facilitated by faculty, created intentional spaces for students to process their experiences and connect with their inner selves. These reflections incorporated a variety of methods, including reflective journaling, group discussions, and mindfulness exercises, each designed to encourage deep contemplation and self-awareness. Research in educational psychology suggests that structured reflection enhances cognitive processing and helps students retain knowledge more effectively (Moon, 2004). Reflective journaling, for example, encouraged students to document their thoughts, emotions, and key takeaways, reinforcing learning through self-expression. Group discussions provided opportunities for collective meaning-making, enabling students to articulate their insights and consider diverse perspectives.

Daily reflections were structured for students to think deeply about something that was meaningful to them on the previous day. By revisiting their experiences, students reinforced their memories and identified key personal takeaways. Sharing these insights with peers cultivated a rich dialogue, highlighting the diversity of interpretations and demonstrating that while students might have shared the same events, each individual's learning and emotional response were unique. This practice aligns with transformative learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of critical reflection in reshaping perspectives and fostering personal growth (Mezirow, 1991). Structured reflections also supported students in developing metacognitive awareness—the ability to think about their own thinking—a skill linked to improved problem-solving and adaptive learning (Flavell, 1979).

2.3. Conceptualization and Application

By integrating structured workshops with hands-on activities, students were able to connect personal growth with global sustainability efforts. This intentional planning was an effort to

bridge educational theory and practice in sustainability education. Workshops delivered by Brazilian Experience on the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provided students with a theoretical framework for understanding sustainability and personal development. The IDGs emphasize the inner capacities, such as self-awareness, critical thinking, complexity awareness, and co-creation, that are essential for addressing complex global challenges. These personal skills complement the SDGs, which outline tangible objectives for environmental, social, and economic sustainability. Research suggests that personal development plays a critical role in fostering sustainable leadership and long-term commitment to environmental action (Wamsler et al., 2020).

To move beyond surface-level observations, Brazilian Experience organized a workshop to have students apply the **iceberg model**, a systems thinking tool that helps analyse the root causes of environmental and social challenges. The iceberg model encourages learners to distinguish between events (visible crises like pollution or deforestation), underlying patterns (recurring trends), systemic structures (policies, power dynamics, and economic incentives), and mental models (deeply held beliefs and cultural narratives) (Meadows, 1999). For example, when examining plastic pollution, students traced the issue from visible litter to underlying consumption habits, corporate supply chains, and economic policies that prioritize single-use plastics. By understanding these deeper structures, they were better equipped to propose meaningful interventions rather than just addressing symptoms of the problem.

A key objective of these workshops was to empower students to apply their insights to their personal and professional lives. Through structured exercises, they developed action plans tailored to their own spheres of influence. Students were encouraged to adopt an agency-oriented mindset, recognizing their ability to drive change at multiple levels. This approach aligns with research on transformative learning, which highlights the importance of critical reflection and personal agency in driving sustainable behaviour (Mezirow, 1991). By the end of the program, students not only gained a deeper understanding of sustainability challenges but also left with concrete strategies to implement change, reinforcing their sense of responsibility as active contributors to sustainable development.

3. Results and Analysis

The program's outcomes were evaluated through a mixed-methods approach, including exit interviews, qualitative analysis of student reflections, and informal observations.

3.1. Enhanced Self-Awareness and Personal Growth

Student reflections demonstrated a significant increase in self-awareness, presence, and authenticity, aligning with the **Being** dimension of the IDGs. Students reported a greater understanding of their values, beliefs, and emotional responses to challenging situations. The program's intentional use of reflective practices facilitated personal growth, fostering resilience and adaptability in a foreign environment. These findings support the idea that developing inner capacities is foundational for meaningful engagement with sustainability (Wamsler et al., 2020). [This video](#) captures the transformative journey of our Study Abroad program, where students not only explored a new culture, but also deepened their inner development, featuring testimonials that bring to life the impact of integrating the IDG framework into experiential learning.

3.2. Development of Critical and Systems Thinking

Through immersive site visits, group discussions, and debriefing sessions focused on local and global sustainability challenges, students demonstrated an expanded capacity for critical thinking and systems thinking, core elements of the Thinking dimension of the IDGs. Students demonstrated a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of environmental systems and the complexities of sustainability issues. They were able to identify root causes of environmental degradation, explore interdependencies within social-ecological systems, and articulate the tensions between short-term actions and long-term sustainability goals. These insights reflect the competencies described in frameworks such as UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

3.3. Cultivation of Empathy, Compassion, Connectedness and Intercultural Competence

Interactions with local communities, particularly those affected by flooding, fostered empathy and compassion, aligning with the Relating dimension of the IDGs. Collaborative activities enhanced intercultural competence, enabling students to navigate cultural differences and build effective working relationships. These experiences contributed to the development of intercultural competence, which is widely recognized as a key outcome of impactful global education programs (Deardorff, 2006). As one student stated, "Volunteering was a really amazing experience for me. Putting together donations to help the people at Rio Grande do Sul helped me connect to a sense of unity. despite the fact that we're in a different hemisphere. I felt that unifying force of humanity I want to be involved in efforts like that at home moving forward."

3.4. Collaborative Competency

Students demonstrated increased competence in cross-cultural communication, co-creation, and mobilization skills, aligning with the **Collaborating** dimension of the IDGs. Group activities that required shared leadership and mutual accountability across diverse perspectives revealed students' growing capacity for inclusive and effective collaboration. These experiences mirror the collaborative skill set outlined in frameworks such as the OECD Learning Compass 2030 and are crucial for navigating complexity in a rapidly changing world.

3.5. Increased Agency and Commitment to Sustainability

Hands-on activities and action planning workshops fostered a sense of agency and ownership among students, fostering a commitment to sustainability, aligning with the **Acting** dimension of the IDGs, which emphasizes courage, creativity, optimism, and perseverance on purpose-driven action. Students expressed a strong desire to integrate sustainability practices into their personal and professional lives. One student, in particular, was returning home to an internship with a political figure, and they wanted to incorporate what they had learned into potential policies that this political figure may introduce into legislation. Another student stated, "We did this project about assumptions that we have, about the environment, and about global warming and plastic consumption. And I think we just really need to shift away from the conveniences of plastic now that I've kind of been educated a little bit more. I really know and I can teach other people to start using products that are more sustainable and better for everybody." This supports findings from prior research that suggest experiential learning can serve as a "threshold moment" in shaping future sustainability leaders (Sipos et al., 2008).

4. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that integrating the IDGs framework within experiential study abroad programs can significantly enhance not only cognitive development but also the inner capacities essential for global citizenship and regenerative leadership. The program's emphasis on structured reflection, hands-on activities, and theoretical frameworks facilitated the cultivation of critical inner capacities for sustainable development. One student put it this way, "Just coming on a Study abroad, it overall just really helps you gain cultural awareness. I mean, you can read about it. You can watch the videos and everything, but until you put your shoes in somebody else's customs and everyday life, you're not going to understand it without coming here. You really meet a lot of people who are very welcoming, and that is fairly different from home, all the different traditions, the cultures, seeing all the dancers and the music, and also just seeing how much they care for the people around them and the nature around them. It is very meaningful and I feel like I can take that back home with me."

The findings of this study suggest that integrating the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) into experiential Study Abroad programs can significantly enhance the program's design, enabling students to meaningfully connect inner and outer change. This holistic approach supports a paradigm shift in international education, where success is measured not only by cross-cultural exposure but by the depth of personal transformation and commitment to a just, sustainable future.

4.1. Pedagogical Implications

The IDGs provide a valuable framework for designing holistic educational experiences that integrate personal development with academic learning. Structured reflective practice is essential for facilitating deep learning and personal growth in experiential education. Integrating the SDGs into study abroad programs provides a global context for student learning and fosters a sense of responsibility for sustainable development. Finally, it helps provide justification for global travel in a time when all travel could be considered unsustainable. If this model is successful, then all participants will return home with an intent to make a difference in their own communities and have the toolkit with which to realize those changes.

4.2. Future Directions

Future program iterations will seek to deepen integration of the IDG framework, explore longitudinal impacts on participants' civic engagement and career trajectories, and contribute to a growing body of evidence on the role of inner development in sustainability education.

Further research is needed to explore the long-term impact of IDG-integrated study abroad programs on student development and career trajectories. Developing standardized assessment tools for evaluating the impact of the IDGs in educational settings is crucial for advancing this field. Expanding the integration of the IDGs into other educational contexts, such as service learning and community engagement programs, can further enhance student development and promote social change.

5. Conclusion: Cultivating Global Citizens for a Sustainable Future

The NMC-BE study abroad program demonstrates the potential of integrating the IDGs framework within experiential education to cultivate global citizens who are equipped to

address the complex challenges of the 21st century. By fostering self-awareness, critical thinking, empathy, collaboration, and agency, the IDGs empower students to become agents of positive change, contributing to a more sustainable and equitable future.

As an example of cultivating a deeper meaning, students were directly engaged with a service project in the community. This allowed students to directly interact with local individuals as they orchestrated relief efforts for flood victims. Engaging students in a community project goes beyond typical study abroad experiences. This experience created deep connections for the students and brought them face-to-face with the impacts of climate change. This one seemingly simple experience connected students to local communities, generated an appreciation for the necessity of giving to those less fortunate, and cultivated a sense of compassion and empathy for those affected by the flooding but also for those individuals conducting the relief effort.

To further legitimize this approach, future academic endeavours should document measurable impacts of IDG-based programs on students' personal and professional development. If we, as educators, believe that student experiences in study abroad are, as Mark Twain so eloquently stated, "... fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness...", then we need to find a way to continue to offer these experiences, especially to students who have been historically excluded from such opportunities. While these experiences are incredibly important (in the author's opinions), we also must be cognizant of their impact on global sustainability. Therefore, it is paramount that study abroad experiences be constructed for student growth so that they are "worth the cost." This calls for intentional program design that incorporates regenerative principles, partners with local communities, and minimizes environmental impact wherever possible. A student summed it up like this, "I think one of my biggest takeaways from this trip was how lasting an impact instant gratification can have on the world and on our ecosystem, especially the marine animals. I mean we use plastic straws once and they can come from Michigan and end up in the beaches on Brazil and affect Turtles and a lot of us were talking about how as we were picking up trash, each piece we picked up was one last piece an animal could eat or one less piece that could hurt an animal. And just focusing less on being instantly satisfied by everything and focusing more on: what can I do to reduce this consumption?"

While travel itself is not a sustainable practice, it is the hope of the authors that the experience in a synergistic study abroad is so powerful, that the actions and behaviours of the participants are changed so that the impacts of the study abroad radiate out from each participant to a broader audience. To that end, post-program reflection, community engagement, and long-term action plans should be embedded into the design, enabling participants to become multipliers of sustainability-oriented mindsets. Creating student study abroad experiences, from the ground up, centring on the IDGs and experiential learning, may make the cost worth the investment, not only in financial terms but in the cultivation of lifelong changemakers equipped to contribute to a regenerative future.

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Corresponding Author

The corresponding author for this manuscript is Rafaela Rolim, who can be contacted by email via rrolim@brazilianexperience.com.br.