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Jean Pak

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Bridging Differences: Building Community in Short-Term Abroad Programs

Jean Pak

This paper is a personal reflection and exploration of the author's short-term study abroad experience in Apia, Samoa. The narrative will consider the elements of one author's personal experiences building community abroad in a limited time span and how these elements contributed to a successful short-term study abroad experience. The author will also examine the implications of these experiences, and of adopting a community-building perspective for short-term study abroad programs within higher education.

Short-term abroad programs are an increasingly attractive means for a study abroad experience. The shorter duration of these programs, several weeks compared to a semester, make it easier for students to travel and receive credit toward graduation. While some critics of short-term abroad programs have questioned whether it is possible to build a sense of community between students and a host culture, I believe that short-term abroad programs can successfully build community. This paper focuses on short-term programs that occur during the intersession period between semesters.

The term *community*, as used in this article, is defined as a group of people who share a common goal. To build a cross-cultural community, it is critical to create an experience that allows students to understand the host culture beyond the surface level. This can be accomplished when students are encouraged to utilize the following tools: story sharing, reciprocity, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication, and cultural immersion and adaptation. These concepts provide a framework for students abroad as they experience new cultures and explore the relationship between their own lives and the lives of people overseas. Through these experiences, students will learn more about themselves, become more globally rounded citizens, and make connections with individuals abroad in the first steps toward building a global community.

The tools that I describe for successful short-term student abroad programs are drawn from my own experiences in one such program in Samoa. I recognize that all students or higher education professionals may not accept this vision of cultural immersion and adaptation. However, if we strive to create a non-tourist model for short-term study abroad programs, then it is possible to build community. It is a

Jean Pak is finishing her second year in the HESA program and an assistantship in the Center for Cultural Pluralism. She graduated from UC Davis in 2004 and her hometown is in Fremont, CA.

collective effort worth taking to enrich our worldview and share with communities abroad who we are and why we travel to their country. The responsibility rests on the student to become an active learner and inquisitor and on the instructor to encourage such a mindset.

Sharing Stories

Wherever a story comes from, whether it is a familiar myth or a private memory, the retelling exemplifies the making of a connection from one pattern to another: a potential translation in which narrative becomes parable and the once upon a time comes to stand for some renascent truth. (Bateson, 1990)

Stories bring people together by illuminating the common and shared themes within their experiences. David Chanoff captures this idea when he says, “[A story is] not merely telling you things; it’s telling them in a way that reveals the habits of mind and quality of feeling” (as cited in Nash, 2004, p. 23). Stories draw us deep into conversations that are recited in a vivid and lively manner, and as we take risks to share our stories, our shared vulnerability connects us with one another.

This experience with stories was certainly similar to my own. I began my journey toward this realization at 5 p.m. on a warm and bright Tuesday at Los Angeles International Airport, when I decided to check in for my flight to Apia, Samoa five hours early. Unusually for me, I did not have my iPod or cell phone to pass the time. Luckily, my instructor Carla had also arrived early and suggested we talk to a woman sitting alone nearby. I sat down next to her and found myself suddenly intrigued and interested in the conversation. The Samoan woman, named Rina, narrated her life story through visual imagery, detailed observations, and anecdotes to which I could easily relate. She talked about the cancelled and missed flights she encountered while returning home, the love she had for wearing blue jeans, the significance of family, and the Samoan coconuts that she craved to drink. Our conversation took us deeper; Rina then talked about losing her significant other and how unsupported she felt while making choices around funeral arrangements. While I had not experienced this event, I understood this feeling of losing someone.

I shared with Rina the challenges of balancing traditional Asian cultural values and gender roles with Western values such as independence. I realized we both shared a similar love for home-cooked meals and missed our families deeply. Because of the unspoken trust and similar experiences that Rina and I shared, she was moved to show me a copy of her loved one’s obituary. Through hearing Rina’s story and sharing my own experiences, I was comforted as I began my journey abroad. Rina and I both were able to move past the sadness in our stories and find peace.

Throughout this process, my instructor was a key figure. She helped facilitate our conversation by teaching me two key concepts: listening and silence. I watched closely as my instructor, Carla, gently asked one or two questions and then listened. When she asked questions, the gentleness and tone of her voice allowed the conversation to continue deeper and deeper. As she modeled the process for me, I discovered that listening could be supportive. Sometimes, there are no words to comfort someone; but our presence alone can affirm the person. This experience helped me realize that honest dialogue between people will only occur through the thoughtful and intentional construction of personal questions. When instructors model such skills and practices, they prepare and teach their students to communicate in this way—to ask questions politely without being invasive. Instructors can also share with their students that when no words are being spoken in conversation, students can affirm their partners in dialogue by being present in the moment.

Reciprocity

*There is one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all
one's life—reciprocity. (Confucius, n.d.)*

For me, the practice of building community abroad was further strengthened by my contributions to the host families with whom I stayed. Reciprocity or “mutual exchange [between more than one person]” means that one person is not bearing his or her soul or doing all of the work while others sit and listen or reap the benefits (American Heritage Dictionary, 2000). Though students go abroad to learn more about another culture, this traditional idea is very one-sided. Finding ways to encourage reciprocal learning between the international community and the student can make the exchange more balanced. In my experience, embracing the concept of reciprocity meant finding ways to give back to the community in which I was traveling.

While abroad, the families in the villages I visited opened their homes and cooked many delicious and filling meals for me. Because I was the guest, they were initially reluctant to accept my offers to help. However, I continued to express a desire to help with even the smallest tasks because the time and energy involved in preparing meals for around 15 guests was not simple. I talked about the importance of helping in my upbringing, which was one of the values I had learned from my own family. The Samoan families saw how much it meant to me to help, and after some persuasion, they assigned me tasks such as sweeping and preparing breakfast.

This experience taught me that even when families do not ask for help, they will rarely turn down an offer of assistance. In my experience, giving in small ways helped me to connect with those individuals with whom I was living. The tasks

involved may have seemed trivial, but the time spent together assisted in our creation of a cross-cultural community. The discussions in which we engaged while completing our tasks also contributed to our understanding of one another's cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and values.

Through this experience, I also came to believe that sharing one's identities (race, gender, etc.) creates a sense of reciprocity that enhances the process of building community. While I had hoped to avoid the "What are you?" question, I discovered that it was inevitable. This question, while uncomfortable, ultimately became an important lesson for me. When people asked me about my identity and I responded "Asian American," our dialogue continued. People were curious about my ethnic identity rather than my racial identity as an Asian American. When I talked about my Chinese Indonesian heritage and the traditions of my culture, questions about my family background and history surfaced. As this conversation continued, I realized that the values of my Chinese Indonesian tradition were in many ways similar to those of the Samoan tradition. My discovery of these similarities brought me closer to the Samoan people. Through this experience, I came to believe that no matter what racial or ethnic group with which we identify, all people have a culture. By sharing our cultural values, traditions, and stories, we discover our commonalities and build stronger relationships with each other, strengthening our cross-cultural community.

Intercultural Sensitivity

The idea of building community continues with the development of intercultural sensitivity.

The concept can be defined as being able to recognize multiple perspectives on an event or behavior, to recognize one's own cultural values and those of others, and to pick up on verbal and nonverbal signals. (Intercultural Competencies, n.d., para. 1)

The process of developing intercultural sensitivity includes understanding and accepting the many factors that contribute to the lives of people from other cultures. These include economic privilege, clothing and dress, the effects of globalization, and the development of sustainable economies. As I saw the permeation of our products, music, and clothing abroad, I better understood how difficult it is to escape the influence of the U.S. The products sold and the clothing worn by many Samoans were no different than in the United States. Mainstream music (Top 40 Billboard music), by artists such as Sean Paul, was played loudly in the markets, and Samoans were seen wearing jeans instead of their traditional long skirts. As Dolby (2004) describes it, "America has been embraced by people [abroad]" (p. 22).

Economic Privilege

Being from the United States elevated my socioeconomic status in Samoa, whether

or not I wanted it to. As a student with a graduate assistantship, I knew that I was privileged to attend graduate school without having to worry about paying tuition. The tuition remission I received reduced my cost burden for the trip, and I paid at least \$2,000 less than other students. Education, particularly post-secondary education, is a luxury that many Samoans cannot afford. Samoan children pay for tuition, supplies, uniforms, and more. I met many individuals who talked about working every day with the hopes of sending their children abroad to receive an education.

Similarly, traveling to a developing country where the exchange rate favors the United States was another indicator of my privilege. The currency exchange rate of one U.S. dollar to seven Samoan *tala* meant that my money could be stretched over time. I could eat at a modest price and buy handcrafts such as bowls or jewelry for prices much less than it would cost at home. This presented a dilemma for me: Do I refrain from excessive spending, even though I can afford the purchases? A Samoan man whom I met illustrated the dilemma clearly when I admitted feeling uncomfortable with this wealth. This man asked me, “Do you think you are too good to spend your money here?” (personal communication, August, 2006). I reflected on the power of my economic privilege and realized that I was perceived by many Samoans as a rich American. This financial wealth dilemma exists for travelers in other developing regions such as Asia, Africa, and South and Central America.

Sustainable Economies

With an enhanced awareness of my own economic privilege, I was able to make conscious choices about how I spent my money. The man who had earlier questioned my purpose in his country taught me a valuable lesson about a sustainable economy. He said, “as long as you spend your money in the markets owned by the people or purchase crafts made in the villages, it’ll [make a difference]” (personal communication, August, 2006). Instead of spending my money at McDonalds or expensive restaurants, I purchased crafts in the marketplace sold by Samoan families. Through this experience, I came to understand that keeping money in the local Samoan economy ensures that the community, rather than an upper-level manager in a corporation, retains control. As a result, communities can use the money toward preserving their culture and society and supporting their families. This is an issue in Samoa, just as it is in the United States. The sustainable economy can be further supported when students on a short-term program carry out sustainable principles in their home country, contributing money to the local communities both abroad and in their own communities.

Clothing and Dress

Through this experience, I also learned to be sensitive about my attire. Sometimes, students may forget that the clothing they wear in the United States may not be appropriate in other countries. The traditional Samoan clothing, consisting of a *lavalava* (a long skirt) and a t-shirt covering my shoulders and legs, was new to me. I realized that I was in a different environment and that my Western ideas of dress did not fit in Samoa. As a guest in another country, I respected the Samoan cultural beliefs related to dress and skin exposure by learning to wear traditional clothing. As I learned to apply the techniques that community members taught for tying my *lavalava*, I continued to form connections. Moments and experiences such as this allowed me to see and join in a cultural tradition, while continuing to build relationships and a cross-cultural community with Samoans. My instructors were also instrumental throughout this process, as they wore attire appropriate to the culture and demonstrated various methods for tying my *lavalava*. Additionally, they provided reading materials in our pre-trip meetings that assisted me in understanding the cultural significance of this attire.

Intercultural Communication

Understanding the role of language in communication style also helped my classmates and me to bridge the gap between students and the host culture. Intercultural communication recognizes that the manner in which we talk has an impact on the message that is conveyed (Bennett, 1998). For example, non-verbal communication helped me connect with Samoans who did not speak English or had limited knowledge of the language. I remember my excitement at meeting children in one of the villages we visited. One girl, with big brown eyes and curly hair, greeted me with a huge smile as I stepped into the *fale* (house). My limited understanding of the Samoan language made it difficult for us to communicate and understand each other. When I asked her in English for her name, she responded in a manner that I could not understand. One of the other children helped me to translate the question. The girl then started spelling her name out loud while I attempted to pronounce it. After much practice, I could pronounce the girl's name, Tuumulinga, correctly. Our interactions were frequent and always non-verbal. I paid close attention to her hands and facial expressions as she grabbed a bunch of rocks and took my hands. I learned that there was a purpose behind the rocks; she was trying to teach me to play the game *aky*. Therefore, every time I said "aky" it was a cue to gather rocks for our game. I still attempted to speak English, at times saying I wanted smaller rocks or I wanted to trade my big rocks for her small rocks. However, I found that demonstrating what I was communicating helped us to better understand each other's cues. This recurring game of rocks was our connection with each other that resulted in a special relationship. While I did not know the words for *goodbye*, the picture that I drew for her and the hug that I gave helped to communicate her impact on me.

Even though we may not speak the language of another culture, we can still connect cross-culturally through observations and non-verbal communication. This can be achieved by being patient with ourselves and other people, and at the same time being committed to trying non-traditional communication methods. When students cannot speak the language of the host country, other methods such as drawing pictures or using hand signals might be alternatives to verbal communication.

Implications

The experiences I had in Samoa were not only personally rewarding, but also can be viewed as a set of good practices for fellow student affairs practitioners and instructors of travel courses. Utilizing the concepts I described in my personal reflection, I have developed the following recommendations.

Sharing Stories

The process of sharing stories that was described in Samoa can be utilized both in American classrooms and abroad. Instructors can encourage this collaborative learning process, recognizing that it is common to many cultures outside of the United States, but is frequently overlooked within our country. The use of non-dominant pedagogies can also assist students in retaining and validating their own cultural values and traditions. This might include encouraging students to contribute or participate in the community through service projects and or developing sustainability programs that supports global learning.

Additionally, silence in the classroom can be powerful tool, especially when an instructor is facilitating a heated discussion. Instead of feeling pushed to generate questions, instructors may recognize that silence can help people reflect on the conversation and its meaning. Silence is powerful because it can provide a sense of peace. It allows strong emotions to be present and conveys the message that words are not always needed to comfort someone. Similarly, listening skills are critical in focusing on the conversation rather than allowing the thoughts in our mind to wander. Also, encouraging students to ask clarifying questions before making assumptions can prevent misunderstandings from occurring. At the same time, silence is a privilege, and instructors must encourage their students to take risks instead of hiding behind their silence.

Reciprocity

Instructors can support and encourage relationships among students and host families by sharing information with students about the host families and their roles. Also, having open discussions with students regarding the significance of being guests in a foreign country is critical. These conversations can bring an increased awareness for students, helping them find ways to contribute to their experience

abroad. It is also important that instructors work to create a safe space in which students may reflect on their own identities and cultures. Students can only develop a better understanding of others once they are aware of themselves. This process can be facilitated in a variety of ways. One example might be to ask students to write short narrative pieces about their family histories and experiences. This self-reflection, in addition to teaching students about themselves, will allow them to find similarities between their own experiences and the values and practices of the culture being studied. As building community involves a knowledge both of self and of others, this reflective piece is crucial to student learning, and to utilizing study abroad programs to create a global community.

Intercultural Sensitivity

Instructors are also encouraged to dedicate time before the travel experience to the topics of intercultural sensitivity and communication skills. As students come to recognize the ways in which a person's communication style is influenced by his or her culture, they will be more comfortable in environments in which non-dominant communication styles are expressed. For example, many students in the United States believe that eye contact is essential in respectful conversations. However, this is not a commonly held value outside of Western cultures. Additionally, the experience and environment of higher education can be a culture shock for new college students. Student affairs practitioners have a responsibility to assist new students in their transitions through the creation and maintenance of safe and welcoming environments. This might be connecting students with community members, instructors, or administrators who could serve as role models.

Instructors of these short-term abroad programs can also support students' understanding of sustainable economies. They may explain how a family might use the money from selling handcrafts to support their children's education. Or, instructors might arrange for opportunities to meet and talk with community leaders involved in sustainability efforts so that students could learn firsthand what their money funds. Instructors frequently make the decision regarding where a group will be staying during the trip. In addition to encouraging students to stay with host families, instructors can also make a commitment to live in the village and contribute to local merchants rather than to corporate hotels.

Intercultural Communication

It is uncommon to find a classroom in which all students communicate in the same way. Instructors therefore must become accustomed to facilitating conversations among a diverse group of communicators. This demand is only increased when the communication occurs cross-culturally. Instructors and administrators alike must find ways to encourage respect for varying communications styles and can open the door to conversation by acknowledging that these differences exist. Discussion about non-verbal communication prior to travel may assist students in

communicating with individuals who are unfamiliar with the students' language.

Together, these tools for building community honor the values and traditions of both the host and visiting cultures. Higher education must continue to demonstrate a commitment to cross-cultural learning and interactions, reflected in instructional teaching and co-curricular experiences. This means providing students the opportunity to engage in learning globally as well as locally.

Conclusion

Building a cross-cultural community abroad is a multi-dimensional and complex process. In order for short-term abroad programs to continue building community, students must be encouraged to play an active role in the trip. Instead of arranging for students to sit in a classroom lecture, they could instead be provided the opportunity to meet with local community members. Additionally, instructors can arrange for students to live with families who will provide meals and hospitality. These types of experiences allow students to become active members of their communities and participate in discussions and activities with community members. Tammy L. Lewis and Richard A. Nisembaum (2005) discussed the integration of research and service in a short-term study abroad program in Costa Rica. It is this balance of academic and service-learning that enriched my understanding of Samoan culture. Through the conversations and experiences I had with Samoan individuals, I was able to connect my experience abroad to my classroom learning about internationalization. Instructors interested in developing programs might consider utilizing these concepts to help students learn about another culture, experience daily life in another country, and dialogue with members of a different community. These actions can result in long-lasting and meaningful friendships, and are the initial steps to building community with people across the globe.

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