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Reflection on Hosting a Study Abroad Program at a Japanese College

ロイ・コノリー^{※1}
Roy Neil Connolly

堤 裕美子^{※2}
TSUTSUMI Yumiko

Abstract:

This is a reflection by the administrators of a study abroad program hosting forty American students at a Japanese junior college for a week of cross cultural activities. Careful consideration of the main challenges of the program is conducted with suggestions on how to draw on lessons learned from experience and to be better prepared for similar programs in the future.

キーワード：

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I. Introduction

In 2019, Sano Nihon University College hosted a study abroad program for two cohorts of students from the same public university in the United States: one in January, the second one in June. Each was approximately forty American students with two visiting school advisors and two bilingual tour guides. The duration was for seven days and eight nights starting with three days of tourist activities in Tokyo, followed by four days of cultural and academic interactions in Sano city led by Sano Nihon University College. The details of the actual activities, participant feedback with specific analysis of each activity, a sort of microscopic view, has previously been presented (Connolly & Tsutsumi, 2020). The purpose of this report is to act as a critical macroscopic reflection on the program from the administrator perspective to facilitate knowledge transfer to future programs. In this way the les-

sons learned through direct experience can serve to better prepare for future programs by enjoying the same strong points, while also avoiding previous challenges from the past. The primary administrators of the program and authors of this paper have identified and analyzed four main areas upon which to reflect: cultural considerations, risk management, program logistics, and post-activity follow-up opportunities.

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II. Cultural Considerations

1. Japanese Origami — In order to facilitate easier communication, it is recommended to first use existing materials, such as YouTube videos in both Japanese and English, to be prepared to share detailed instructions. By having the presenter review the steps in their native

^{※1} 佐野日本大学短期大学 総合キャリア教育学科

^{※2} 佐野日本大学短期大学 総合キャリア教育学科

Sano Nihon University College Senior Lecturer

Sano Nihon University College Associate Professor

Japanese, then again in English, they can more easily understand the instructions in the target language (English), as well as find the appropriate English instructions to give in the live presentation to the visiting students. The cultural significance of the two selected origami patterns, crane “tsuru” and helmet “kabuto”, were illustrated to the visiting students. Prior to actually folding the paper to make the origami items, a slideshow presenting various ways that cranes and helmets are common and important in Japanese culture, both traditional and contemporary, was shown; for example, in Japanese paintings and on wedding bags. Finally, once the practical portion of the activity began, the participants were able to select from different types of paper with various traditional colors and patterns. The participants were able to make large versions of the helmet pattern such that they were able to actually wear it on their own head. Upon reflection, it would have been nice to have offered large versions of the crane pattern as well, and in future programs, such preparations would be of benefit to the participants.

2. Japanese social welfare presentation — Since many of the participating students were social welfare majors, there was a lecture on the Japanese system of insurance coverage. There was a lot of interest in comparing and contrasting the Japanese and American systems and a lively discussion followed. However, in the feedback collected, some participants indicated that the lecture itself could have been a little more interactive, so for future programs, it is recommended to present it in smaller sections with interactive discussion integrated rather than waiting until the end of the lecture. Alternatively, perhaps Japanese social welfare students could present the smaller sections and have a chance to interact student-to-student in smaller,

rotating groups for a more intimate experience.

3. Music and sign language — Another activity was to sing four different songs in both Japanese and in Japanese Sign Language. Singing a song without understanding the meaning is a much less valuable experience, therefore an English translation of the lyrics was distributed so that everyone could have a background understanding of the songs and enjoy them more deeply. In addition, an English version of the chorus of each song was prepared to be sung following the melody, so a tri-lingual rendition of each song was enjoyed by both the Japanese and American students. In the feedback from the American participants, the evaluation was mixed on how interesting and valuable the experience was, however it was a very valuable experience for the host Japanese students. Perhaps some revisions to the presentation and implementation of the activity could improve the experience for the less enthusiastic half of the American students.

III. Safety and risk management:

Of course, in addition to the previously mentioned challenges in program content, some challenges can also create health, safety, and even legal risks that need to be addressed. In preparation for future visits, specific guidelines should be put into place, not only as preventative measures, but also predetermined procedures on how to best respond in situations that might arise so that optimal results can be assured despite unfortunate events.

1. Traffic Safety — During the program, the visiting students had accommodations at a nearby hotel and walked about 10 minutes to and from the school each day. During the optional student-led mini excursions in the evenings, they were also expected to walk to other

nearby locations. Since Sano is somewhat infamous for having dangerous drivers, it might be advisable to include a traffic safety segment in the welcome orientation. Compared to large cities, the streets are not well-lit at night, so the importance of wearing light colored clothing and carrying a light should be impressed upon them. There are also a number of non-standard intersections, where a third street intersects diagonally through an otherwise regular intersection. There are no special traffic lights or signs to indicate that there is another street, and what appears to be a regular parking lot corner, may have unexpected cars passing through diagonally. Traffic flows in the opposite direction in the United States, so cautioning the visitors to first look right, then left, then right again before crossing the street, might also keep them safer.

2. Injury at Visited Sports Clinic — During an external visit to a sports rehabilitation clinic, the American participants were learning about various strength training exercises used by the clinic to help patients to regain and increase strength and flexibility. The students practiced various techniques on each other under the direction of the physical therapists. One of these activities included Japanese sumo wrestling grapples where the participants would try to knock each other off balance. The students seemed to really enjoy the activity, but many of them were athletes with a strong sense of competition, and were therefore perhaps a little more vigorous in their efforts than was prudent. This may have contributed to the one student who had a bad fall and received a twisted ankle. In addition, the doctor had been suddenly called away prior to the injury, so his therapists supervised the activity without him. It seems unlikely that this would have contributed to an unsafe environment, but perhaps it should be stipulated

that the doctor must be present in order to ensure safety during the event. Had the doctor been present, perhaps the ensuing visit to the hospital could have been avoided.

3. Food Allergies and Communication — Since the students were expected to eat every day at school, and for various additional activities, all participants reported any important food allergies prior to arrival so that we could prepare dishes that would be safe for all. For the integrated activities, daily lunch, and farewell dinner, everything was arranged well in advance. However, during some external activities away from the school, the visitors had lunch at local restaurants. During the program, the participants could be allowed to spread out on their own or eat near the bilingual guides for help. However, it might be advisable to also have a backup contingency plan in case a participant was separated, for example, during the optional evening activities led by Japanese students. Perhaps a bilingual card with easy to understand visual aids could be provided to participants to help them to communicate important things like food and medical allergies, getting help back to the school if stranded, etc. It could also have critical contact information to allow emergency responders to contact the school in an emergency even when the participant is unable to respond themselves.

4. Exposure to Alcohol — One of the official program excursions was a tour of a local traditional Japanese sake factory. In terms of technical and cultural interest, the participants seemed to enjoy the experience. At the end of the tour, there was an opportunity for the group to sample and purchase various products and souvenirs. The inclusion of alcohol in any official school sponsored event is potentially problematic to begin with, but to further complicate

things, these were international visitors, most of whom were students. The generous offer of the factory administration to provide samples was thoughtful, and the American supervisors said that their school policy allowed for the consumption of alcohol in such an event as a justifiable “cultural experience”. As a result, the American advisors were happy with the invitation, the participant students were universal in their enthusiasm for the offer. Thus, our school supervisory staff suddenly found themselves with an uncomfortable dilemma, feeling pressured into the experience without having received prior explicit approval from school administration. After confirming that all American students present were of the legal drinking age (21 years old in the United States), they somewhat reluctantly acquiesced. The sampling portion was tastefully administered with helpful explanations of each sample before they were distributed. While initially unexpected, it was an enlightening experience, and with proper approval in advance, would make a strong addition to the program. A further twist was that while all individuals that purchased any products from the factory gift shop promised not to open anything until after they returned to their hotel rooms, all those purchases were kept inside the bus during the next stop, which happened to be a tour of a prestigious Japanese high school. As a result of those unexpected purchases, alcohol was inadvertently brought onto a high school campus, changing the order of events could neatly avoid this issue.

5. Other Risk Management — It might be worth drafting up a set of guidelines on how to handle unfortunate events such as physical altercations, sexual misconduct in various forms, bullying, breaking of laws such as underage drinking, riding a bicycle while intoxicated,

criminal arrest, etc. Perhaps it is not necessary to prepare contingency plans for all possible problems, but it might be beneficial to create very generic “incident plans” to use as a blanket go-to backup in the event of an incident. For example, such a plan might include an escalating list of emergency administrative contacts, preferred contacts within a hospital or police station, a flowchart of “if/then” instructions to guide choices made during the critical first responses to a crisis. It might include on-call male and female staff to help in the event of a mixed gender incident. For example, for an alleged physical altercation (physical violence), it might start with, “Are all involved parties separated and in a stable/safe condition? Y/N: Yes: Is anyone injured? Y/N: Yes: Are any of the injuries potentially serious? (example: eye or head injury, bleeding, trouble moving, etc.) Y/N Yes: Is the school nurse available to advise? Y/N No: call for paramedics. etc...”

IV. Administration and Logistics:

Of course, managing the logistics of a program like this will always be challenging, and while things went well in general thanks to careful planning, coordination, and preparation, there are some observations on how improvements could be made for future programs.

1. Preliminary Communication and Negotiation — Firstly, in an attempt to allow the program to come to fruition in a short time from initial consideration to the activities themselves, some details had been glossed over with the assumption that the details would be worked out through ongoing negotiation and cooperation among the parties involved. (The host, Sano Nihon University College; the visitors, the US university; and the support entities, CIS Global, Kamimoto Clinic, other groups/individuals

involved in the program.) Granted, everything did actually work out in the end, it still might be better for the future to have a general set of guidelines in place on how to explore, negotiate, seek approvals, etc. for not only this same program, but for any other program that might need to be planned and implemented in the future. If such guidelines were set up in advance, many of the lessons learned through past experience could be hardwired directly into the procedures mandated in the premade set of general guidelines. This might be determined by the International Exchange Committee internally for its own uses, but perhaps could benefit the greater body of the school in general, especially if officially approved by upper administration to streamline approval procedures.

2. Student-led Activities — Another area that has room for improvement are the student-led activities, namely the cultural activities taught by SanoTan students, and the optional, unsupervised evening trips around the area after school. Again, in general, they all went pretty smoothly, and the students, both Japanese and American, evaluated both quite highly in terms of being a valuable learning experience as well as in level of enjoyment. However, critical evaluation by the SanoTan faculty noted that the quality of the student-led portions could have been improved if the students had more practice in advance. As it was, the student-led activities were integrated into the curriculum of specific classes as graded projects, and so the students worked in groups to plan, prepare, and finally present the actual live presentation as a final product of the project for evaluation. Perhaps if greater curricular weight, and more to the point, greater class time were to be dedicated to preparation for said presentations, the student presenters could be not only better prepared to present

quality material, but learn more through additional practice, and as a result, enjoy the experience even more.

3. Activity Management — A third point of logistical improvement could be the way that individual activities are managed, in particular, the final farewell dinner party for the host and visiting students. For the second session in the summer, there was a Japanese-style barbeque (yakniku) that allowed the American visitors and their Japanese hosts to sit together around a grill and cooperate together in a truly authentic communicative situation in order to cook and eat various barbeque dishes and garnishes. While it was a very rewarding and emotionally moving experience for all participants involved, it was without question, the shakiest portion of the program in terms of logistical management. On the surface it seemed all prearranged as planned, the cafeteria staff had prepared the food and had the portions separated in advance as expected, the electric grills were spread out around the cafeteria and nearby student lounge as an overflow, and the students smoothly transitioned from the previous activity to the final farewell festivities. Unfortunately, a few complications started popping up from that point. First of all, the cafeteria staff had not been instructed to provide the dishes for the participants to eat on, nor had they had enough staff available to handle the cleaning of that many dishes. Next, the energy required to power all the grills was too much for the wiring and kept tripping the circuit breakers. There were not enough extension cords immediately available to allow the use of different electrical outlets in order to share the power consumption to a wider range of circuits. Then, even when the needed number of extension cables were gathered, the circuit breakers continued to trip off over and over again, requiring someone to man-

ually reset them constantly throughout the dinner. Finally, at the end of the night, all those grills needed to be washed before being returned to the various faculty and staff members who had graciously donated the use of their private grills for the evening. The problem discovered only after returning those kindly lent grills to their generous owners, was that the power adapter cables were not universal, and not all of them were matched correctly to the appropriate grill. Various solutions to these challenges will be included in the following sections.

4. Due Diligence — These various complications illustrate a deficiency in foresight and preparation, but also act as lessons for improvement for the next time. Rather than assuming the various duties to be filled by the different members of the team, in this case, the cafeteria, all duties and materials should be specified in written detail, confirmed, and re-confirmed to ensure that nothing has been overlooked or misunderstood. Next, the specific technical requirements, limits of the electrical power grid in this case, should be researched deeper, rather than simply assuming that using different outlets would be sufficient, check all the way back to the breaker box to confirm that the load on any one circuit is not excessive. For a similar activity in the future, the grills would need to be placed in a greater number of rooms to stay within the limit, or possibly use gas fueled grills. However, the safety of such would need to be carefully analyzed separately to address fire and ventilation hazards appropriately. If electric grills were to be used again, the various parts of each grill should be uniquely labeled according to the owner and the various parts (electric adapter, lid, accessory, etc.) For example, “Tanaka 1 of 4: grill”, “Tanaka 2 of 4: grill lid”, “Tanaka 3 of 4: power cord”, “Tanaka 4 of 4: tongs”, etc.

5. Redundancy — In addition to these improvements, it would be advisable to have a reserve of faculty or staff members immediately available to be able to quickly address unexpected issues rather than just the number expected to be needed. That way, even if someone is absent due to illness or some other crisis, redundancies are already in place to take up the slack. Separately, yet in a similar manner, one student-led outing to the Ashikaga Flower Park Illumination was so popular that virtually all visiting staff and students opted to join. This resulted in a group too large for the small group of Japanese students to manage on their own. Rather than limiting the number of participants who could join the outing, faculty from Sano Nihon University College were obliged to provide additional support on very short notice. Had nobody been available, it would have been a shame for the participants turned away.

V. Post Activity follow up

The experience enjoyed by the participants of the interaction between Japanese and American students during this program is often a life changing one. Follow-up to learn about the effects of the program on participants could be enlightening. Furthermore, it could continue to benefit the participants to a further degree. Some such benefits might be reinforcement of the lessons that they learned previously, the chance to reflect further on how their lives have changed since the international program, chances to reconnect with friends made, to reaffirm and even cultivate deeper relationships. New opportunities might arise for further interaction, collaboration, and learning. Past visits without a planned and prepared program for follow-up could still be accomplished by contacting the visiting professors by email, LINE, or What-

sApp application. There could be a virtual reunion of sorts held for the Japanese and American students, possibly an invitation for “Alumni” of past visits to participate semi-officially for future programs to share insights, experience, and even volunteer support for the program itself perhaps. This could create a greater sense of continuity from one year to the next, provide additional support without additional expense, and deepen the level of impact that the program can have on the individuals as well as to the communities involved.

References

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