



Laidlaw Scholars Program

Experience Abroad Reflection

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Before deciding to go on my project in a remote fishing town in northern Japan, I had never set foot in east Asia. Most of my motivation had come from my long-running love of Japanese history and culture, and I really wanted to see the daily lives of people who were a living epitomization of that passion. I knew that my modest research of the elements of Japanese etiquette and cultural norms would not be fully sufficient to blend into the daily life that awaited me in a new country, but when I actually got into Japan, this did not seem like a major concern. Surely there were a myriad of cultural norms and practices, and everyday behavioral cues that took me time to adapt to, but the people I had interacted with were accommodating and did not hesitate to point out the societal expectations and norms.

Cultural hardships arose much later, among classroom dynamics. Students I taught were not as engaged as I had hoped they would be. They were not responding to some of my questions and were generally acting very shy. I was later told that students in general were reluctant to speak English in front of other Japanese people. This presented significant challenges for my pedagogy and self-esteem - as I interpreted this silence as a sign of disinterest and apathy towards my workshops. It took me weeks and many conversations with people who supported me to understand, and more importantly accept, that it is just the way it was culturally - Japan still being a hierarchical society, I understood that student engagement was expressed in different forms.

I think this experience represents one of the most important cultural competencies developed throughout my experience abroad. It is true that I could always discern that cultural differences exist in our world, but living in a foreign country and actually having to experience them made me realize that these cultural elements and expressions are here to stay - they are a part of what makes up a culture. I learned to live with these elements in harmony. I learned to pivot my own goals and visions that admittedly were rooted in a different culture - a Canadian one, more focused on metrics, visible impacts and just in general a western version of classroom participation.

One of the biggest cultural shocks for me was extreme order that permeated every corner of Japanese society - whether it was in crowded streets of Tokyo, quiet and pristine neighborhoods of Otsuchi, or just about anything I had seen from my extensive train journeys - order was everywhere. Since the beginning I liked this quite a lot, partly because it was such a big contrast to what I was used to seeing at home in Georgia, a place I would describe as chaotic at times, and partly because the quite orderly and extremely organized attitude of Japanese people contrasted starkly with my own somewhat disorganized and very ad-hoc style of thinking and living. After some time I understood that a similarly organized and disciplined attitude was what the people were expecting to see from everyone around them - including me. So after a handful of faux pas, late arrivals and mislabeled ingredients in the refrigerator, it became obvious that I was simply not as organized as most people around me. Trying to change that

throughout the weeks was very challenging - there were some times where I saw success, but most times I would simply fall behind to my default self.

Then, as Yuki-san and I were coming back from one of our workshops, watching the sun slowly bottoming over the horizon otherwise covered in lush tropical vegetation, I decided to be more direct and discuss the issue of order and my perceived lack thereof. Yuki-san told me about how she lived in France for a handful of years, and how that experience exposed her to the extremely orderly nature of Japanese culture that she did not quite pay attention to before. Perhaps we first need to experience such a different cultural environment to truly see the outlines of our own ones. I never quite thought about my own culture as “less organized” or as I described it quite deridingly, “chaotic” before my trip to Japan. I think this entire experience exposed a different cultural competency - the ability to contrast cultures through lived experiences to better describe and understand them.

I taught a series of workshops about ArcGIS - a software that is perhaps one of the best tools to develop better spatial thinking. So it was natural to me that I really had to understand and feel the space around me. Simple observation will reveal that the area of Japan I lived and taught at was starkly different from how the country is known in popular culture. Busy crossroads of Shibuya, bustling financial districts in Chūō, high-tech and well-lit buildings of Chiyoda - were all absent beyond a few dozens of kilometers away from Tokyo. The town of Otsuchi and the entire Sanriku coast offered a

very different living space. Pristine cliffs and small fishing communities is how I would describe the place where Iwate prefecture meets the vast and endless Pacific Ocean, although Pacific is not the word locals would use for a body of water that has brought so much tumult to their lives.

In 2011, the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami struck Sanriku coast like no other, and entire communities and towns were completely destroyed in a cataclysmic event that many still have not recovered from. The living memory of this disaster could be seen everywhere - empty lots between sleek new houses in Otsuchi, abandoned warehouses and fishing docks in plain sight from my bedroom window, visibly oversized public buildings and schools - they all were evidence of sharp depopulation with no end in sight. The community itself, still mourning their loss, was divided and bitter - how tall of a seawall should we build? Do we demolish the old city hall that stood as either a symbol of resilience or a haunting memory? These were all heated questions that drew a line through Otsuchi and its families, neighborhoods, and politicians. My ritualized daily bike ride along the concrete walls, rusting fishing docks, and through perpetually empty traffic lights burned these images and divisions in my memory. But it was through these rides that I got close to really feeling what the locals had felt for years - silent, muted yet very clear memories of pain, mixed with relentless searches of hope.

In my half hour rides with Yuki-san to a more lively town of Kamaishi for my workshops, I would find that hope. Despite the disaster and its lingering memory. Despite the depopulation and hollowing out, there was, after all, hope.

The young people of Sanriku coast were nothing short of amazing. Motivated, diligent and ever-curious, they brought hope and light even during the most melancholic, dark, hopeless moments. It really made sense then that professors, teachers, and just about everyone else was so heavily invested and dedicated to uplift each individual's education and motivation. For me, my students were just about a perfect representation of what hope looked like for the people of Otsuchi and Sanriku Coast - growing and full of potential.

To say that the six weeks in Japan were transformative would be an understatement. In such a short time, I was melted away and recast as a different person, with much more awareness and perspective on this world. Living in a remote town was unlike the primarily urban experiences I have been having my entire life. Living among Japanese people was equally as transformative - the conversations I have had made me grow in magnitudes unseen before. But perhaps the biggest thing that this experience abroad opened my eyes about was the beauty that lies in experiencing the differences between countries and cultures. In the beginning of my trip, the thinking was more one-sided: I would praise XYZ about the Japanese people while calling out ABC from either Canada and Georgia, yet during my last days in the country of the rising sun, I slowly realized



that only through seeing, experiencing, feeling the differences between these cultures was I able to truly appreciate each one of them in their entirety.