

Maximizing Study Trips Abroad

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Introduction

This paper outlines ideas for improving the study trips abroad that many colleges and universities offer. Often school trips abroad are the same experience year after year. With some effort beyond the range of the typical travel agent, it is possible to begin to make substantial progress and improvements leading to a more fulfilling and authentic cultural exchange.

Recently my school in Japan organized a study trip to Hawaii for 15 social work seniors. The organizing committee set out to take the "travel agent" arranged trips to another level. The trip entailed many intriguing features and explored many new directions. Consequently, the depth of student interaction on the trip was significant.

Three charts will be offered to outline, in brief, the many tidbits of information and insights that made up the successes of the trip and the efforts of the organizing committee:

- I. The Possibilities
- II. Steps to Success
- III. Enhancing the English Aspect

The focus throughout is especially relevant for planning study trips for non-English majors, often the more difficult task. However, the offerings are applicable to trips for English majors as well.

I. The Possibilities: Notable Features of Our Study Tour to Hawaii

Full slate of events.

There was an average of 6 hours of study and site-visits, and 6 hours of recreation per day.

Very engaging lectures and site-visits.

Some of the highlights included: "hands on" experiences (lots of up-close and personal opportunities); interaction with American peers; opportunities to use English; and interaction with high-level scholars and practitioners in the field (in this case social work).

Best entertainment and recreation on the local scene.

We were fortunate to be able to receive many special arrangements through our local contacts.

First-time opportunities.

Nearly 90% of our academic lectures and site-visits were first-time opportunities for any visiting group. They represented authentic social work, beyond the scope and range of "travel agent" arrangements. The recreational activities included local favorites (there were few or no other tourists in attendance).

Tailor-made schedule.

The lecture and site-visit schedule matched the results of a pre-trip student survey, reflecting their interests and areas of specialization within social work. Last year's group, for example, included many students interested in geriatrics. The schedule for dining,

recreation, entertainment and shopping was also "tailor-made" in this fashion.

Substantial savings to students.

The entire trip was about half the price of regular school trips. The cost may have actually been even more than a 50% savings, considering depth and breadth of our student involvement. The savings were achieved through contacting lecturers, sites, vendors, etc. directly and through tapping local knowledge.

Thorough enjoyment and satisfaction by students.

The remarks by students in post-trip reports and evaluations were high.

High praise by American presenters.

The remarks on post-trip presenter evaluations were very high.

Establishment of valuable relationships.

We established many contacts for future study trips and for school research. Many professionals in our field remain in contact, making inquiries and suggestions for next year's trip. Also, there has recently been an inquiry for a sister school relationship by a state university. Student and faculty exchanges seem to be a possibility, too. Furthermore, collaborative research between our schools is being explored.

Motivation.

For our seniors, the trip served as a culmination to their studies and as a springboard for career explorations. Giving back to the community in the form of our various performances proved to be extremely fulfilling.

II. Steps to Success

Get an early start.

More options will be available if you can remain well ahead of schedule. You should start to plan for the following year's trip while on tour for the present trip. Send thank you cards or e-mail messages to express gratitude and to touch bases for the next trip.

Don't bite off more than you can chew.

Improving small aspects of the "regular tour" schedule may be enough for some situations, especially in settings resistant to change. Hopefully the appeal of the new features will spur additional future changes.

Use support agencies or offices in the community or at the university you visit.

For example, there may be some agencies set up to assist groups with volunteer service endeavors. There may be state-funded telephone "help lines" to assist with similar or miscellaneous matters. Inquire at the university or reference a local phone directory. Such agencies put our school in contact with numerous social work sites. From there, these contacts and the relationships that developed represented the engine that powered our planning, providing numerous insights, making valuable connections.

Review available information.

Review old student evaluations, schedules, etc. Former participants (teachers and students) can provide excellent insights. For starters, "don't try to fix anything that isn't broken."

Contact former presenters or service providers.

Bypassing travel agents for many, most, or all arrangements is KEY. You will often be pleasantly surprised by the help you receive from former or current presenters. Their insights, advice, and connections took our program to the next level. For example, phone calls to sites and agencies by our host school's professors on our behalf opened doors and excellent opportunities that would not have availed a travel agent. The depth of the schedule was largely attributable to this factor.

Tap local knowledge for entertainment, dining, and recreation.

Again, local knowledge beats travel agent arrangements many times. It can lead to the best values, highest quality "products", and the local favorites. It is a good way to avoid "tourist traps."

Inspect Japanese travel magazines.

They have proved to be on target and insightful. They have done their homework well. You can cross-reference prices for many things through these magazines. You can also cross-reference recommendations for dining, shopping, accommodation, recreation, etc.

Collect local phone books.

Try to obtain a local phone book set (yellow and white pages) while on tour for future use. The set is valuable for direct contacting. Also, try to obtain a copy of the university phone directory if available.

Prepare students to be active participants.

The students need to be made acutely aware of their responsibility as audience members for lectures, as partners in pair activities with American peers, as participants in site visits, as representatives of Japan, etc. Fulfilling these responsibilities can make or break the experience. (See "Enhancing the English Aspect.")

Miscellaneous.

While on tour, collect business cards; befriend many people; and keep in contact.

These contacts can be valuable assets. Again, they represent the engine that will drive future planning.

Try to implement a selection process for students.

If the trip is to be special, the better, more motivated students should be selected.

Try to develop a credit course around the trip.

It allows a pre-trip and post-trip curriculum to be developed and implemented.

If possible, conduct an exploration trip (one teacher).

It is well worth the expenditure.

If possible, have the experienced teacher travel ahead of the students and the partner teacher (a few days to week).

With no travel agent (for a few, many, or all arrangements), finalizing and double-checking will be an increased responsibility for the organizers.

Foster a spirit of giving back to the community amongst the students.

Many individuals will go out of their way to assist in planning and to give advice. Make it known to the students how fortunate they are for the assistance. Small gifts to individuals or a small monetary donation to centers (especially to the non-profit organizations) can go a long way toward keeping the relationships alive year to year. Talent presentations by students are highly recommended as a gesture of appreciation. They also make for a most memorable experience for all involved.

In planning, always opt for the definite, safe route when unsure.

For example, if wary about the reliability of a certain transportation service or the safety of a certain recreational activity). Later, experience and insights through additional contacts will allow more leeway in planning.

Understand that the nature of making arrangements, partly or wholly, outside of a travel agent is that change should be expected, even warranted, year to year.

Some of the best connections will be to places and with people that do not make a business of interacting with foreign students. Here we met some of the most genuine, caring, and giving people (in addition to being the most talented). However, they cannot be expected to hold "reservations" for schools many months in advance since 1) they have a higher agenda than meeting the interests of visiting students and 2) they tend to accept very little monetary compensation for their substantial time and effort (many non-profit organizations we interacted with refused to accept any money). Plan ahead in order to secure back-up events should the first choices fall through. (In our case, none fell through. Still it is advisable to be prepared.)

For trips for English majors, the program for language study is more often a set curriculum and schedule organized by a foreign university or language school.

Still, do not hesitate to give program directors constructive feedback for improving your participation from year to year. As a former director of such a program at a state university in America, this presenter recalls meeting requests for such things as far ranging as the following: having popular student tutor "Michael" circulated equally among the classes; arranging for extra hours of communication time with American peers; having teachers assign more/no homework; having teachers evaluate students according to criteria set by the Japanese school; increasing/decreasing the level of the curriculum; asking the cafeteria to include bottles of kim chee with the salad bar; etc., etc. As is said, it doesn't hurt to ask. Tactfulness is always appreciated.

III. Enhancing the English Aspect

Pre-trip lessons.

Our lessons included: survival English, culture, pre-lecture preparation (advanced lecture notes from American professors, though they should not always be expected), self-introductions, etc. These are just some possibilities. For example, the self-introductions were repeated at many stops on the trip. Equipped with confidence for that opening, communication more easily flowed from there.

Self-introduction booklet.

Our students wrote one-page self-introduction essays which were compiled into a booklet. The booklets were given to each presenter. They were very well received.

Student responsibility in communication.

For example, we warned our students that one to one communication (presenter to each student) is more the norm in America, even in a lecture setting. In other words, they had better pay attention, acknowledge the speaker, respond if called upon, etc., as if being spoken to directly. It seems a simple matter but, in general, students in Japan have gotten used to being lectured to as teacher (T) to the entire group of students (Ss): T---(S,S,S,S, etc.). Whereas in America, students had better be ready for communication teacher to each student: (T---S) The difference became apparent to the students from the very first lecture in America. In the night meeting, the students remarked how the professor asked questions to individuals, remembered names, re-incorporated student answers into the lecture, walked directly up to students from the podium, etc. They found it most intriguing. It kept them motivated and on their toes throughout the tour.

Representatives of Japan.

A few American professors we contacted seemed reluctant to interact with our group due to unfortunate past misunderstandings with other Japanese groups--mainly a difference in audience participation. The occurrence was relayed to the our students. It motivated the students to set a better example. The request for advanced lecture notes came from one of our students at this point in the preparations while still in Japan.

Talent/activity presentation.

We required students to be involved in group and/or solo presentations. We performed and

presented many times on the tour. It was our way to give back to community--our small token of appreciation. We rehearsed the English introductions and the explanations of the acts in Japan. The performances were very, very well received everywhere. For example, our group's talent pool included solo acts of traditional Japanese enka singing, Japanese fan dance, and karate kata; and group acts of origami paper folding, Japanese *bon odori* dancing, a cappella two-part harmony of Japanese folk songs, and a Japanese pop-song group-dance.

Japanese culture presentation.

We prepared to conduct Q&A sessions in small groups in English on Japanese culture. Each group had a different topic and made poster-size illustrations to aid conversation. These prepared mini-lessons on Japanese culture in English served as an "ice breaker" for communication on the trip in various settings.

Exchange with Japanese language class in America.

We prepared our students for small group meetings with American university students studying Japanese language. We conversed in Japanese and English. The main purpose was to show that nervousness and making mistakes are natural aspects of foreign language learning. The tables were interestingly turned between "expert and novice" as languages switched back and forth in conversation.

Nightly meetings while on tour.

We held nightly meetings (without fail) to keep our students focused on the goals we set and to discuss each day's events. These meetings also served as pre-lecture preparation time for the next day's agenda. Many excellent insights were expressed by students in these nightly meetings. Potentially mundane discussions were often lively and encouraging, lasting into the wee hours of the night. The enthusiasm was contagious and grew day by day. It is important to resist the temptation to save discussion for post-trip lessons. Opinions, questions, and feelings lose their edge and appeal after-the-fact (back in Japan). "Current and fresh" seemed to make a critical difference for discussions.

Journal/Diary in English.

Journal writing started months before the trip. The topics were sometimes social work related but were more often "open." This activity proved to be very motivating for some students.

Organized many interaction opportunities with American peers.

Though our students had ample opportunities to meet and interact with their American peers, they seemed to long for many more encounters. We will keep it in mind for subsequent planning. The interaction with American peers seemed to represent the students most enjoyable and memorable experiences.

Final Thoughts

This paper has included specific insights into the authentic experiences of our school's study trip, meant for consideration and as inspiration for other schools. The information presented is far from a blueprint plan for duplicating the trip described. Each situation will be unique, involving variables such as the focus (major), selection process (or lack thereof), the trip length, the budget, the time organizers are willing to put forth, the amount of leeway given organizers, etc.

Our school's efforts have paved the way for greater and greater possibilities. Though it took substantial time and effort to lift the project off the ground, the continuation from here seems easier and smoother as the pathways for so many aspects, big and small, have been laid. Most significantly, so many are eager to lend assistance again having enjoyed their experience with us the last time. That to us is worth more than anything else.

There may be many unknown factors initially, but it is hoped that the potential for enhancing the student experience as described offsets some of the hesitations.

<http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Higa-StudyTrips.html>