

Summer Study Tours

Making the Most of a Preeminent Professional Development Opportunity

BY RONALD S. BYRNES

Summer study tours present an unparalleled opportunity for teachers to continue learning about other people and places, to make new friends, to network, to internationalize curricula, and in the end, to rekindle enthusiasm for teaching. I have been privileged to be part of two Asia study tours. In 1997, I spent July in China with six colleagues, compliments of a Freeman Foundation grant. We traveled by bus, train, and plane in Eastern and Central China visiting cities, schools, and historic sites. In 1999, I spent two weeks in Japan with twenty other social studies educators from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia as part of the Keizai Koho Fellowship program. We spent one week in Tokyo visiting businesses and schools, then traveled by bus and bullet train to Hiroshima and Kyoto, where we visited more businesses and schools, completed a home stay, and sang some terrible karaoke. In this paper I turn what I've learned on these trips and related international experiences into ten suggestions intended to help educators preparing to participate in study tours make the most of their experiences. I also hope to inspire other readers to seek out and apply for travel opportunities on international summer study tours.

One: Before departing, learn as much as possible about your destination. Read about its history, learn some “survival” phrases and sentences, and read travel guides and back issues of *The Economist*. Watch relevant documentary films, attend lectures by specialists on the country or region, and get a feel for the country's geography, economic strengths, and domestic and foreign issues. Learn the name of the president and prime minister and know the nation's current population. In short, become conversant about the country so that you'll ask better questions of your guides, earn the respect of your hosts, and create positive intellectual momentum. For example, before traveling to Japan, I read the “Japan” chapter in a wonderful book titled, *Women in the Material World*.¹ The chapter consisted of a photo essay and narrative about one typical Japanese female head of household. In reading it, I began to learn about women's issues in Japan. Then, when I completed a homestay and befriended the mother of the family, I better understood her situation because it closely paralleled that of the Japanese woman in the book chapter.

Also, pre-travel orientations differ in their thoroughness. Be sure to ask about itinerary details, what to pack, what immunizations to get, how much spending money to take, and the best way to exchange money and make purchases.

Two: Before departing, study exemplary curricula that engage students in thinking deeply about your travel destination and find ideas and inspiration for the curriculum writing you will do when you complete the study tour. For example, examine some of the excellent curriculum units produced by the

Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE).² Think about the curricula in the following ways: What essential questions or key concepts do the curriculum writers use to frame their lessons? How do they engage students and promote active learning? How do they detail the procedures so that the lesson's steps are easy to understand? At the end of the lesson, how do they assess what students know and are able to do? Again, the goal is to find ideas and inspiration for the curriculum you will develop upon returning home. Save reading, movie, and lecture notes, particularly relevant and interesting news articles, book chapters, political cartoons, and exemplary curricula, because eventually you'll draw upon these materials when writing your own.

Three: Group travel often presents challenges, so don't just depend on the designated group leaders for leadership—do whatever is in your power to make the group work. Contribute to positive group dynamics by being prompt, by befriending those you don't know, by being considerate of others, by being patient and positive in difficult situations, and by maintaining a sense of humor. Also, prepare to keep pace with others by packing lightly and by getting in shape to walk long distances in hot and humid conditions.

It's perfectly natural for people to spend most of their time with a few special friends within the group, the few friends they'll probably stay in contact with after the trip is over. Small tight-knit groups within the larger group are not a problem as long as everyone occasionally sits by different people at meals or goes somewhere or does something with the larger group. Spend time by yourself each day—to think, to write, to decompress. Think of group interaction and solitude as the ebb and flow of successful group dynamics. When you don't make time for yourself, you won't have nearly as much insight, patience, and humor to contribute to the group.

Also, break off from the group on occasion. After attending business lecture after business lecture, I grew frustrated one day in the middle of our Japan trip. I wanted to explore Japan beyond air-conditioned business meeting rooms, so I capitalized on a small window of free time late that afternoon to go for a run. I headed from our hotel into a residential area where I relished the opportunity to finally observe and rub elbows with ordinary people enjoying leisurely walks, hurrying home from work, and uniform-clad schoolchildren, some of whom were playing in after-school programs, others buying ice-cream for their walk home. Use unstructured time to go somewhere on your own for a while.

Four: With an eye towards future curriculum writing, collect as much raw material as possible. As a result of your pre-departure reading and thinking, you should arrive at your destination with a general idea for an instructional unit, such as population density, youth culture, gender relations, international trade, or environmental issues. During the trip, take digital pictures, buy photographic slides in museums and at other historic sites, purchase folk art and related souvenirs, and keep relevant newspaper articles. In addition, keep a journal to document your impressions, conversations with people, and your experiences more generally. These materials will prove helpful

when you write. Also, when you continually think about your topic, your subconscious will work steadily, and you'll happen upon other useful materials.

Five: Adopt an other-regarding travel orientation and capitalize on the trip to develop global citizenship knowledge, skills, and sensibilities. One morning in Japan, my fellow study tour participants and I were headed to a suburban school on a congested Tokyo freeway. Most of us stared out the bus windows, lost in silence, intrigued by Tokyo's amazing population density. A high school teacher from suburban Atlanta broke the silence by bragging, "I could fit six or seven of those homes into my backyard." He had traveled extensively throughout the world, but still seemingly hadn't learned to appreciate economic and cultural differences.

International travelers typically respond to the cultural differences they encounter in two ways. One tendency is to romanticize them; another is to rush to negative judgments about individuals and the culture more generally. In another paper I propose an alternative, other-regarding approach that emphasizes suspending judgment to better understand and appreciate cultural differences.³ Travelers who adopt this type of orientation are conscious of how their limited communication skills, their subjective sense of "the way things are supposed to be," and their eyes, ears, and other senses sometimes contribute to cultural misunderstanding. In addition, these travelers are mindful of their visitor/guest status and know it's unrealistic to expect their hosts to change ingrained behavior on their account. Maybe most importantly, these visitors continually reflect on questions that help them suspend judgment, better appreciate the perspectives of their hosts, and avoid ethnocentrism.

Six: Upon returning home, design curricula that other teachers will want to use, too. When finally writing lessons based on your experience, think of your audience in terms of concentric circles starting with your students in the middle, and include grade-level or departmental colleagues, other teachers in your school, district, or state, or given the Internet, even beyond your state. To maximize the ripple effect of your experience and the impact of your curriculum, write clear, detailed lessons that other teachers can easily understand, and link your lesson objectives to some combination of district, state, and national curriculum standards. Share your lessons or unit with other teacher-friends informally or plan an in-service, submit a lesson to a professional publication, and present your curricula at local, state, or national conferences. Participating in a study tour is a privilege, and creating exemplary curriculum for others to use is an excellent way to give back to the trip's sponsors and the profession more generally.

Seven: Decide whether your lessons will have a historical or contemporary emphasis, and use substantive knowledge of your destination to help students develop meaningful skills and attitudes. Since there is never a shortage of history texts and since too many social studies teachers emphasize historical information as an end-in-itself, most of the study-tour-based curricula I have written has a contemporary orientation. For example, in my Japan lesson, students explore the follow-

ing question: What is the quality of life in Japan and how does it compare to the quality of life in other developed countries? Students compare and contrast data on population density, cost of living, and crime for Japan and a few other developed countries. The best curricula helps students remember key concepts, apply knowledge of key concepts to subsequent units, and refine writing, reading, and perspective-developing skills. I also impress upon students that it's impossible to thoughtfully resolve contemporary dilemmas without some understanding of their historical context; consequently, historical content works its way into many of my lessons.

Eight: Design creative lessons that engage students and heighten their curiosity. In this era of high-stakes testing, many schools are preoccupied with increasing students' test scores. Often lost among test score mania is the need to spark students' curiosity about other people and places; and, paradoxically, understanding other people and places has never been more important. This paradox presents an opportunity for study-tour participants to be creative and write curricula that compel students to say, "I'm intrigued and I want to learn more." I agree with John Dewey who argued, "The most important attitude that can be formed is that of a desire to go on learning."⁴ We need to act on this insight by designing creative curricula that promote active learning.

Helpful strategies for doing this include framing lessons around open-ended questions and requiring students to balance challenging, "real-life" trade-offs. For example, one lesson I recently co-authored within a larger conflict resolution

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curriculum requires students to decide whether to buy a less expensive surfboard mass-produced in Taiwan or a more expensive handmade one from Southern California.⁵ In thoughtfully arguing a position, students have to decide whether access to inexpensive, mass-produced imported goods is more important than the continuing availability of hand-made locally produced products. In the end, students will find your lessons engaging and meaningful when you have fun designing and writing them.

Nine: Write lessons with especially clear and detailed procedures so that teachers who didn't travel with you can easily implement them. Recently I edited curricula written by two different sets of teachers who returned from summer study tours. Many of their lessons were excellent, while others were problematic. The excellent lessons tended to be clear and detailed, highlighted key concepts, challenged students, and promoted active learning. The less successful lessons were problematic for three recurring reasons: the procedures were far too cryptic, students were expected to complete small group activities with insufficient modeling or direction, and students were expected to research topics on the Internet with insufficient modeling or direction.

Ten: Enlist the help of teacher-friends to carefully edit your lessons. One of the best ways to assess whether your lessons are as clear as possible is to ask teacher-friends from different grade levels and/or subject areas to read your lessons. The key question is whether or not colleagues who didn't travel with you, or who teach different subjects at different levels, understand the lesson's objectives, procedures, student handouts, and assessment plan. Editing is a process; consequently, it will take several readers and revisions to finalize your curriculum.

In summary, summer study tours are a preeminent professional development opportunity. I hope these suggestions help educators make the most of upcoming study tours and inspire still others to apply to participate in future study tour opportunities. ■

NOTES

1. Faith D'Aluisio and Peter Menzel, *Women in the Material World* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996), 140–151.
2. See <http://spice.stanford.edu/>.
3. Ronald S. Byrnes, "Towards Other-regarding Travel," *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 11: 2005, 231–244.
4. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Kappa Delta Pi, 1938), 48.
5. Bancroft-Arnesen, *Explore*, "Exploring Cultural Conflicts: Journeys Towards Peace" (Minneapolis, MN: Bancroft-Arnesen Explore, 2005), <http://www.bancroft-arnesen.com/explore/ArcticOcean2007/students.jsp>.

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