

Study Abroad Reflection through Guided Blogging with Social Networking Services

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Abstract

Returning study abroad students often report overall personal growth and an increase in intercultural understanding. Yet classes for returnees can sometimes lack direction or purpose. One possible contributor to this issue is that study abroad students may have difficulty reflecting upon their formative experiences as they often have limited opportunities to document their experiences and observations during their time overseas. This paper describes a pilot project which used the Facebook social networking service as a platform for students to document and share their cultural observations and reflections during a medium-term study abroad experience. These guided blogs created a valuable record of students' cultural discoveries during their study abroad experience. This record allowed for a thorough analysis and discussion of cultural differences and the cross-cultural interactional strategies and skills that students developed in their time abroad.

Introduction

Each year, Japan sends approximately 50-60,000 students abroad (MEXT, 2015). With the amount of college undergraduates joining medium-term (i.e. one or two semester) study abroad programs, many universities have developed pre- and post-study abroad language and culture support programs. These programs are designed to prepare students for the challenges of study abroad before they depart and

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to help them ‘unpack’ their experiences upon their return.

Most universities send students abroad under the trusted care of host institution’s ESL programs. However, given the lack of accountability to their home institutions in Japan, participants may have limited opportunities or reasons to document their learning while they are overseas. When they return, students may forget or understate their observations and struggles and the valuable lessons they learned while adjusting to their host-country’s culture. This can be problematic because very often this kind of personal growth from cross-cultural understanding represents a core objective of many study abroad programs (Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Holmes, Bavieri, & Ganassin, 2015).

Anecdotally, students who return from study-abroad programs often vaguely report an experience with culture shock. That is, they describe feeling initial anxiety in their new social environment, then gradually gaining an acceptance and appreciation of their host country’s culture. While this kind of broad observation characterizes the goal of cross-cultural understanding, it does not clearly reflect the struggle towards intercultural competence that a medium-term study abroad experience often entails. Students may not remember their experiences clearly enough to allow for detailed, reflective, comparative learning when they return to Japan.

Previous research indicates that creating a detailed record of experiences that students have overseas can increase their cultural competence (Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Lee, 2013). For example, Nakayama, Sixian, and Mann (2013, p.24) argue that “more long-term learner impact might be encouraged by getting students to document real time insights during their stay abroad and reflecting on these diary entries at a later date.” They reason that such a record could help students to remember and “activate further cross-cultural or linguistic awareness” (p.24).

Background

This pilot project was conducted at a private university in central Japan. Students in this study abroad program spent nine to ten-months at different host institutions in one of five countries: Australia, England, Ireland, Malaysia, or The United States.

The students’ pre-departure preparations consisted of two semesters of credited courses at their home institution at the end of their first year and the beginning of their second year of university in Japan. Participants took mandatory comparative-cultural courses in Japanese as well as English-medium reading, listening, comparative-culture discussion, and presentation courses. After returning to Japan, students took two to three intensive “returnee” courses, designed to both review their study abroad experiences and to address the challenges and opportunities that

they might encounter in the future.

The administration, students, and teachers generally agreed that the pre-departure courses satisfactorily prepared students for their time abroad. However, there was wide concern that the courses for returnees lacked direction and purpose. The author, in cooperation with the university's Center for International Studies, set out to improve the course by creating course materials to connect the pre-departure and returnee courses.

Methodology

Upon their return from overseas, the students took a required credited comparative culture discussion and presentation course. The course was structured as a review and extension of their *pre-departure* comparative culture discussion and presentation course. The topics addressed in the pre-departure course included those common to study abroad preparatory courses such as: Food, Housing, Gestures, Sports and Hobbies, Transportation, Homestays, Travel and Sightseeing, Money and Tipping, Health, Crime and Safety, Etiquette and Taboos, University Life, and Culture Shock.

The project involved students recording their observations on cultural differences related to a selection of these topics while they were abroad and that these observations would become the content for interactional activities in the returnees' course. To this end, we sought a method which could serve the purposes of the project and meet the following criteria:

1. Easy to implement- The method needed to be one which students could use regularly and easily.
2. Verifiable- The students needed to be held accountable for regularly submitting their blog postings as their time abroad progressed- that is, they could not procrastinate and complete all of them at the end of their stay.
3. Public- Because the Center for International Studies wanted to share the students experiences abroad as a public relations instrument, it was necessary to make the platform a public one- to be accessible by those interested in the study abroad program.

Several methods were considered. Paper notebooks were judged to be difficult to verify or share publicly, audio recordings and video blogs were determined to be too technically difficult to implement, as was the university's content management system which was bound to the Japanese version of Microsoft Windows. Other internet-based platforms such as popular Japanese blogging sites, shared (wiki-style)

documents, and online forums were also considered, but determined to have undesirable limitations. Ultimately, it was decided to adopt a Social Networking Services (SNS) platform. As Facebook and Twitter were known to be the most used SNS platforms by students of the program, Facebook seemed like the option which had the most potential to meet all of the above criteria. Godwin-Jones (2016, p.12) points out how Facebook “provides a communication channel with which students feel comfortable and which therefore they are likely to use regularly.”

An examination of past research reveals ambivalence regarding the role of Social Networking Services within study abroad programs. Since over a decade ago, SNS has been recognized as a portal to communicate with study abroad students (Murray & Waller, 2007). Yet, some authors claim that the use of SNS should be discouraged during study abroad because the connectivity they afford can detract from an immersive study abroad experience (Huesca, 2013; Trentman, 2013; Gortler, 2015). Others (e.g. Mitchell, 2012; Godwin-Jones, 2016) argue that it is these very affordances that can make social networking services powerful tools for language and cultural learning.

In the end, it was decided that Facebook would be implemented, and, to ensure suitability for PR purposes, the students would email their posts to the Center for International Studies who would then review them and post them to the Center’s official Facebook site. Each month during their stay overseas, students were required to submit a 3-5 paragraph, blog-like Facebook post in Japanese on a topic related to cross-cultural observations. They were also asked to include relevant photos and videos. To encourage regular compliance and accountability, the assignment sheet was also distributed to student’s guardians and teachers of the pre-departure and returnee courses. To encourage peer interaction and mutual support, students were also asked to respond to each other’s observational posts.

From among the topics of the course, nine blog topics were chosen based on their applicability for the project and the returnee course. The topics were then sequenced to address issues as they might become relevant to the students during their study abroad experience. The topics are listed here and the full assignment sheet is included as Appendix 1:

1. First Impression
2. Food
3. University Life
4. Manners, Etiquette, and Taboos
5. Gestures
6. Health
7. Talking About Japan

8. Hobbies, Sports, and Pastimes
9. Classes

The students' blog posts were integrated as core material into the returnees' English comparative culture discussion and presentation course. Students consequently had access to a record of the progression of their cultural understanding, assumptions, and awareness before, during, and after their study abroad experience. This material was used as a basis for coursework such as reflective activities, class discussion, and final presentations on cultural differences. This allowed for a thorough analysis and discussion of cultural differences and the cross-cultural interactional strategies, skills, and competencies they developed in their time abroad.

Discussion

The blogs served their purpose as timely and relevant material to guide the returnee's course. They allowed for students to clearly recall and compare their cultural impressions and observations at the time of their occurrence. The specificity of the blog posts and accompanying photos and videos fostered a much richer discussion of culture than mere memory could have supported. By discussing blog posts on specific common cultural topics, students could compare and contrast their experience in a much more direct and meaningful way.

A surprising result was that students in different host institutions in different parts of the world often had similar observations on culture. For example, students often noted similar customs and etiquette, such as the custom of holding a door open for a stranger or not removing one's shoes in a private home. These common observations set the foundation for class discussion on shared values and beliefs. In addition, The Center for International Studies also reported that the blog posts became talking points for potential recruits to future iterations of the program.

Conclusion

While the value of social networking services in educational contexts will undoubtedly remain a debated issue for some time, in this case the Facebook platform provided a mechanism to archive study abroad students' experiences and reflections and to allow for both deeper and more specific examination of cross-cultural issues.

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Appendix 1- Guided Blog Assignment Sheet

1. First Impression

What kind of country is your host country? What is your impression of the people, the lifestyle, the culture? What seems similar to or different from Japan? Is your host country similar to how you imagined it? Send us photos (three photos at most) that you think they very much represent your host country. (ex. Japan-> Buddhist temple, Shinto shrine, Modern electronic store)

2. Food

How is the food compared to food in Japan? Think about the ingredients, flavors, and preparation. Are meal-times different from Japan? Send us photos (three at most) of your favorite foods in your host country.

3. University Life

How is student life different? What are some interesting clubs or sports teams? Are there many extra-curricular activities? How do students spend their free time on campus and off campus? What do students do for fun or to relax? Send us photos (three at most) of your favorite places on/outside of campus.

4. Manners, Etiquette, and Taboos

What are some rules of manners that you have learned? How are rules different or similar to Japan? How do the manners rules reflect the values of your host country? Send us photos (three at most) showing manners, or eti-

quiet rules that you don't see in Japan.

5. Gestures

Please send us some photos (or short videos) of you showing 3 popular gestures and explain their meaning. Do people use more or less gestures than people in Japan?

6. Health

How do students stay healthy and safe in your host country? What kinds of exercise are popular? Is dieting popular? Do people get enough sleep? Send us photos (three at most) of the popular exercises, and diet ("healthy") foods or drinks in your host country.

7. Talking About Japan

What parts of Japanese culture have you described to people in your host country? What do they find interesting about Japan? What are their stereotypes of Japanese people? Send us photos (three at most) of useful items or tools to describe Japanese culture.

8. Hobbies, Sports, and Pastimes

What are the most popular hobbies, sports, and pastimes in your host country? Which new hobbies, sports, or pastimes have you tried? How did you learn about them? Send us photos of your favorite hobbies, sports, and pastimes that you have tried and the popular hobbies, sports, and pastimes in your host country.

9. Classes

Describe your favorite class. How are the students and the teacher? What is the homework like? What makes/made the class interesting to you? Send us photos of your classroom (with your classmates, if possible) and textbooks.