

ASIA: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING — GUEST EDITOR, TOMMY LAMONT

Experiencing China through a "Wide-Angle Lens"

Observation, Participation, Reflection

By Stephen Ceccoli, Gao Jiayong, and Han Li



Tourists walking outside the wall of the old town of Dali, China. Source: Photo by Worateep Suppavas. © Shutterstock.

Seeing it once is better than being told 100 times.

—Chinese proverb

A critical factor in generating successful experiential learning outcomes in China is to actively engage students in multiple contexts (e.g., individually, peer to peer, and group interactions) while promoting intentional oral and written reflection about such experiences. By engaging student learners in what philosopher and professor Donald Schön refers to as “reflection-in-action,” students are able to actively and continually reflect on full immersion cultural experiences.¹ Such reflection promotes an important critical thinking element in supplementing traditional student roles as overseas observers and participants. This article discusses various approaches for facilitating student learning and enjoyment through active experiential learning and reflection.

Although this article uses the Rhodes College summer program at Tianjin Foreign Studies University (TFSU) as an illustrative vehicle, approaches discussed are applicable in any context. The five-week Rhodes-TFSU program enables students to study Chinese language and culture (taught by TFSU instructors) in a full immersion experience while meeting for a twice-weekly seminar with a Rhodes faculty member to explore China’s history, people, politics, economy, and role in international relations. In addition, seminars and reflections continue during student excursions to Beijing, the Great Wall, and the Jiangnan region.

STUDENTS AS PARTICIPANT-OBSERVERS

Students encountering China for the first time are often filled with notions and perceptions about its population density, poor air and water quality, and limitations on individual freedom amid other developing country stereotypes. Consequently, students are initially challenged to set pre-

conceived notions aside to facilitate development of their own firsthand perspectives. Prior to arriving, students are introduced to basic elements of participant-observation, a long-established tradition used by ethnographers and other social scientists that perfectly captures the spirit of a meaningful study abroad experience. As anthropologist James Spradley points out, “The central aim of ethnography is to understand another way of life from the native [or national] point of view . . . the disciplined study of what the world is like to people who have learned to see, hear, speak, think, and act in ways that are different. Rather than studying people, ethnography is learning from people.”²

Participant-observation offers a valuable conceptual approach for orienting first-time students to China and rapidly accelerating individual understanding and appreciation of unfamiliar cultural settings. Unlike ordinary participants, a participant-observer typically enters social situations with two purposes: “(1) to engage in activities appropriate to the situation and (2) to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation.”³

Opportunities for participant-observation occur on multiple levels. First, students engage daily with Chinese native speakers to not only supplement Chinese-language communication skills, but also the ability to function independently in non-Western settings. The latter involves creative and resourceful thinking, individual responsibility, and the ability to problem-solve in overcoming obstacles. Unlike classroom language learning, applied Chinese-language communications—such as ordering from a menu, exchanging currency, directing a taxi driver, or bargaining with vendors—are framed as “pass-fail” interactions where one either achieves the desired objective or not. Effectively, traditional letter grades are replaced with either the reward of a successful engagement or frustration from the

inability to achieve the desired objective. Second, regular excursions (e.g., practicing with a tai chi master or touring a multinational joint venture) enable students to identify and understand similarities and differences in cultural values, beliefs, and/or worldviews of those they encounter. Excursions provide glimpses into a range of societal elements, including etiquette and social norms, as well as market activity and group harmony. Third, regular classroom seminar discussions supplement assigned readings to provide a critical context for understanding Chinese history, society, politics, and current events. TFSU students also participate in the seminars in order to expand the range of cross-cultural experiences, viewpoints, and understandings.

PARTICIPATE—OBSERVE—REFLECT

We contend that successful experiential learning programs must take participant-observation one step further by embedding regular opportunities for student *reflection* into the participant-observer experience. Consequently, students are challenged to individually—and actively—*reflect* on connecting daily observations with seminar and assigned reading material. Specifically, every student writes a series of 600-word-minimum reflection essays to augment their emergent understanding of China. Reflection entries are submitted electronically on a twice-weekly basis over the course of the program. While the content of each reflection is entirely an individual choice, reflections are guided simply by the following definition of "reflect": "to express a thought or opinion resulting from consideration of some subject matter, idea, or purpose." Such reflective expression, which Schön dubs "reflection-in-action," is critical because "significant learning requires that we help students connect what they learn in our courses with their "life file" rather than just their "course file."⁴

Students are encouraged to frame individual reflection essays around the following topics/ideas:

- Any new substantive understanding about China, Tianjin, or its people, and/or how such an understanding was obtained
- Description and interpretation of a self-taken photograph (to be included with the reflection)
- How one's understanding of similarities and differences in identities, cultural values, beliefs, and worldviews has been changed or deepened (if at all)

The following illustrations are actual reflection excerpts from individual, peer-peer, and group contexts, and are edited only for brevity.

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTIONS

Illustration 1: On initial expectations: "Coming to China, I had no idea what to expect. But having spent a few days here, I realized that it is like nothing I could have ever even imagined. I've noticed that we fail to realize how much we rely on language until we are forced to try to communicate without it. Alternatively, one of the greatest feelings in the world is understanding someone in their own language. Understanding people in the way they want to be understood puts you in a position to really connect with them, and automatically allows them to open up in a way that would not be possible through a translator."

Illustration 2: On language and communication: "I did not realize before I came to Tianjin how much vocabulary I actually know. I just never had the confidence to use the language in America since we only used it inside the classroom. In addition, although my family spoke the Chinese language, I was not able to converse with them much as most of us spoke English as well. Even then, they would laugh at my pronunciation whenever I attempted to. However, coming to Tianjin has definitely boosted confidence in my Chinese speaking skills, and I am excited to practice and learn more."

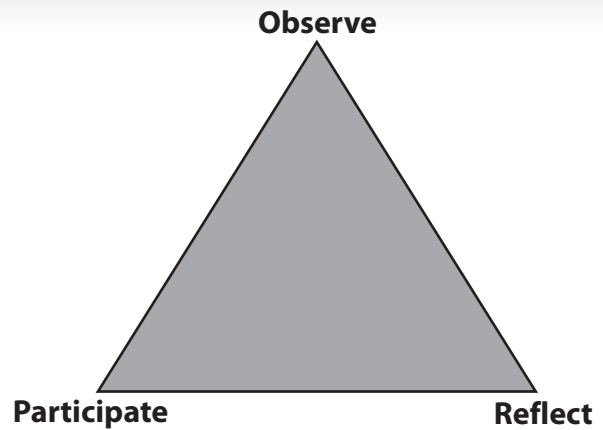


Figure 1. Reflection to Complete the Participant-Observer Triangle.

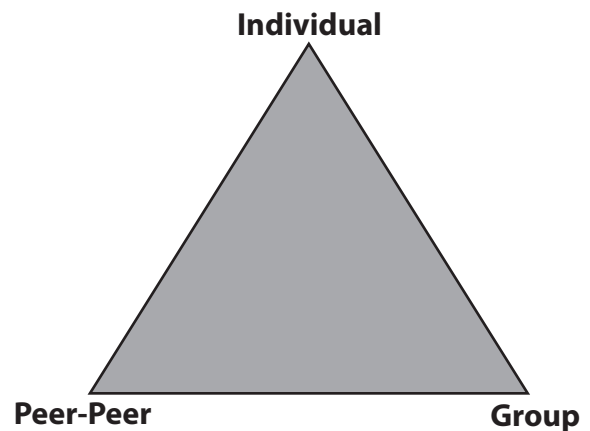


Figure 2. Peer-Peer refers to one-on-one interactions, involving either an American student and a Chinese student or simply two American students. Group interactions refer to situations with the faculty member and students or simply larger groups of students.

Illustration 3: On communication and assimilation: "I decided that in order to fully embrace and learn more about the culture of Tianjin, I must be able to interact and converse with locals. Initially, I was more reserved and uncomfortable. I was not confident with my Chinese speaking skills and was scared to embarrass myself in front of others. However, I learned that this is all a learning experience, and like my professor said 'It's a pass-fail process. It doesn't necessarily have to be completely correct as long as the message gets through to the other person. I was able to pick out my grammar mistakes, and learn to correct them. After Saturday, I gathered my courage and made it my goal to talk to as many Tianjin people as possible, and to not be afraid to approach them."

Illustration 4: On generational differences: "One of the main things I have observed is the very obvious generational difference. Compared to the US many of the older generations cannot and probably would not ride a bike for fear of injury or just simply because they are too old. I know in my area it is hard to bike anywhere because everything is so spread out; arguably though, Tianjin is a massive city and it would be easy for older people to make the same argument as those in the US (i.e., they simply can't). Instead elderly people are . . . making the most of the life that they had been given. For example, when we engaged in the line dancing one night it was actually really hard to follow and do the movements, but most

of the people were fifty or above and they were all perfectly in sync and not in the least bit tired.”

PEER-TO-PEER REFLECTIONS

Illustration 1: On a Buddhist temple visit: “This past semester I took Professor X’s course on Buddhism and for the first time learned a lot about its history and practice. I was expecting to see some pretty buildings and snap a photo of a giant Buddha statue. I was lucky enough instead to have an incredibly rewarding and informative experience thanks to [my American classmate] Violet, whose father practices Buddhism. Violet taught me a lot about prayer in Buddhism and showed me how to participate properly and respectfully. She told me that people often pray for things like peace, good health, and good fortune. Because I am not a Buddhist but wanted to participate, I tried to use my time in the temples to prayerfully reflect on ways that I can promote peace, good health, and good fortune in my own life and in the lives of others. In the space, I felt the importance of all aspects of Buddhism. I felt the reverence for the Buddhist community in the kindness and respect of the other visitors. Overall, I felt very lucky to have such an experience and am even more thankful that Violet was able to make it that much more worthwhile.”

Illustration 2: On developing a meaningful friendship: “Twenty-five days ago, I had no idea that I would gain an incredible friendship during this trip. Hank has been a key piece of my visit to Tianjin, and one I would not want to see the city without. This reflection is dedicated to explaining the importance of Hank’s impact. First, Hank is exactly who I want to grow up to be. He has a kind soul, and a personality that brightens the day of everyone around him. If I could trade all of my luggage to take Hank back to the US, I would do it in a heartbeat. Another reason it was easy to tell how great a guy Hank is, was the friends that he surrounds himself with. I have met four of Hank’s good (Chinese) friends. All of them are great ball players, and even better all-around people. It takes a good friend to attract good friends, and Hank has many of them.”

GROUP REFLECTIONS

Illustration 1: On nightlife: “We went to a club on Friday and as soon as we paid the bodyguards stopped us and searched all of us, which was odd compared to the Chinese people who walked in and didn’t have to go through the metal detector. One of the bouncers actually stood over us the entirety of the night. If he weren’t there he would send other staff members to come and watch us. I am not entirely sure what they were so worried about, but we figured that the management thought that we would try and steal stuff from the club. We got a table near the back of the club and were in a back corner, but it seemed like every person in the club came over to take pictures with us or to just stare. It really felt like we were zoo animals with people just sticking cameras in our face and people yelling broken English at us. A few times people would try to pull us away and bring us to their table, and we did end up getting some free drinks out of all of the staring people did. It was kind of uncomfortable but most of the people were super nice about asking for pictures and would always tell us ‘welcome to Tianjin’ which made it slightly better.”

Illustration 2: On sporting activities: “This is not our space, a fact that became clear to me the minute I stepped off the plane and saw the unfamiliar characters. I feel like an alien in this foreign land. Even though the inability to communicate can be scary at times, the opportunity that comes along with exploring new things outweighs my apprehension, tenfold. Through openness, you learn ways to communicate that do not require words. For example, the other day, we walked over to the basketball court and figured out how to put together a pick-up game of 5

on 5 basketball, even though none of them spoke English and none of us spoke Chinese. We were different in almost every way. We couldn’t understand each other, but we could understand friendly competition and sportsmanship. Although I could not ask, I know they had just as much fun playing with us as we did playing with them. It is memories like this that I will cherish for a lifetime—not because we got some exercise with some strangers, but because we overcame the barrier put up by language and managed to create a moment of pure joy.”

CONCLUSION

Embedding intentional opportunities for written and oral reflection can greatly enhance individual student learning in Asia, especially for first-time visitors. As social work professor McGuire and colleagues point out, “Reflection is both a pedagogical strategy as well as a valuable skill to support effective professional practice for the future.”⁵ Moreover, engaging students to reflect using multiple contexts (e.g., individually, peer-to-peer, and group interactions) builds on Spradley’s “wide-angle lens” metaphor, ultimately enabling student participants to capture “a much broader spectrum of information” during the study abroad experience.⁶ Together, integrating intentional reflection opportunities with active experiential learning can greatly facilitate student learning and enjoyment while abroad and beyond. Such learning and enjoyment not only maximize immediate pedagogical objectives, but also go a long way in whetting student appetites to return for more. ■

NOTES

1. Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).
2. James Spradley, *Participant Observation* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1980), 3.
3. *Ibid.*, 54.
4. L. Dee Fink, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 7.
5. Lisa McGuire, Kathy Lay, and Jon Peters, “Pedagogy of Reflective Writing in Professional Education,” *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 9, no. 1 (2009) 93–107, 103.
6. Spradley, 56.

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