

# The Australian/Japanese Homestay Program and its Positive Contribution to Cross-Cultural Understanding

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## INTRODUCTION: HOMESTAY PROGRAMS - THE NEW CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATIONAL PHENOMENON

Homestay programs are nothing new - or so history would have us believe. For centuries, wealthy families have sent their children to study in foreign countries with the hope that, by total immersion, they will better understand - and incorporate into their own system of thinking - a wider range of ideas, concepts and methods of problem solving that will help them to succeed in their chosen field of endeavor later on in life.

The idea of studying in a foreign land has always appealed to families as an invaluable tool for learning, and at the same time a tremendously cost effective method of educating their offspring. For not only does the student learn the subject that he/she is specializing in, the student also has the added advantage of absorbing another language, gaining a different cultural perspective and being exposed to a totally different set of mores that can be drawn upon throughout the course of one's career.

In essence then, the host country in which the student is studying becomes, in itself, an extended university. So the student is actually studying in two universities at the same time - for the price of one. The acknowledged university on the inside and the actual, real life situation university "school of hard knocks" on the outside. "Nothing can beat the experience of actually being in a country and experiencing its culture and way of life to motivate learners." (1.)

As Dr. Kenji Yamada, International Student Director, Sugiyama University, pointed out, "One of the most important aspects of a viable homestay program is they afford Japanese students the opportunity to live independently from their parents in a totally foreign environment." (2.)

Gerry Meister, Head, La Trobe University Language Centre, Victoria, Australia, goes on to say, "A good homestay program is an excellent opportunity for students to experience day to day life in the host country. Students get a chance to practise their English, meet new people, and have personal care and attention outside the classroom." (3.)

But yet, even with this supposed historical background of overseas pursuit of academic excellence, those of us in the academic field dealing with the physical day-to-day administration of homestay programs are constantly running into problems as to how a properly administered homestay program should be organized.

It is, therefore, apparent to anyone involved in running a homestay program which is administered on a large scale that this phenomenon *is* new. So new, in fact, that the 1990 Edition of The Oxford Reference Dictionary doesn't even have the word "homestay" listed. "Homestead" and "homework" yes, "homestay" no. (4.)

So, in actuality, homestay programs, and the consequent proper implementation thereof, either by educational institutions or business organizations are, in fact, the *new* cross-cultural educational phenomenon.

## ONE BASIC ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEM THAT PLAGUES ALL HOMESTAY PROGRAMS DEALING WITH

### AUSTRALIAN/JAPANESE STUDENTS

One of the most fundamental problems confronting both on-going and start-up homestay programs alike is the absence of any kind of strategic outline, step-by-step format or even a basic homestay manual that presents in a "hands-on fashion" how a successful homestay program should be administered.

In preparation for this paper I found bits and pieces of "philosophical" statements relating to the many obvious educational benefits, i.e., overseas travel, getting to know another culture, self-fulfillment, etc., that homestay programs can, and do, provide.

However, I found nothing that even remotely resembled a list of basic ideas that could be used in a step by step manner as a guide to establishing a well-administered, verifiable homestay program. There simply is nothing in general circulation within either the business or educational community that lends itself to helping solve this problem.

Consequently, as Sue Fujino, Director of Homestay Programs at La Trobe University Language Centre, Victoria, Australia, so aptly pointed out, "Most people are just doing their own thing. And that is where the problems originate." (5.)

It is, therefore, the thesis of this paper to show that the proper running of any homestay program is paramount to contributing to a positive cross-cultural understanding.

For if programs are shoddily run, curriculum thrown together and homestay (host) families are picked at random - or seemingly so - the outcome will result in a negative cross-cultural misunderstanding which will ultimately defeat the whole purpose for which homestay programs were originally intended in the first place.

## **WHY HASN'T A MANUAL ABOUT HOW TO RUN A SUCCESSFUL HOMESTAY PROGRAM EVER BEEN PRODUCED?**

One reason is that it simply isn't an easy job to accomplish. Another is the amount of time that it would entail trying to interview people in the field, formulate procedures, make a list of "dos and don'ts," anticipate problems that might arise, and decide the criteria for selecting homestay families - let alone trying to figure out the legal implications involved in setting up such a program. Add to this the medical problems that might arise without proper medical insurance coverage or the complex aspects associated with the more litigious nature of Western cultures and one begins to see how involved an undertaking such as writing a basic homestay "manual" could become. These problems, compounded with the ever present possibility of encountering a life-threatening situation while administering a homestay program, have been enough to make most people shy away from this most formidable undertaking.

Yet, it is for this very reason - the unwillingness to accept *initial* responsibility, and the courage to lay one's reputation on the line that makes it possible for serious problems to continue to arise - sometimes in very disturbing, reoccurring fashion - in many homestay programs being implemented today.

## **HOW CAN THIS PROBLEM BEGIN TO BE RECTIFIED?**

What I don't intend to do is launch into yet another philosophical diatribe about the benefits associated with studying overseas. I am assuming that the readership of this paper is already sophisticated enough to operate from this basic premise.

Given the obvious fact that I am constricted in a paper this size, I nevertheless want to focus my attention on a few concrete points that I feel are constantly being overlooked in programs of this nature.

Points #1 and #2 are strictly mechanical in nature. They are simply what should be done to help make a program run better from a purely administrative standpoint.

Points #3 through #7 are where most of the inter-cultural *mis*-understandings seem to find their roots in both students *and* administrators associated with Australian/Japanese homestay programs.

And finally, point #8 is a partial list of other ideas that could be included in a general manual on homestay.

These points are:

1. Police Records Check.
2. Insurance Review.

3. Honne and Tatamai.

4. Group v. Individual.

5. Selective Historical Perspectives.

6. Patience.

7. Prejudice.

8. Partial List of Further Points to Consider.

## **1. POLICE RECORDS CHECK**

Graham Bell, Managing Director, Bellder International, located in Western Australia, told me in a conversation once that, "I never place a student in a host family until I have run a complete police check on everyone of its family members. I'd be derelict in my duty if I didn't protect my students - and myself in this manner."(6.)

Mr. Bell is absolutely right in his assumption. The need for proper police records investigation by the agency responsible for placing students in host families can't be stressed enough.

But many schools, to this day, still do not check on any homestay family's police background for fear of invading their privacy or "losing" them for use in future homestay programs.

I have often been asked, "How do you go about checking a host family's criminal record?" First and foremost, you *must* ask them if it is all right with them for you to check with the local police. Make sure you get their permission. Ideally, you can go with them to the police station, which affords the homestay administrator the opportunity of meeting with the local police and discussing their homestay program with them.

In fact, police are very good sources of ideas on safety and procedure when dealing with homestay students and their host families. I have found them to be very willing to offer suggestions about good places to visit off the "beaten track" and have even had some of them - once the program is explained to them - become host families themselves! It is also an exceptionally good way to make inroads into the community and be on the safe side at the same time.

The local police are a tremendous source of information that is rarely, if ever, pursued by the educational community. It shouldn't be that way. Of all my experiences with law officials in an administrative capacity I have found them to be very cooperative and willing to go out of their way to help. I have even had police officers invite groups of homestay students to take a tour through their police department - and via their friends and acquaintances have arranged guided tours of their local fire department. Some students commented that these excursions were some of the most informative - and exciting - of their homestay program.

Checking criminal records is becoming standard procedure at most reputable homestay institutions, but I have been surprised to find that many schools still do not implement this one basic procedure as standard policy, thus leaving themselves wide open for a lawsuit, unfavorable publicity, permanent damage to students, families and institutions alike, not to mention tremendous financial expenditures in court fees, legal costs and in final settlement agreements.

The importance of checking police records is a simple, painless way of "covering yourself." It doesn't take any stretch of the imagination to see what kind of legal entanglement that would ensue if a student was found to have been molested by her host father - who had a previous record for sexual assault, but was never properly investigated by the placing agency.

One note of reassurance. Most people readily agree to having their police record inspected by you - and are relieved to see that you are thorough and professional enough to care about fulfilling your responsibilities in such a manner. But, on the other hand, if they refuse, don't hesitate to drop them immediately.

Any homestay manual should have a method for checking police records as standard policy procedure.

## 2. INSURANCE REVIEW

This may sound obvious but I am constantly amazed at the number of homestay directors who don't know what coverage they have or what their insurance responsibilities are.

A total review of basic fundamental insurance policies is an absolute must for any homestay program.

A. The traveling students - and accompanying teachers - must be insured for both life and bodily injury.

B. Students and teachers must also be fully covered for all medical expenses that might arise.

C. All drivers of vehicles must be properly insured against uninsured drivers, medical costs and hospitalization

D. *Pre-existing illnesses* must be addressed and clearly understood by the concerned parties. Many insurance programs protect students against injury, hospitalization or sickness but most *do not* insure against pre-existing illnesses. This must be fully spelled out - and understood by the students and parents alike - before going overseas.

E. Homestay families must have *adequate* homeowners insurance to cover accidental death or serious injury to anyone who is physically on their property. Homestay families are legally responsible for all guests on their premises.

## 3. HONNE AND TATEMAI

"Honne" means to talk honestly and express your feeling without reservation.

"Tatemai" means to hide you true feeling and to say what you think people want to hear.

I must admit that in my 16 years of living and working in Japan I have never found any two people - be they Japanese or otherwise - who could agree on the definition and implementation of these two Japanese concepts. I therefore don't intend to engage in a cultural analysis of their meanings at this juncture.

What I do wish to point out is that Japanese have been trained from childhood not to express their true feelings and to "go with the flow." Consequently, Westerners tend to perceive Honne as "telling the truth" and Tatemai as simply "lying."

If Australian students are expected to cope in a positive manner when dealing with Japanese it is imperative that they, at least, try to understand this vital concept of Japanese culture.

However, it must also be pointed out that Japanese are not averse to lying. They will say things they don't mean - just like anybody else. The myth about Japanese never lying is just that - a myth.

Yet, time and again, I have seen Australian students shocked, surprised and ultimately hurt when they find out their Japanese counterparts have not been totally honest with them.

Many Australian students coming to Japan for the first time are permanently turned off by Japan when they discover how deceiving and circumspect the Japanese can be.

If, on the other hand, they are adequately prepared - and forewarned of this cultural idiosyncrasy - they will be more able to cope with it in a positive and beneficial manner.

The more level the playing field is the better chances for positive cross-cultural understanding to take place. "Honne" and "Tatemai" are two of the most essential aspects - and least understood by Westerners - of Japanese culture.

It is a wise and formidable opponent who can learn to adroitly use "Honne" and "Tatemai" to their advantage.

## 4. GROUP V. INDIVIDUAL

"Tatemai" is one of the essentials of holding the Japanese group mentality together. Japanese go to extreme lengths to engage in, what appears to be meaningless conversation - and many times it is. However, it must be remembered that the Japanese are almost pathologically concerned about what others think of them - thus their proclivity to always smile, use "Tatemai" and strive to be in constant good standing within their group. The biggest fear of any Japanese is to be ostracized from the group which is what accounts for their constant desire to be included within its confines at virtually any cost.

On the other hand, Australians - and Westerners in general - tend to be more individual in their approach to interpersonal relationships. So when Australians witness Japanese smiling to everyone and trying to be "all things to all people" they tend to be put off by what they perceive as fawning, or being a nation of professional apple polishers. "The Japanese character has thus been formed in a social environment which forced people from the time of their birth onward to maintain their own social standing and to respect their relationships with others." (7.)

The issue of group as opposed to individual should be more openly dealt with by both Japanese and Australian students to ensure a better understanding of where each other is coming from.

In all fairness it must be noted that Japanese themselves exclude *each other* from certain core groups. So when Australians are excluded from a particular Japanese group they shouldn't feel offended by it, or assume they are being singled out because of race or any other reason.

Understanding each other's cultural traits - and how to deal with them - is one of the biggest challenges to establishing a positive cross-cultural understanding.

## **5. SELECTIVE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The consequences of laboring under the dilution of a selective historical perspective has not played well for Japan in the international community - especially with its Asian neighbors.

"As long as Japan refuses to come to terms with its past, the people of Asia will remain wary of Japanese motives." (8.)

As long as the Japanese Ministry of Education persists in its concerted effort to pass off selectively distorted historical views in their public schools as worldwide accepted fact, positive cross-cultural understanding will be slow in coming for Japan and its intentionally dis-informed citizenry. "In Japan history is censored to ensure children are kept in ignorance." (9.)

Although outside pressure - most notably from China - has forced Japan in recent years to be more truthful with regard to their "aggressive acts in Asia, they still leave hazy the issue of who was responsible for the war." (10.)

As an educator it is very disheartening to witness the historical inaccuracies - and consequently accepting them as fact - that the vast majority of my Japanese students hold. I was stunned to find out that, when I administered a survey questionnaire both last year and this year regarding, among other things, certain aspects of Japanese history, that the uniformity of answers was, in fact, frightening.

In the above mentioned questionnaire only 6% of the students surveyed knew that Japan had annexed Korea as a colony in 1910, only 9% were aware that Japanese had invaded Manchuria (Manchuko) in 1931, only 13% were aware of Japan's plunder of Nanking in 1937. When asked if Japan had bombed Australia during World War II a stunning 93% answered no! (11.)

The Japanese Ministry of Education has blatantly misled its citizens by intentionally lying to them in such a fashion. For this reason it is imperative that Japanese homestay students be given a more comprehensive historical perspective - especially with regard to the Asia Pacific region, with a special note on Japan's attack on Australia's Northern Territory before they come to Australia, to inform - *and prepare them* - for the inevitable social encounters that they will most assuredly come in contact with.

I have known Japanese students to be embarrassed, humiliated and ultimately reduced to tears when they find out - from foreign sources in not so gentle a manner - what kinds of atrocities Japan committed during World War Two.

For the sake of more positive cross-cultural understanding Japanese homestay students should be enlightened in a crash course with reference to Japan's *real* historical transgressions in the Asian region - before they are sent overseas.

A level playing field tilts both ways and if Japanese students are to make a positive impact on cross-cultural understanding they must be given the proper tools - in this case *comprehensive* information about their own historical past - so they can deal with confrontational situations in a logical and *informed* manner.

Since the Japanese Ministry of Education refuses to educate its own students in a truthful manner, it is up to the Japanese Homestay Director to see that this job gets done. To not address this issue of a comprehensive historical perspective with regard to Japanese students would - in simple terms - be grossly unfair.

## **6. PATIENCE**

For Australian students, coming to Japan for the first time, patience is not one of their virtues. Whereas Japanese students have had it drilled into them since childhood to adhere to the "group" and patiently persevere, Australian students have always been taught to speak their minds and to get things done - *now*. Since Australians, in general, like to face a problem, "sort it out" and go on from there, Japanese despise solving problems and try to ignore them in hopes that they will just disappear. "The Japanese attitude toward life, then, is characterized by inertia and by submission to authority, rather than by individual conscience or rational judgment." (12.)

Here again, we witness the clash of cultural ideas in the form of the group concept as opposed to the ideal of the individual human being.

Of the many aspects that Australian students continually complain about, the frustration of trying to generate a truly patient mind-set is one of the most difficult attributes of Japanese culture to try to absorb.

But, here again, if Australian students are encouraged to develop a keener sense of patience when dealing with the multitude of frustrations Japanese society has to offer its foreign visitors it can only help - not hurt - when dealing with stressful situations in the future.

Japanese students tend to feel a great amount of frustration when going overseas for the first time, but in my observations it has generally revolved around their language ability - or lack thereof - in trying to get their point across, whereas with the Australian homestay student problems tend to be more cultural in nature.

The main point is that both groups should be instructed to take things as they come and not to let the frustrations of culture shock get the best of them.

## **7. PREJUDICE**

This is one topic that both the Australian and Japanese homestay Directors seem to shy away from and this is a mistake of monumental proportion.

Prejudice, both institutionalized - *de jure* (overt) as it is in Japan and *de facto* (covert) as it exists in Australia today must be addressed, and if done so in the right manner can be handled in a positive light. However, shunning the subject or denying that it exists altogether - as both Australia and Japan tend to do - only confuses the issue, and in essence helps to foster the concept of racial prejudice, by not allowing it to be discussed in the open marketplace of a free thinking society. The last thing racial prejudice wants is open discussion of the subject - and for that reason it must be squarely faced and dealt with in a *positive* manner.

In this sense when I say positive I *don't* mean that racial prejudice is good. What I mean when I say to deal with it in a positive manner is to inform the students that racial prejudice infects *all* societies and that it is something that should be systematically discussed, dissected under full public scrutiny, and completely eradicated as a method of cultural bias. Only when prejudice is acknowledged can it be dealt with and properly done away with. It is only when people deny that it exists that it is able to endure as social policy.

What makes this topic so pertinent to the discussion of homestay programs and their contribution to positive cross-cultural understanding is the fact that when both students from Australia and Japan exchange places in each other's societies they immediately become minorities - and are subject to the prejudices that accompany their minority status. And in my opinion this is the most important learning aspect and positive contribution to cross-cultural understanding that successful homestay programs have to offer.

Suddenly, when Japanese students go to Australia they are no longer the norm, but the exception. They have now become the gaijin (foreigner) and are accorded all the prejudice that accompanies that status. More than once have Japanese students been the subject of catcalls from passing vehicles as they walk along the street, or have received sneering looks from the local inhabitants - just as Australian students are pointed at and called "gaijin" in the trains and subway stations of Japan, or have to endure side glances or the infamous sucking of air between the teeth that disgruntled Japanese often employ when they encounter a foreigner in their midst.

Australian exchange students will know what it means to be refused to rent an apartment because they are not Japanese, or denied a Japanese bank credit card because they are considered untrustworthy - just as the Japanese student will feel the bitterness that still lingers in the hearts of many Australians for what the Japanese did to Australia - but refuse to acknowledge to this day - during the Second World War.

For the first time in their lives exchange students from both countries are thrust into a situation where they feel the crushing unfairness, humiliation and degradation that racial prejudice has to offer. They can be read about it for years in school textbooks and never understand the true implications thereof. It is only when the boot heel of racial prejudice comes crashing down *personally* does it begin to become internalized and make a lasting impression.

But if exchange students from both countries are forewarned about these facts, and instructed properly in how to deal with them in a positive and straightforward manner, the concept of racial prejudice will diminish in size and scope, and hopefully, disappear from the lexicon of all free-thinking societies.

### **PARTIAL LIST OF FURTHER POINTS TO CONSIDER**

The following is a partial list of further points to consider for anyone who would like to attempt to establish a homestay handbook for general reference throughout the educational community. For a more complete list with explanations and further ideas concerning establishing a viable homestay program please refer to my article entitled "How to Conduct a Successful Japanese ESL Overseas Homestay Program: Some Basic Concepts and Systematic Strategies" (13.) in the notes section of this paper.

1. Australian/Japanese Embassy/Consulate address and telephone number.
2. Country's emergency number.
3. City map - with dangerous areas noted.
4. College information sheet/map.
5. Transportation routes and schedules.
6. College/hotel lodging information.
7. Homestay information:
  - a. Smoking/non-smoking.
  - b. Allergies.
  - c. Pets/no pets.
  - d. Children
8. Discounts from local merchants.
9. Course descriptions/classes/schedules.
10. Master map with all host families annotated.

11. Video of the whole homestay program - make copies after editing distribute to the students.
12. Temporary student passes.
13. Bicycle rental information.
14. First meeting place - airport or pre-arranged area.
15. Before homestay is actually started - letters of introduction to be exchanged.
16. Seating on airplanes - no smoking and all together. 17. Everyone involved in administering homestay programs should have each other's business *plus* home phone number.
18. Small gift to homestay family.
19. Student to fill-out questionnaire after homestay program - good/bad points. No names on questionnaire.
20. Student *and* parents - pre and post homestay seminar/party.

## CONCLUSION

If a homestay program is to be successful all parties concerned must, first and foremost, be dedicated to the concept of cross-cultural education. They must also believe in the idea of total immersion as one of the best ways to learn another language and culture.

It is vital that all homestay Directors take it upon themselves to compile as complete a list as possible with every aspect concerning the running of a successful homestay program and use it as a guide for future reference.

I have tried to give some ideas that I thought were pertinent to the implementation of a successful homestay program and their value in contributing to positive cross-cultural understanding.

One of the best ways to insure that each person's job is completed satisfactorily with relation to the running of a successful homestay program is to have a stated general manual of procedures that can be referred to at any time to guide administrators not only in questions of policy, but also in implementing new ideas and concepts to help improve the overall concept of successful homestay programs between Australia and Japan.

In this paper I meant in no way whatsoever to espouse the idea of institutionalizing homestay programs. Far from it. What I am suggesting is that a model be developed as a "starter" to be added to - and subtracted from - when the need and opportunity arises.

I invite others to use this paper as a starting point in which those of us in the business of administering homestay programs can someday present a hands-on manual to the educational community at large that will help to make all cross-cultural understanding be viewed in an even more positive light.

We are living in very precarious times. And make no mistake about it, world war is still not ruled out as a viable military, political or even economic alternative to world leaders and the nation-states they represent. One need only witness the recent "testing" of atomic weapons by France to realize that ignorance and ill-conceived notions of grandeur will plague us well into the 21st Century and beyond.

With the year 2000 rapidly approaching and the globalization of the world economy already a reality it is of utmost importance that we learn to live, work and play together in harmony with each other.

Through properly run homestay programs and their positive contribution to cross-cultural understanding maybe we can do a small part to help put to rest, once and for all, the ever-present pre-battle equation:

Ignorance + Fear = War



Dr. David Wilmoth, Head of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, sums it up this way. "Homestay programs are among the most powerful means I know to promote international understanding and goodwill. Households that open their doors to visitors in this way do so for many reasons - interest, curiosity, conviviality among them - but the effect of even short stays can be profound for guest and host alike. The generosity of Japanese families in having an Australian visitor, for example, may lift the scales of prejudice in one day. Such contacts can be lifelong, indeed, intergenerational, as children years later look up faded entries in old address books. The future of international understanding may rest more on such simple acts of kindness than on all the treaties we can devise." (14.)

## NOTES

- (1.) Christine Senior, "Schools: Learning sans frontieres," *The International*, July 1995, page 36.
- (2.) Dr. Kenji Yamada, Individual Studies Seminar, Sugiyama University, July 17, 1995.
- (3.) Gerry Meister, Personal Letter, Head, La Trobe University Language Centre, Victoria, Australia, 3 August 1995.
- (4.) *The Oxford Reference Dictionary*, 1990 Edition, page 394.
- (5.) Sue Fujino, Personal Interview, Director of Homestay Programs, La Trobe University Language Center, Victoria, Australia, August 5, 1995.
- (6.) Graham Bell, Private Conversation, Managing Director, Bellder International, Perth, Western Australia, July 25, 1994.
- (7.) Ichiro Kawasaki, *Japan Unmasked*, Charles E. Tuttle, 1969, page 187.
- (8.) Frank Ching, "Eye on Asia," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 26 August 1993, page 26.
- (9.) "Welcome Mr. Nice Guy," *The Economist*, February 20, 1993, page 15.
- (10.) Teresa Watanabe and Mary Williams Walsh, "Facing the Demons of War Guilt," *Los Angeles Times*, Sunday, August 13, 1995, pages A-1, A-4.
- (11.) Lawrence Klepinger, "Selective Education as Opposed to Comprehensive Education in the Japanese Public Education System," *Sugiyama University Journal*, (To be published) March 1996.
- (12.) Ichiro Kawasaki, "Japan Unmasked," Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1969, page 187.
- (13.) Lawrence Klepinger, "How to Conduct a Successful Japanese ESL Overseas Homestay Program: Some Basic Concepts and Systematic Strategies," *Sugiyama University Journal*, March 1995.
- (14.) Dr. David Wilmoth, Personal Letter, Head, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, August 12, 1995.

## SUGGESTED READING MATERIAL

The following is a suggested reading list that all serious Homestay Directors should avail themselves on a regular basis with regard to gaining a broader insight into dealing with Japanese foreign exchange students.

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