

## POINTERS, PRACTICALITIES, AND PITFALLS OF DIRECTING A FIELD COURSE IN ASIA

By Jennifer and George Pomeroy

*As novices in directing a field course, we felt that our trip, while immensely successful and enjoyable, yielded a number of lessons to be shared with others.*

It is difficult to imagine a teaching challenge more daunting and yet more rewarding than directing an international field course. Picture adding to the standard demands and pleasures of teaching the tasks of guide, accountant, publicist, recruiter, travel agent, menu planner, goodwill ambassador, medical advisor, and, for some of us, translator. Given the mix of mostly single men and women who share close quarters, one also becomes a chaperone. One even needs the capabilities of emergency preparedness. Nonetheless, directing an international field course is among the most satisfying of teaching experiences.

The field course that we co-directed (we are also married) consisted of seventeen days in China, with the bulk our activities based out of Shanghai and Beijing. The course, “Field Studies in China,” was offered as a ‘400 level’ course open to both undergraduates (thirteen) and graduate students (one). Coming from a Geography–Earth Science Department and with our research background in planning and urban studies, we decided to focus primarily on urbanization, development, and planning. However, given the setting and diversity of students, the field study became an area studies course as well!

As novices in directing a field course, we felt that our trip, while immensely successful and enjoyable, yielded a number of lessons to be shared with others. Our “top twelve” are provided with comments. Checklists of what to pack, what shoes to bring, etc., are helpful and plentiful. The items below are more strategic in nature and speak to the overall design of a course. Some were implemented and some were learned, sometimes the hard way!

### **Exploit the Expertise of Others**

Even with our in-depth background in the study of China, we realized that bringing the best knowledge forward on all fronts required the expertise of others. In a general sense we could provide a broad curricular framework. However, since we were housed at East China Normal University, a nationally renowned university with a wealth of academic expertise, especially with relation to cultural arts and with local knowledge about urban development trends, it made sense for us to defer a number of times to “in-house” expertise.

Three benefits come out of this. The best expertise is brought to the students, networks are established for future use, and a fuller understanding of the regional context is brought to the situation.

### **Local Knowledge is the Best Knowledge**

In planning meals, field trips, and logistics, there are three choices: contract it out (tour guide), do it yourself; or work with a liaison. We

did a little of the first two and, thankfully, a lot with the East China Normal University liaison officer. She provided the best advice. Honest and thorough, she had no agenda and was always correct. We will use the knowledge she imparted the next time around, and we made a good friend too.

### **Make a Dry Run Through All That You Can**

This seems like common sense and is. However, there are challenges involved in doing things from the other side of the globe. For hotel, meals, modes of travel, field trips, and every other conceivable situation, including bathroom stops, one of the course directors conducted trial runs the previous year. Guidebooks and conversations with others may be helpful, but it is most preferable to do this yourself. For example, one restaurant recommended by a respected guidebook did not have the available seating needed, let alone any indication of why it was so highly recommended. Another example has to do with transportation. When asked, one local contact noted that a certain subway stop was within reasonable walking distance of campus. We planned to use that walking access in our daily trip planning and recommended it in turn to students for planning their free time excursions. Unfortunately, upon arrival, we discovered it was beyond the walking distance that most students deem “reasonable.”

### **It is OK to be a Tourist**

Tourist destinations appeal for very good reasons—they have special cultural, human, or natural significance. Given that our disciplinary background is in geography, we felt the course should certainly speak to study of place, and that well-chosen tourist destinations would complement a course more than detract from it. Furthermore, these destinations are often the best recruiting tool for your trip. Imagine the dismay of students had we *not* traveled to the Great Wall!

### **Less is More—Fewer Destinations May be Better**

We made a conscious decision to base out of Beijing and Shanghai. Except for a day trip to the water town of Zhouzhuang and an overnight trip to Hangzhou, we minimized the “overhead of intercity travel.” It would have frayed nerves and consumed valuable time, energy, and funds. We opted for the security of two main hotel stays that allowed students to explore the areas on their own. They could even follow up on local lessons and make stops at their own pace.

### **Conservatively Estimate All Costs, Then Add the Safety Factor**

We were quite nervous about costs, especially airfare and unexpected expenses. Fortunately, in the end we came out far ahead, issuing a refund, providing spending money (or seed cash) on site, and paying



Professor Sun Naishu (left) of East China Normal University lectures on calligraphy while Jennifer Pomeroy (right) translates for students.

Photo courtesy of George Pomeroy.

for both books and the students' visas. Our trip included all expenses including meals. We did advance research to cost out accommodation and airfare. Lectures and local transport were arranged and sometimes negotiated with the university. For other costs, such as meals and rail to Beijing, we could "triangulate" using guidebooks, online sources, and local knowledge. For everything, we took the most conservative estimates for our quality category, and added a 20 percent safety fee. This paid for unanticipated costs and allowed us to flexibly upgrade some of our arrangements.

#### **Interact Instead of Insulate**

We regret not doing more of this. As much as possible, we interact instead of insulate. One evening we hosted a dinner for students from East China Normal University. Everyone enjoyed the food and the company. The students interacted well, and, had they been given more opportunity, would have formed stronger bonds with their peers. These opportunities need not be confined to social events. Interviewing students, joint group projects, and shared fieldwork activities would provide both interaction and topical learning opportunities. Along these same lines, we hosted two banquet-style meals for the foreign exchange director, associate director, and staff to show our appreciation.

#### **Use the Participation Portions of Evaluation as "Heavy Leverage"**

A field study course takes a tremendous amount of energy to arrange but is easily deflated if participation in activities wanes. To be sure it did not, we assigned 25 percent of the course grade as participation and informed the students, verbally and on the syllabus, that this included participation at all meals, field trips, and events. There were no problems with this policy, and once things were moving along, students appeared to understand the value of participation. Even when it meant getting up earlier than one would want for breakfast!

In rare cases, grade leverage may not be enough to deter a miscreant. When developing your syllabus, investigate sanctions you may employ beyond the grade itself. Depending on the seriousness of a transgression, you may be able to have the student suspended from the university. Some universities have a point system of transgressions that lead to suspension once a certain threshold is reached.



Shippensburg University students and faculty take in the Great Wall at Badaling. Left to right, Dr. George Pomeroy (instructor), Michael Goldberg, Greg Coldsmith, Dr. Paul Marr, Jordan McMillen, Professor Jennifer Pomeroy (instructor), Scott Crandall, Jeannette McBryan, Jennifer Boyer, Kathy Shellington, Alex Feeman, Mary Martin, Rachel Marks, Ashley Oyer, Michael Brinley, and Amanda Ankbrandt.

Photo courtesy of George Pomeroy.



Shippensburg University students take in the scenes of Shanghai from the river. Construction activity in the Pudong District looms in the background. Left to right, Jordan McMillen, Michael Brinley, Michael Goldberg, and Alex Feeman.

Photo courtesy of George Pomeroy.

#### **Acknowledge that Mistakes will be Made**

Mistakes will be made. Missteps will occur. We had several, the most notable during our overnight rail trip to Beijing from Shanghai. We did not realize that travelers in China must show their tickets to exit the station. We were stuck purchasing two full-fare tickets. Now we know.

#### **Implement a Daily Briefing Session**

A daily briefing session is helpful and may even be integrated into a lesson with grading implications. Sensory overload characterized much of the trip. Although the itinerary was generally clear, we found it necessary under the pretext of a daily language lesson to update everyone on the day's activities. Sometimes our program changed, too, so this was a format for announcing those changes. Repetition is simple and advisable in a setting where everything is or seems to be extraordinarily dynamic.

## CALL FOR PAPERS

### INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ASIAN STUDIES

**National Conference  
February 12-17, 2007  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

Abstracts, not to exceed two (2) pages, should be submitted that relate to any aspect of the Asian and Asian American experience. Subjects may include, but are not limited to: literature, demographics, history, politics, economics, education, health care, fine arts, religion, social sciences, business and many other subjects. Please indicate the time required for presentation of your paper (25 minutes **OR** 45 minutes).

**ABSTRACTS WITH HOME AND COLLEGE/AGENCY ADDRESS MUST BE POSTMARKED BY: WEDNESDAY, November 15, 2006.**

**SEND ABSTRACTS TO:**  
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#### Need More Recruits?

##### Consider a Wider Pool of Eligibility

One constant challenge for many field study programs is recruiting a minimum number of students. Most post-secondary institutions have a required minimum enrollment. Reaching our required threshold was a challenge, though we had a supportive administration.

You may cast a wider recruitment net when you consider in-service teachers (who may have continuing education requirements), students at nearby or sister universities, or even non-traditional students via extended studies programs. You may even recruit from your alumni! Consider when these people can travel (those teaching have the school year to keep in mind), and investigate how the course may be configured to comply with any program requirements this other audience may have. For example, when prospective students need graduate credit, consider cross-listing your course as both a graduate and undergraduate course. Work with extended studies program officers and registrar to enable these potential travelers.

##### Learning from Fellow Students is Important, Too

A diverse group of travelers provides a mix of life and work experiences that, in many cases, allows for intellectual and personal growth beyond any envisioned within the traditional course parameters.

##### Final Comment

Whether you are novice or an old hand at teaching field courses, you likely know that there is no one recipe to follow. However we hope these pointers, practicalities, and examples of our pitfalls will assist your planning. ■

#### USEFUL RESOURCES

Some of these sources are helpful with the minutiae of planning a field course abroad, and others are of value for issues larger in scope.

Emanoil, P. "Study Abroad Expands Cultural Views, Life Skills, and Academic Experience." *Human Ecology Forum*. Summer (1999), 11-14.

Festervand, Troy A. and Kenneth A. Tillery. "Short-term Study Abroad Expands Cultural View, Life Skills, and Academic Experience." *Journal of Education for Business*. November/December 2001, 106-111.

*International Study and Travel*. University of Washington at Tacoma. Unpublished handbook, 2001. Accessed January 12, 2006 at <http://www.tacoma.washington.edu/travel/resources/>.

Moore, Ann M. *The Insider's Guide to Study Abroad*. Peterson's/Thomson Learning, 2000.

Peterson's/Thomson Learning. *Summer Study Abroad*, 2002.

Stanitski, Diane and Kurtis Fuellhart. "Tools for Developing Short-Term Study Abroad Classes for Geography Studies." *Journal of Geography*. 102(5) 2003: 202-215.

Wallace, J. and S. Chan. "ACT-TIONS: A Model for Student Safety and Instructional Responsibility in Study Abroad." *Perspectives*. 3(4) 1999, 123-127.

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