

Short-term Study Abroad Programs: Enhancing the Cultural and Communication Experience

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With English generally accepted in the global community as the universal medium for communication between nations and their international institutions, there is an ever-increasing demand in non-English speaking countries for non-native English speakers who are linguistically proficient and inter-culturally sensitive. To accommodate for this demand many Japanese universities' language programs have included study abroad components, varying in length from one year exchanges to short term programs, as one way for their students to experience immersion in a target culture and language and, subsequently, develop their intercultural self.

This paper outlines the development and enhancement of a short-term study abroad program (STSAP) to the University of Tasmania, Australia. It illustrates the need for such programs to have two essential features: a built in mechanism to receive feedback from participants, and institutional flexibility to initiate changes to the program to enhance the educational experience of the participants. With the English education industry being a significant source of revenue for many host institutions, this paper recommends that all STSAP and hosting institutions be continually monitored for quality in light of the commercialization of this market.

The STSAP is the most common overseas study program run by Japanese universities. Each year the number of universities sending students on study tours to Australia is increasing; the number of foreign students attending English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) centers in Australia, between 2007 and 2008, increased by an astonishing 23% (Studies in Australia, 2009). The major part of this increase has been the rise in the number of STSAP. Institutions in Japan obviously concur with the results of researchers such as Crew & Bodycott (2005) who see STSAP as 'an extremely powerful means of engendering positive changes in students, reaching far beyond language development alone', and Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen & Hubbart (2006) whose research results suggest 'that short-term programs can have a positive impact on the overall development of cross-cultural sensitivity' (p. 457).

Notwithstanding the positive benefits of participating in a STSAP, concerns have been raised about the 'rapid commercialization' of this education market and a subsequent deterioration in

the educational integrity of programs offered by host institutions (Ogden, p. 87). The English education market is a major export earner for many countries, and especially institutions of higher education who look towards non-English speaking countries as a major source of their yearly revenue. The 2005 Australian Government census estimates that expenditure by students at ELICOS centers was A\$536,000,000. With this as the pecuniary reality for many host institutions, there may be economic pressures applied by administrative agents within these institutions or ELICOS centers to maximize their income by offering services that may not always be educationally beneficial for STSAP participants. For leaders of STSAP this economic reality should be recognized and taken into account when decisions are made in regard to their study program.

Recognizing that the driving factors in the STSAP market are not always educational, STSAP leaders need to spend time researching and visiting possible host institutions to assess their suitability for STSAP participants and the unique goals of their planned program. As Crew & Bodycott (2005) state many study tours 'seek to recreate the all-too-familiar classroom experience for their participants, ignoring to a large extent the immensely rich linguistic and cultural environment outside the classroom walls'(p. 5). Study tours must encourage and provide for 'authentic linguistic and intercultural exchange' (Drake, 1997, p. 1) within their programs; otherwise, the pedagogical goals of the program may not be realized, and as a result, provide an unsatisfactory experience for the participants. Leaders must establish a collegial relationship with the host institution whereby suggestions for enhancements are encouraged and welcomed. Crew & Bodycott (2005) also stress the need 'to modify designs and implementations' as an essential element of a successful STSAP(p. 2).

The aim of designing a short-term study abroad program is to 'facilitate learning activities that directly align with the learning goals of the course; assess specific learning outcomes; and (find) ways to close the circle ... so that the experience becomes part of a continuum of lifelong learning' (Santanello, 2007, p. 189). To achieve the goals listed above requires the designer of the STSAP to, not only consider the particular course students will take, but also what activities will be included in or outside of the course that will allow for these goals to be achieved. Furthermore, designers need to look outside the educational setting for possible ways the students can be immersed in the host culture. Anderson et al. (2006) puts forward that there is potential for students to go overseas to study and yet experience very little of the surrounding culture due to the lack of essential components within the program to maximize contact with the host culture. Therefore, leaders of STSAP should create in their program a series of interlocking cultural and communicative opportunities in both the educational setting and the surrounding culture to assist students in their interaction and interpretation of the host culture.

This paper outlines the continual development of one such joint STSAP between Kochi University and the University of Tasmania. It will describe the initial background to the program and the lead up to the decision on the host institution. From there the paper will describe the enhancements made to the program and the background from which these changes were decided on. It will show that if a relationship of collegial responsibility, based on sound pedagogical theory and practice is established as a core element of the program's design, then the primary goals - empathy for the host culture, development of an interest in their own culture, improvement in communicative ability, and motivation for further language study - can be achieved.

Background

The Tasmanian study tour program was proposed in 2004 to complement the programs already established in Kochi University's Department of International Studies: study tours to Leeds Metropolitan University, England and the University of Saskatchewan, Canada. As these study tours took place during the summer break, it was decided that the option of another study tour in the spring break would allow students greater choice of when to take an overseas study tour. Furthermore, taking into account the schedule students have over the summer break, the number of intensive courses during this period, and the seasonal difference between Japan and Australia, the spring vacation was selected as the optimum time to run the program.

Within Tasmania there are a variety of well-established institutions that offer intensive English language programs for international students: TAFE (Technical and Further Education) college, now the Tasmanian Polytechnic; The Tasmanian College of English, a privately-run nationwide language school chain; and the University of Tasmania's ELICOS centre (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students). Each of the above centers were contacted about the possibility of holding a study tour and were asked to provide tentative quotes and information on the courses conducted at their respective institutions.

In selecting the appropriate institution a number of factors were carefully considered: the variety and type of courses on offer; the facilities available for students at the school; the makeup and size of the student population; the institutional support provided for students; the willingness and flexibility of the institution to accommodate requested changes to their programs; and the cost of the course and home-stays. After careful consideration of the listed factors and discussions with the International Students Coordinator at each institution, the ELICOS Center at the University of Tasmania was selected as the preferred study tour provider.

Program Background

Since 2004 six study-abroad programs have been sent to the University of Tasmania. While the initial study tour was held at the university's northern campus in Launceston, the remaining five study tours have been at the main Hobart campus. Through the 2010 academic, nearly 100 students will have participated in the study-abroad program.

The following is a brief description of the first tour and the challenges encountered that led to the establishment of the on-going joint enhancement initiative project. The initial tour and the problems it had clearly illustrate the need for a degree of outside micro-management of study tours if the set linguistic and intercultural goals of the program are to be achieved.

The Initial Program

Discussions with Department of International Studies colleagues and with the Launceston based international study tour coordinator, culminated in the selection of the Academic English course as the preferred program. As with most study tours, the students were to study together as a group. The coordinator, however, taking into account the relatively large size of the group (22 students), recommended splitting the group into two smaller groups using the university's in-house English placement test for international students. Unfortunately, both of these decisions inadvertently resulted in a less-than-perfect learning environment that mired the educational experience of some students.

Although considerable time, effort and thought, by both the coordinator in Japan and in Tasmania, had gone into arranging the most educationally beneficial program for students before departure, it became apparent during the second week of study that some small, but significant, adjustments were needed: varying the composition of each class; refocusing the curriculum towards a more communicative one; and creating an environment that provided for more frequent and positive interaction with, not only local, but other international students.

A meeting took place between the tour leader and university coordinator to decide on measures that would establish the necessary changes. The proposed enhancements to the program were quickly agreed upon and put into place. Firstly, all students were taken out of the tour group academic classes and integrated into the university's established Module-based academic English classes. As a result, students were then spread over a number of different level classes allowing them to study with students from a variety of international backgrounds. The exchanges with other international students were further enhanced by using two classes a week for a cultural

discussion class. International maritime college students, predominantly from Middle Eastern countries, were invited into the classes for discussion and workshop sessions with Kochi University students. Furthermore, a larger communicative component in the module-based curriculum presented students with more opportunities to exchange ideas. Finally, the focus of study was switched from an intensive program designed to introduce students to English required to participate in university classes to a more broad-based academic English program that contained more communicative and intercultural study components.

From the outset these simple adjustments clearly changed the learning paradigm for the students. Students found that interacting with other international students in class provided, not only a real communicative experience but also created a truly unique intercultural environment that encouraged the exchange of different ideas and opinions. Feedback collected after the study tour by both the study tour leader and university coordinator clearly showed students reaction to the target culture and to the culture of other class members had changed and had become more positive and inquisitive. Additionally, students remarked on a renewed interest in their own cultural background and heritage as a result of the discussion sessions held with other international students attending the ELICOS center. From these sessions many students began to feel that their understanding of their own culture was limited, and they realized how difficult it was to explain cultural differences and customs using English as the medium of communication. Nevertheless, all students responded that the changes were a positive addition to the program.

As a result of the success of these adjustments, the tour leader and university coordinator established the study tour enhancement initiative project that put forward, assessed and implemented suggested changes to each year's study tour program. The University of Tasmania receives a number of suggestions and requests every year from a variety of different overseas institutions in regard to their respective study tour programs. Some of these suggestions are institution-specific, while others are applicable to any study tour. The university now advises tour coordinators of new significant educational and logistic changes that can be made to their tours, thereby enhancing the experience of their participating students.

Implemented Program Enhancements

Since the initial tour in 2004 the following enhancements have been made to the study tour program.

1. Group vs. Module Courses

A major criticism of short-term study tours is the 'herd mentality' of the group, or as Ogden (2006)

refers to it, in regard to American universities study tours, the ‘One hundred-legged American’ (p. 88). This metaphor applies to study tour groups that travel, study and move as a group, interacting with the host culture in intermittent bursts leaving the students with simple, fractured, and often mistaken interpretations of the surrounding host culture. For many host institutions arranging study tours to study and move together as a group is the least disruptive arrangement: part-time instructors are employed for the group, allowing full-time instructors and their classes to experience the minimum of disruption to their educational programs as interaction between the two groups is fleeting if at all.

However, for study tour students, this is the worst possible situation: the Japanese classroom is merely transferred to the host culture with few opportunities scheduled for the students to immerse themselves in the host culture while studying and, just as importantly, mix and interact with other international students. Without requesting integration into the international student body, many study tours find themselves studying as a group and, as a result, unknowingly isolating themselves from the culturally rich environment surrounding them. Since the initial tour, all study tour groups have been integrated into the established Module courses run throughout the year for international students. These courses run for 4 weeks and are available from the false-beginner to advanced level. For study tours from Japan, integrating their students into module programs is one way to avoid what Drake (1997) terms the ‘reclusive tendencies of the homogeneous group’(p. 1).

The module curriculum is an intensive sequential language program that covers all areas of language learning. In contrast, a majority of study tour courses tend to be less academic orientated and instead cater for the ‘holiday-while-studying’ tours. As the foremost purpose for creating a STSAP is to provide the opportunity for students to immerse and interact in the host culture, tour leaders should steer clear of those institutions that do not provide or allow for the tour’s students to integrate with the established student bodies of both the study center and host institution.

2. Email Mate Exchange Scheme

As an example of the collegial efforts to improve the educational experience of students, the Email Mate Exchange Scheme (EMS) was suggested by the Japanese section of the Asian Languages Department of the University of Tasmania as one possible way to connect and engage students interested in each other’s cultures in an intercultural dialogue. Researchers (Jackson, 2008; Ogden, 2006; Crew & Bodycott, 2005; Gray, Murdoch & Stebbin, 2002; Lingley, 2001; Pellegrino, 1998; Drake, 1997) all are unanimous about the role of regular and meaningful interaction with native speakers in developing, not only linguistic ability, but also for developing

in the learner an understanding and awareness of the cultural dynamics and social norms of the host culture. Promoting and providing opportunities for students to integrate amongst fellow students in both informal and controlled settings allows for real communication and cultural insights.

The scheme consists of three parts: pre-study tour, in Tasmania, and post-study tour. After students have confirmed their participation in the study tour, they are asked to provide a computer email address. The addresses of all the participants are then sent to Tasmania where each student is assigned a Tasmanian counterpart. Both sets of students are asked to send an email to their counterpart introducing themselves. The language of communication is left up to each student; some students from Kochi University have written in English while others have used Japanese. Likewise, University of Tasmania students have used either English or Japanese. The content, also, is left up to the students, but generally students begin by asking questions about each other, and after a number of email exchanges start asking more specific questions about each other's culture and news events concerned with their respective countries.

When students are in Tasmania, time is set aside for them to meet with their Tasmanian counterpart. Since the inception of this scheme, this time has been outside their regular class schedule; however, from 2010, one period a week will be assigned to a discussion period with EMS participants. During this class a mix of informal and structured activities and discussions will be held. It is hoped that these discussion periods combined with the time students spend with their EMS counterpart informally outside of study times will enhance the study tour participants chance to mix and participate in campus life as a normal student. Drake (1997) puts forward the idea that this is an essential element of any successful study tour program: opportunities, both informally and formally, provided for STSAP students to experience the daily life of a regular student on campus.

If students establish a meaningful relationship with their EMS partner, then, hopefully, after their return to Japan, they will maintain that relationship into the future. Feedback from students shows that those students who had frequently emailed their partner before leaving for Tasmania and met their partner while in Tasmania have created such a relationship. From 2010 more support will be provided to the students before, during and after the study tour. During the pre-tour sessions, discussions and practical workshops are planned to provide students with practical advice on writing emails and possible common topics to engage their EMS partner in an on-going dialogue. This will be followed up in Tasmania and after they return to Japan in post-study tour sessions.

3. Local School Visits

Another program implemented to immerse students in the host culture and use their English as the medium for communication was the local school visit initiative. As the study tour leader is involved in two projects that involve meeting with elementary school teachers of Japanese, discussions were held with these teachers about having study tour students visit each school and participate in the Japanese classes. The Japanese teachers were very positive about this project and to date most study groups have participated in this initiative. Unfortunately, the timing of the study tour coincides with the beginning of the school year in Tasmania, a time when teachers are busy preparing classrooms and students for the coming school year, so the window of opportunity to visit schools is usually restricted to the final two weeks of the tour.

Arrangements for the 2010 school visit program have started with a few adjustments that will allow the tour students to participate more fully in the classroom with the students. Feedback from previous study tour students showed they wanted to be more actively involved when they are visiting schools. Therefore, discussions are currently being held between the necessary parties (teachers, principals, and university coordinator) to have small groups of students, working alongside the Japanese teacher, hold a short class or presentation for the class. If students know beforehand what will be happening in the class on the day of their visit, they will be able to prepare the necessary materials and prepare the necessary English to communicate with the students. Participating students will begin preparing for this class before they leave as part of their pre-tour study session.

Again, by immersing students in a goal-orientated communicative situation, they can experience a communicative setting unattainable in their classes at either the host institution or in their classes at Kochi University. For those students from the Faculty of Education in Kochi University, this has been and will continue to be an excellent chance for them to participate in the host culture's education system and to make cultural comparisons with the Japanese system.

4. Reflection Report

It is essential in any educational endeavor to receive comprehensive feedback from participants. This feedback provides the indispensable information to make modifications to the program so that the unique goals of the endeavor can be achieved in the most pedagogically effective manner (Otlowski, 2008). This feedback may take many forms: interviews, discussions, journal writing, reflection reports, or questionnaires. The data collected is requisite: without it, what has occurred before, during and after the event is a total unknown; with it, the educator can pinpoint activities and events that were successful or unsuccessful and discover why. The STSAP leaders are provided with an intimate insight into the responses students had to events in the host culture.

From the outset the reflection report was selected as the data collecting method most likely to provide the most comprehensive insights and feedback. Every year students are asked to provide a reflection report about their experience abroad within a week of arriving back in Japan. While they are in Tasmania, students are asked to send weekly reports to the tour leader by email. The tour leader reads and responds to each weekly report. After returning to Japan and receiving the reflection report, the leader prepares a report noting the successes and disappointments of the STSAP. A summary is then sent to the tour coordinator at the host institution as the study tour's required feedback. The host institution responds by sending their own student feedback material. After looking through all the feedback, discussions are held on any relevant points that have been brought up. If a number of students remark on an activity positively, this is noted for inclusion the following year; if, on the other hand, there are some negative comments, these are investigated in more detail to determine whether adjustments are needed or, if it should be removed from the program.

The majority of the adopted enhancements to the program have come from these collegial feedback-based discussions. The improvements so far implemented clearly show the importance for all STSAP to have a student feedback mechanism in place to monitor their study tour program and their students' responses to it.

2010 Program Enhancement Measures

1. Journal Writing.

Coordinators of STSAP need to explore ways to enable students to participate and interact with the host culture and then to reflect on and draw conclusions based upon these interactions. In many study tours a student's daily routine revolves around attending classes, studying, and returning to their home-stays without spending anytime reflecting upon incidents that occurred during the day that made them 'stop-and-think' about the host culture in which they are immersed. Time is required for students to reflect upon these incidents. Reflection allows students to codify these incidents into a number of meaningful and insightful intercultural vignettes that will help them acquire a deeper understanding of that incident, and, in the long term, help them to develop into cultural relativists (Ogden, 2006).

One simple and effective method for collecting and noting these cultural events is journal writing (Gray, Murdoch & Stebbins, 2002). Students are asked to note down those events that made them stop-and-think in a journal on a regular basis. Ogden (2006) refers to it as a 'Cultural Learning Journal' 'designed to capture a process of culture learning organized around experience

and reflection' (p. 95). With this journal students will be able to reflect and discuss events that happened to them while they are in the host culture and, more importantly, they will be able to use it for future educational and research purposes after they have returned to Japan. It will be an invaluable record of their feelings and reactions to the host culture.

Ogden (2006, pp. 95-8) proposes the structure of the journal project as follows:

Part 1

1. Students record an interesting, puzzling, irritating, or otherwise significant occurrence.
2. Students record their initial analyses of cultural meanings, interpretations and insights into the occurrence.

Part 2

Re-examine the experience at least two weeks later and/or after receiving feedback from your coordinator.

Part 1 of the journal writing task is completed by students at a convenient time for them. Part 2 requires feedback from the coordinator of the task, in this case, the study tour coordinator. As the students are only in Tasmania for little more than three weeks, a discussion session after 'two weeks' would only allow for one session depriving students of critical feedback that they could utilize to make meaning of the puzzling events occurring around them on a daily basis. Therefore, discussion sessions scheduled for the end of each completed week would allow for a minimum of three sessions. During each sessions students are invited to discuss the events they have written about in their class with the coordinator and with their fellow tour participants. The coordinator will provide the students with the necessary cultural knowledge for them to develop a deeper understanding of the event, minus personal biases and preconceived ideas of the social and institutional organization of the host culture. Then, with this feedback students again reflect upon the event and their first reaction to it. The result: A journal that is a personal detailed account of their interaction with the host culture as it happened; a resource that can be referred to anytime in the student's academic life and provide data for research and discussion. Most educators would be in complete agreement with Wutrich (2008, p. 38) when he writes, 'It is in the process of writing that one comes to discovery.'

2. Post Tour Study Sessions

Just as students need pre-tour sessions to prepare themselves to go overseas, they also need post-tour sessions to follow up on what they have learnt during the study tour (Jackson, 2008; Amelsvoort, 1999). Preferably these sessions would take place immediately after returning to Japan; unfortunately, for this tour, the return date is during the spring vacation and most students return to their hometowns. However, sessions will be organized for April.

These sessions will provide for the following:

- Reflection and discussion on their time in Tasmania
- Preparing and writing up their reflection paper
- Discussion of their journal writings
- Group work on their assigned research project in Tasmania
- Writing up their research project
- Preparing a presentation about the study tour for Open Campus and 1st year students.

It is hoped that through these sessions and workshops students will derive greater meaning and understanding from their experiences abroad. As Gordon (1987) states: ‘The student participating in a study-abroad program needs guidance and encouragement to reap maximum benefit from this experience’(p. 4). Having time to discuss events that occurred with other participants and the tour leader will encourage the student to think more about these cultural experiences and the cultural differences. It is only through reflection that an experience can become a learning event.

Possible Future Enhancements

1. Volunteer Program Participation

Since its inception the inherent guiding principles for the study program have been the combination of immersion and interaction in the host culture. Only through this combination can students ‘engage ... in meaningful intellectual and intercultural experiences’ (Ogden, p. 87). Changes and enhancements to the present program have been made so that students spend as much time as possible interacting in the host culture with native speakers of English, and, just as importantly, interacting with other non-native speakers in settings that are not only educational, but also a part of the social fabric of the host culture.

To further promote interaction the University of Tasmania’s coordinator has proposed for select students to participate in a conservation volunteer program run over the summer by the Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment, the Tasmanian government body that is in charge of maintaining the large number of Tasmanian parks. The department runs a number of volunteer programs for concerned citizens and visitors to Tasmania to give up some of their time to help in the eradication of foreign and invasive vegetation, the building of trails, or helping to save the Tasmanian Devil. Volunteers work alongside each other under the guidance of a National Parks Officer.

Due to the time constraints of the study program the shorter one day programs would be

preferable to the longer programs run far from the major urban centers. Yet, even these shorter programs would provide participating students an unique chance to work alongside volunteers from around the world. The chance to work on a conservation project where English is the medium for communication would certainly be an experience that students would not forget.

2. Faculty Intensive Courses Overseas

Part of the time spent studying overseas could be allotted to a faculty intensive course from the home institution that can now utilize the surrounding target culture. Whereas a course concerned with the target culture is taught *in absentia* in the home institution, transferring the course to the target culture that pervades the students' daily life, provides an unique opportunity to reflect and interact with the surrounding host culture. The course could either be taught in the students' native language for more complete understanding, or it could be taught in English by using either a task-based or project-based pedagogical approach. An instructor from either the home institution or from the host institution could lead the course. If the latter option was taken, then careful preparation of linguistically accessible material would be needed so students are not cognitively overloaded between new language material and also new content. The target culture, rather than being a remote intangible construct, is now concrete, accessible and available for interaction. Established courses, as described above, have shown 'that students have gained a greater appreciation for study abroad ... and ... believe the course has a greater impact on them than the traditional course offered strictly in a classroom setting' (Santanello & Wolff, p. 194). With careful planning between both institutions an invaluable course, combining accessible cultural assets with careful controlled communicative and intercultural exchange opportunities built in, could enrich, not only the study tour program, but also the students' interaction with and interpretation of the target culture.

Summary and Conclusion

The questions STSAP leaders need to ask are: 'If developing language is a goal, how should such a short time abroad be spent?' and 'If study abroad should provide the ideal context for language learning, what factors in that complex environment are the most essential' (Magnan & Back, p. 44). Considering the rapid commercialization of STSAP market and the tendency of study tours to be placed in 'one-size fits all' programs, leaders can answer these questions by carefully selecting their hosting institution. STSAP leaders should make their decision based on the institution's willingness to work with the leader to provide the best possible educational experience. It should be ready to allow for the total integration of the study tour into the main student body and provide means for the maximum possible interaction with native speakers and the surrounding culture. Furthermore, it must welcome suggestions for changes or new courses

that will promote more interaction and immersion and lead to a more insightful understanding of the host culture.

As Ogden (2006) states: 'It is a false assumption that some international experience is better than none' (p. 89). Students should not be sent overseas with the misplaced notion that by spending time in a foreign culture they will return with a deeper, more profound knowledge of the host culture's linguistic and social fabric. More often than not, students return with impressions that are preconceived or superficial. Ogden succinctly puts the case forward for STSAP programs to have strategies in place that will enhance both the program and the student's understanding of events. 'Unless the students is guided toward pursuing a more accurate interpretation of his observations and experiences, he may never learn or consider an alternate viewpoint.' (Ogden, p. 89) Jackson (2008) concludes: 'Intercultural learning is a challenging process that students need to work on before, during, and after study abroad experience, no matter the length of the sojourn. Residence in the host culture does not automatically produce interculturality' (p. 357).

This paper has clearly shown the need for, and benefits of, STSAP leaders micro-managing their programs as an assured way of creating the best possible environment for the successful acquisition of the tour's goals by learners. The case study of the Tasmanian tour clearly demonstrates that if STSAP leaders actively monitor their program and provide support throughout its entirety, then students have the opportunity to 'change learning structures, learn new paradigms and become more complex individuals' (Ogden, p. 90).

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