

Orientation for Study Abroad Programs

By Roberta H. Gumpert

We send students abroad with the goal that they will develop an understanding of another culture. The key to facilitating and maximizing the development of cross-cultural understanding is to help students acquire the skills to become independent, effective participants in the new culture. The development of these skills, which is a continuous process, can be enhanced by structured learning activities (orientations). Cross-cultural learning and skill development should begin before students go abroad and continue after they return home. Orientation, then, should be provided to students before, during, and after the overseas experience.

The following briefly outlines the major components of a fully developed orientation program for sojourners. References to some basic resources dealing with both the theoretical and practical aspects of cross-cultural education can be found at the end of this article.

BEFORE THE STUDENTS LEAVE

Pre-departure orientation should begin when the decision is made to go abroad and should extend over some time. During this stage, students should learn something about the place they will visit. This includes a wide range of information, from the academic (history, geography) to the practical (the currency system, dining etiquette). If students are not enrolled in language classes, some language training should be provided, if possible.

Students also need to be informed about the process of adjustment they will undergo in their new environment. Knowing that the emotional roller coaster they will experience is a normal part of learning to live in a new culture helps them get through the frustration they will experience and even seems to moderate the low points.

Activities should also be included to help students explore the values and assumptions that they will take to this new setting. For the most part, these values and assumptions

are unexamined, if the student is aware of them at all. It is important to have the students become aware of, and begin to explore, the filter through which they view the world around them. Learning to live in the new culture will continuously challenge these personal values and assumptions, and this can be a major source of discomfort, as well as growth, for the student.

Immediate pre-departure or post-arrival orientation programs should be limited to more practical concerns—the appropriate greetings in the target language, instruction on how to use the telephone, the advisability of wrapping the gifts to be presented to your Japanese host family. The anxiety experienced by most participants at this time mitigates against their ability to absorb other kinds of information.

WHILE THEY ARE ABROAD

After students have lived in the new culture for some time and the initial euphoria has worn off, the unpredictability and uncertainty they experience in functioning in a society in which they do not know the rules begins to take its toll. At this point, students need the opportunity to ask questions, test the validity of their interpretation of the behaviors they experienced, and be reassured that they can learn to function comfortably in this new environment. They are primed to do some significant cultural learning. They need to be reminded that the learning process and the emotions they are experiencing are predictable and normal. Activities that help make them aware of the ethnocentrism through which they filter all of what they experience can be very effective at this time. Cultural misinterpretations can be corrected and strategies suggested for interpreting their experiences. Since the sojourners are continually exposed to new situations, orientation sessions should be provided periodically throughout the entire experience.

THEIR RETURN HOME

Returning home can be as unsettling to the sojourner as immersion in an incomprehensible new culture. Home is a known quantity, and the expectation is that one will just slip back into the routine. But the student has changed, and so has home. Returning home involves an adjustment process similar to the one experienced overseas, and the students need to be made aware of what to

expect and provided with strategies to deal with it. The cultural learning and personal development which are the basis of the change can be reinforced by helping students integrate this “foreign” experience into their “normal” life.

ORIENTATION FOR THE NATURAL AND HOST FAMILIES

Natural and host families also need orientation. There is no reason to expect that adults are any more knowledgeable about the process of acculturation than the students. Host families will experience discomfort in living with people who do not understand the “rules.” Teaching host families about the process of acculturation, and providing support and guidance to them as well as the students during the process, can attenuate some of the inevitable tensions.

Natural families, although not directly involved in the experience, will be monitoring the situation from afar, learning only what their student communicates to them. As students move through the ups and downs of cultural adaptation, their natural families are exposed to this emotional roller coaster. Knowing that the student’s feelings are normal will reassure the natural family, which can in turn reassure the student.

Few programs can actually provide the wide-ranging orientation activities described above. Programs tend to pull participants from different schools so that long-term group pre-departure or re-entry orientations are not possible. Students also go to programs run by foreign universities where an appreciation of cross-cultural learning as a discipline is not well developed and student services are minimal.

These obstacles can be overcome to some extent. Home institutions can provide the general pre- and post-experience orientations. Programs with on-site directors can provide activities throughout the period abroad, but students in programs without this kind of on-site support are left pretty much to their own devices. Contact with home universities during their time abroad on a regular basis would be of great benefit, but is difficult to maintain.

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ESSAYS

It is clear that training in cross-cultural learning skills increases the learning that takes place and should be implemented whenever possible. The following resources will provide an introduction to the growing literature on cross-cultural learning. ■

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books which deal with both the theoretical and/or practical aspects of cross-cultural learning:

Grove, Cornelius. *Orientation Handbook for Youth Exchange Programs*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1989. A comprehensive resource on how to plan and execute orientation programs for students and families.

Kohls, L. Robert and John M. Knight. *Developing Intercultural Awareness: A Cross-Cultural Training Handbook*. Second edition. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1994. A collection of activities to develop intercultural awareness.

Paige, R. Michael, ed. *Education for the Intercultural Experience*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1993. An excellent introduction to the theoretical and practical aspects of cross-cultural learning. Each chapter has an extensive bibliography.

Living abroad:

Kohls, L. Robert. *Survival Kit for Overseas Living*. Second Edition. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1984. Covers a wide range of issues involved in living abroad and is an excellent general resource for students.

Books on single cultures:

Condon, John C. *With Respect to the Japanese: A Guide for Americans*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1984.

Council on International Education Exchange. *The High-School Student's Guide to Study, Travel & Adventure Abroad*. Fifth Edition. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.

Fieg, John Paul. *A Common Core: Thais and Americans*. Revised by Elizabeth Mortlock. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1989.

Gochenour, Theodore. *Considering Filipinos*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1990.

Jamieson, Neil. *Understanding Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Wenzhong, Hu and Cornelius L. Grove. *Encountering the Chinese: A Guide for Americans*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1991.

Resources to help find study abroad programs:

Institute of International Education. *Academic Year Abroad*. New York: Institute of International Education, published yearly.

Peterson. *Peterson's Study Abroad: A Guide to Semester, Summer & Year Abroad Programs*. Princeton, NJ: Peterson, published yearly.

Publishers

Intercultural Press publishes books on all aspects of cross-cultural and multicultural experiences. Their catalog also includes books on similar topics by other publishers. Intercultural Press, P.O. Box 700, Yarmouth, ME 04096.

Internet and Case Study Resources on Asian Economic Issues

By Yana Rodgers



Professor Rodgers and her William and Mary undergraduates.

In a keynote address to Asian Studies instructors, economist Linda Lim suggested that too many Asian Studies courses are not relevant to contemporary Asian issues.¹ Students often leave an Asian Studies course with a thorough understanding of traditional cultures, but little grasp on the driving force behind the tremendous changes in Asian societies in recent years. To help instructors address Lim's critique, this article examines how Internet resources and the case study method can be used in Asian Studies courses. These practical tools serve as excellent vehicles for students to develop their understanding of the social, institutional, and political aspects of rapid Asian economic development in recent years. These methods have been applied in an undergraduate economics seminar specific to the East and Southeast Asian economies and the role of government intervention in their structural transformations.² Although the article utilizes examples that focus on economics, the instructional resources have other fruitful applications in

Asian Studies courses, at both the secondary and university levels.

ASIAN ECONOMIC RESOURCES ON THE INTERNET

Combining Internet resources with other materials can make classroom teaching and research more interesting and effective. Internet-based instruction strengthens students' perceptions that the course material is relevant to real-world issues, refines their analytical abilities, and develops their computer skills. The Internet, through the Gopher and World Wide Web, offers a rapidly expanding source of Asia-related data sites, some of which are reported in Table 1. These sites provide economic analyses and a battery of descriptive statistics on Asian income, trade, finance, government budgets, investment, and other useful macroeconomic indicators.³ The table classifies the Gopher and World Wide Web locations according to three categories, and includes directions for how to work through the indices. To maintain focus, I have limit-