

*"Learning on the move: The value of Student Cultural Study Trips"*

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0252

The Asian Conference on Media and Mass Communication 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

In this paper we will state the case for student cultural study trips being an essential component of a student's growth and in support of this we will talk about our experience of organizing our own trip to Japan, highlighting the positive lessons we as teachers also learned from the experience. Our hosts in Japan also commented on how our students reacted positively to this immersive learning environment and how this resulted in the individual nature of their subsequent project work.

Besides the obvious educational benefits of student cultural trips, important though they are, there are other benefits to be had too. When we are taken out of our regular, familiar surroundings we are able to see ourselves with fresh eyes. In our modern, hectic daily life this is an extremely valuable opportunity, an opportunity to rediscover our true selves.

The benefits of the trips are many and include the building of self-confidence within the students, a growing awareness of other cultures, a widening of the students' horizons leading to further travel for leisure or work and a broadening of mutual understanding between nations.

Keywords: Cultural Study Trips, field trips, experiential learning, cross-cultural engagement, pedagogy of experience, nurturing self-awareness, international collaborations, social and cultural awareness, personal transformation, hands-on experiences, immersive learning environment.

## **Introduction**

Student trips overseas are organized for a number of reasons for various durations and under different circumstances. Sometimes the trips are organized during holidays or after graduation and sometimes they are part of the curriculum. In this latter case, the trip needs to fulfill certain predetermined criteria so that the trip becomes a learning experience.

This raises an interesting question: what constitutes a learning experience? Often, educational establishments insist on every activity having to include some kind of assessment that needs to be graded otherwise, it is thought, the students will not learn anything. Without debating the relative merits or failings of this attitude, there are many occasions when students learn valuable lessons and often these occasions have not had well-planned intended learning outcomes in place because they happened unexpectedly and yet the impression and memory of the experience would stay with the students for many years to come.

Our organizing team believed that we would expose the students to hands-on activities in order to create an immersive, experiential environment that would, hopefully, stimulate the students' burgeoning creativity. It was the team's belief that this immersive experience would prove to be of even greater benefit to the students than any single taught fact or classroom-based PowerPoint could hope to achieve. Our planning was based around this hypothesis and the trip would prove to be the practical test.

## **Research**

From the beginning we knew that this Cultural Trip would be comprised of two parts. First there would be a scouting trip during which our team of lecturers would go to Japan on a fact-finding mission to discover which experiences and locations would be beneficial for our students.

The second part would be the student trip itself.

At one time we considered enlisting the help of local tour guides and a coach to ferry our students and us between the hotel and our daily destination. However, we soon realized that this method would prove to be prohibitively expensive for our students. We were hoping to open up this trip to whichever students had the interest rather than only those whose families could afford the cost. It also occurred to us that the daily journey to and from each activity could be a learning opportunity and so we decided to make the trip a self-guided one.

We spent time researching in books and on the Internet in an effort to find a balance of workshops and places to visit. From all the possible activities that we investigated we eventually agreed on a final list.

At Hong Kong BoDW 2011 (Business of Design Week 2011) we joined a presentation by staff of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University that modeled field trips for cultural studies that detailed various approaches such as 'student-driven', 'network-driven', 'tutor-driven' and 'agency-driven'. In order to keep costs down and

thereby making the trip more accessible to students and to reduce the workload of students we opted for a tutor-driven method.

## **Methodology**

### **a) Experiential Learning**

The methodology adopted for the trip was based around the concept of experiential learning. Although we needed a certain amount of pre-planning and preparation for our students, we also considered that the students were primed to be open to the new, to new experiences, new influences, new customs and rituals...a new culture. The German artist and educator Josef Albers, who had been so influential at the Bauhaus and later in the USA at the Black Mountain College and Yale University, believed that practice should come before theory. He didn't wish the students to simply implement his ideas, but to develop their own through discovery or in his classes through trial and error. The trip team felt that it would be much easier to teach cultural diversity once the students had experienced the reality and pleasure of that diversity.

The scouting trip was organised just before Christmas in 2011 and we were very fortunate with the weather. Although it was cool, we enjoyed bright sunshine for the entire week. Another consideration was the academic calendar in Japan. It does not coincide with the Hong Kong academic calendar so we needed to carefully select the dates of both the scouting trip and the later student trip so that we would be able to meet students and staff of local institutions.

### **b) Itinerary Planning**

Our itinerary was quite full with at least two separate workshops or visits each day. In order to reach the final version of our intended itinerary we passed through several earlier versions until we had found the most efficient method to incorporate the chosen activities into the 7 days of our trip. Sometimes our decisions were guided by geographical considerations, sometimes because the selected workshop could not supply English-speaking support or even because some of the activities were available on only a limited number of days in the week. The team tried to find activities that reflected different aspects of Japanese culture. Besides the famous tea ceremony, we highlighted pottery workshops, roketsu fabric dyeing, mochi confectionary creating, weaving, fabric hand-dyeing and also walking tours through some of the historic and interesting districts of Kyoto.

Eventually we reached what we felt to be the best arrangement of workshops and activities to try out during the scouting trip but despite all this effort we still ended up with situations in which some team members had to travel down to Nara in the morning before returning to Kyoto in time for a walking tour around the Gion district in the afternoon. On more than one occasion when the team had to travel from one activity to the next, there was not even enough time to stop for lunch and everyone had to make do with a light snack on the move.

### c) Accommodation and Food consideration (Pedagogy of Experience)

The team put some considerable thought into what kind of accommodation we should provide for the students. Of course the cost was high on the agenda but a lot of thought was also directed towards creating an 'authentic' living experience which would, the team hoped, reinforce the overall character of the trip. Besides hotels in both Kyoto and Osaka that would form a base at the beginning and end of the trip, the team also experienced a temple stay. This presented an opportunity to sleep on the tatami mat within a refreshingly tranquil atmosphere, which came as a welcome break from the hectic life in Hong Kong. The team considered this experience as particularly valuable. Besides the restful sleeping arrangements, there were traditional Japanese meals and also the communal bathing which is a unique feature of Japanese culture.

The temple was a little remote from the centre of Kyoto but was still easily accessible by local train. Each morning the day began at around 6:00am with the morning bell signaling that breakfast would begin soon. Each evening there was a curfew at 9:00pm after which the main gates would be locked. The team felt that this environment would be very interesting and stimulating for our students. Within the quite large grounds of the temple, there was a working kindergarten and during our short stay we saw Japanese tourists also staying there and on one day we saw a film crew working in one part of the complex.

Lunchtime and dinner each day also gave us the opportunity to check out local prices for the benefit of our students. Besides checking out restaurants we noticed that in some locations small vans and motor scooters park and sell reasonably priced food such as bento boxes and other packed lunches. Other fast food type establishments had an array of vending machines on the premises which offered a fair range of cooked food.

It was worth all the effort and all the running around because it left us in the position of being able to make well informed decisions regarding which activities would be beneficial for our students.

### d) Pre-trip Workshops



*Japanese Language Learning*

As part of the preparation for the student trip we arranged two activities for the students. Firstly one of our faculty's senior lecturers, who is Japanese, agreed to conduct a short introduction to the Japanese language. Of course it was realized that it would be impossible for the students to gain even an elementary grasp of the language in such a short time, but it was felt that the activity would help to foster team spirit between the students and to generate a sense of excitement and

expectancy in anticipation of the trip. The students enjoyed the session and had fun taking turns trying to order food and drinks or role playing brief conversations at the railway station etc.

The second activity was a screening of a Japanese movie, with Chinese subtitles that helped to introduce the students to the way of life in Japan and to the music of the Japanese language.



*Cultural Trip Activities Poster*

The organizing team had pinpointed local workshops on Chinese tea culture, which could provide a contrast to that found in Japan, and the students were encouraged to attend by themselves. There would also be student projects during which students would form groups to investigate certain cultural elements that are found within both Chinese and Japanese culture. They would begin the project in Hong Kong and continue their investigations and comparisons in Japan. Their initial findings would form the presentations planned to take place at Kyoto Saga University of arts.

## **In Japan**

The student trip left Hong Kong in June 2012 with considerably different weather conditions from the scouting trip. There was no need for coats, scarves, or gloves this time. We had been warned about the likelihood of rain in June but we were spared any of that and for the whole eight days we were graced with wonderful weather.

### **a) University Visit (International Collaboration)**

During the eight days spent in Japan, one of the highlights was the visit to Kyoto Saga University of Arts. The staff of the host university had been very welcoming and we had arranged for our students to present their project work so far in the form of a PowerPoint presentation with each group introducing the local students and staff to the topic under investigation. All the presentations were conducted in English, which was the common language for any interactions during the trip.

Each of our 6 student groups presented their study topics before the local students introduced us to the subject areas they were investigating. This was very interesting and informative and gave us an indication as to how the local students conduct their study and what areas of community related and sustainable projects they were researching.

### **b) Cross-cultural Engagement**

Our students' presentations included a group studying Cantonese Opera, which originated in Southern China as entertainment for wealthy people and which combines music, singing, acting, martial arts and acrobatics.



Another group of students were investigating the Man Mo Temple in Hong Kong, dedicated to the gods of literature and war and traditionally worshipped by students hoping for success in the civil examinations of imperial China.

Following the presentations, our students exchanged gifts with the local students and this was an opportunity for them to get to know each other. This gift exchange was conceived as an icebreaker. The students were asked to prepare something, not too expensive, which had some connection with or represented some aspect of Hong Kong culture, as they perceive it. The trip team purposely did not instruct them on what type of gift to prepare so that they had to consider the choice along with the knowledge that the local Japanese students would be preparing a similar kind of gift to give in return.

#### *Student Cultural Gift Exchange*



*Group photo outside Saga University*

It was wonderful to watch them communicating through a mixture of English, a few Japanese terms and even some note-book written communication using Hanji characters which both our Hong Kong students and the Japanese students could understand.

After the gift exchanges had been completed and the staff had also exchanged souvenirs, we were given a comprehensive tour around the local campus during which we saw first hand

the educational attitude and methods of the university. It was encouraging to see how both traditional crafts-based skills and techniques were being taught alongside digital image creation methods and were therefore available for the students to investigate within their individual practice whether that is painting, printing onto Kimonos or Sculpture.

#### c) Personal Transformation

Finally, following the completion of the tour and a group photo-taking opportunity outside the main entrance of the university, everyone walked from the campus along the Katsura river to Arashyama where the students had some free time to themselves to look at the beautiful bridge, the gorgeous scenery, the picturesque river and all the delightful little shops which line the roads there. From Arashyama we all caught the lovely small local train to visit the Ryoanji temple with its famous Zen rock garden. This was a wonderful experience for all. At first the temple and garden were overwhelmed by the number of visitors but slowly, as people began to leave the temple grounds close to the time of closing, a quiet, tranquil atmosphere descended onto the local environment and the lucky people who remained to experience it. Time seemed to slow down and a mood of introspection and calmness pervaded the grounds of the temple and we all later felt rejuvenated as we walked back to the train station.

The intangible benefits to the students from these experiences could be seen clearly by all. Hiraku Kusubayashi, Associate Professor in the Department of Design, Kyoto

Saga University commented on “the high motivation and expectation of participating students”. He further commented on the “enthusiasm and interest displayed by the students” during the gift exchange.

Hiraku also went on to comment on the students’ work and especially their photographs, which went beyond the usual tourist-type photographs: “Each student had their own angle and perspective with an individual vision, attempting to communicate in their own way what they come across during the trip. This can be enough evidence to conclude the trip was successful” added Hiraku.

Many of these photographs and memories of the trip were later uploaded to the trip Facebook page – HKDI Japan Kyoto cultural trip, so that everyone including our new friends in Japan could share in the memory and experience of the journey.

#### d) Accommodation (Immersive Learning Environment)

Although the team hadn’t managed to find a temple large enough to host the student group in Kyoto, suitable accommodation was found not far away in the lovely small town of Uji within walking distance of the ceramic workshop where the students would be introduced to pottery making.



*Harmonious group dinner at Ujikameishiro*

The accommodation that was found was in the style of the Ryokan guesthouses found around Japan and was large enough to host the entire student group. There were two linked blocks and we were able to arrange the students grouping male and female students together sharing rooms large enough for 4-6 students respectively.

This accommodation provided Japanese style meals and also had a communal bathhouse so that the students were able to experience this. The students were also introduced to the custom of wearing slippers everywhere indoors and leaving them outside each of our rooms, and the kimonos provided for each person to wear before and after bathing and for bedtime. The students found this all great fun, along with the tea and tasty sweets left in each room for the guests to enjoy.

During the two days the group stayed in Uji, the staff team found a bicycle renting company and rented out the entire 16 bicycles owned by the company who delivered all the bicycles to the accommodation and promptly closed for the day.



After breakfast each day there was a briefing session during which the staff team reminded the students of the

itinerary for the day and how they should prepare. Following the briefing the students gathered their things and assembled outside the accommodation. The student group that had been allocated as the day leaders issued instructions to the rest of the students and then led the way to the activity venue. At the close of each day each student group met their respective teacher and held a tutorial / debriefing session during which the day's events were discussed and the tutors suggested points for consideration and references that may have a connection to the students' project work. The team felt it was important that the students reflected on the day's experiences and were encouraged to think about the relationships to the traditional activities and to place them into the context of Japanese culture.

#### e) Asahi Pottery (Hands-on Experience)

Before leaving Hong Kong all the students had been briefed on details of the pottery workshop and they had prepared drawings, which they would use as guides to modify the basic clay vessel that would be created with the guidance of the local pottery master.



*Student Aaa's pottery design 'Forest'*

Before the workshop began the students were treated to a guided tour of the premises that included the wonderful large step-kiln.

The master explained how this workshop had been in his family for 14 generations and in the past had used wood from the surrounding forest and after making traditional tea bowls using the kiln, the bowls would then be utilised to drink green tea, which is grown in the surrounding hills. The team discovered that the area around Uji is famous for its green tea production, which was first praised in the 1100s.

### Conclusion

Finally, with the trip completed and the student projects finalized and presented, the team organised a sharing session during which we could relay the whole story of the trip to the rest of the faculty.

#### a) Nurturing Self-awareness



*Sharing Session Poster*

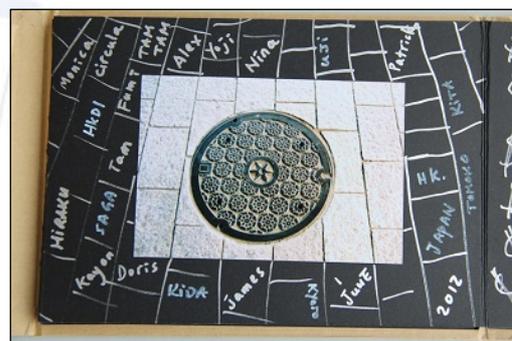
In keeping with the nature of the rest of the trip, we encouraged the students to take the lead. They responded remarkably well and created an entertaining and comical play based on memories and observations from the trip. In this role-play, they reenacted a dream about the Kyoto trip with one of the students playing the part of a

Japanese passenger. It was as if even in their dreams the students had developed a sense of camaraderie. They acted as host, MC, actors and rounded off the trip experience perfectly. The students received their certificates of completion and there was a group photo-taking session along with other students, teachers and members of the senior management who had joined the sharing session.

Afterwards it was a strange feeling to think that the project was over after over a year's worth of planning. The students had gained so much from the experience. They had developed valuable skills and abilities to engage in teamwork, organising day trips and excursions and had visibly grown in confidence.

This confidence was so obviously displayed during the sharing session role-play and in the enthusiastic and mature way that they had approached and handled it. This development was definitely an intangible learning outcome and would no doubt stand the students in good stead in the future. These wonderful memories will stay with the students for many years to come.

The students later informed us that they planned to go back to Kyoto after their graduation as a celebration; it shows how the trip is important and has strengthened their friendship. It also shows how valuable the trip was to them and that they wish to recreate the experience with the same group of friends.



*Trip Photo Album*

As a follow up the team compiled several photographic albums, which were signed by the team and students and then sent to the different institutions and friends we had met in Kyoto and Osaka.

#### b) Pedagogy of Experience

The team needed to compile a trip report, which summarized the whole trip from the planning stage through to the sharing session. It was clear to us that the project work the students' were required to complete had certainly helped to focus their attention on specific areas of the culture and design that related to the topic they had chosen to investigate. However, we also noticed that the students had also benefited in another way, a way that is difficult to measure and is not related to assessments or strictly pre-determined deliverables. Once the students' curiosity and enthusiasm has been awakened, they were able to respond positively to the new culture they were now immersed in. Some of these benefits could be seen immediately as previously shy and withdrawn students began to come out of their shell and began joining group activities, initiating discussions and investigating aspects of the local area.

The decision to make the trip a self-guided one proved to have been a wise choice. As we had no local guide to show us around and provide local information, each group assigned to a particular day needed to research and prepare for the day on which they would lead the rest of the students from the hotel to the intended destination. We as teachers let them lead the way and only intervened if it was obvious that they were travelling in the wrong direction. This didn't happen too often. This strategy was very

successful and it nurtured a sense of responsibility in the students and gave them confidence in their own decision-making. This was yet another of the benefits gained from the trip.

Other benefits would not be so immediately observable. These impressions and memories will live within the students and will slowly rise to the surface at some point in the future. The knowledge and experience gained during the trip is within each of the students and will be a valuable resource for the future whether that is for their education, work experience or simply in their leisure time.

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