

A Look at Students' Study Abroad Experiences through their Essays.

Susan K. Burton*

When Bunkyo Gakuin University students return from studying abroad (in Australia, New Zealand and at the College of St Benedict & Saint John's University in Minnesota, USA), they are asked to submit several pieces of writing describing what they have learned from their experiences. In post-trip interviews and conversations with lecturers it is clear that their English skills have improved. This is especially evident with the students who have studied abroad for a semester or more, especially when they have lived with homestay families. However they rarely mention their English learning in their essays. What they do notice – and what surprised lecturers note when previously reticent students greet them effusively and hug them warmly – is what aspects of the host culture they have learned from living abroad.

This year I asked returnee students to write about the differences and similarities they noticed between Japanese and American /Australian/New Zealand culture. Their answers covered daily life, social interactions, food, and bathroom etiquette. Excerpts from their essays appear below in italics. Unsurprisingly, they wrote most about their experiences in education.

EDUCATION

The Japanese education system is a component of Japan's hierarchical, high power distance culture. Information flows from the highest to the lowest, from teacher to student.

Japanese class style is usually lecture. Students just sit on the seat, listen professor's lecture, and take notes.

People in Japan are so quiet in classes. Students hardly talk [or] ask questions to professors in Japan.

* 准教授 / Oral History / Social History

In Japan, most students don't raise their hand during a class even though they didn't understand. In Japan, students are allowed to speak when the professor gives permission. This is not only universities. Most junior high and high schools are the same.

The United States, Australia and New Zealand are examples of democratic, low power distance cultures. Information flows back and forth between students and the teacher, who acts as a facilitator to the students in their self-learning. Debate is encouraged, indeed Harvard is known for its classes in which the lecturers often do not speak at all; they simply write the topic for discussion on the board and then oversee the students' ensuing discussion.

The class style in the US is different. Students talk a lot in class. If they disagree with something even a teacher says, they say "disagree". Students are admitted by not only going to classes but by saying opinions and talking. That's the way they participate in school. I thought that is very nice way. Because I have to talk in class. I think about the topics and think questions a lot. It is very good for me to learn a lot of things.

Even in lecture style class, students often interrupt professor's talk and say their opinion. That's really different from Japanese class style, so it was really hard to participate for the first."

Style of the class is different from Japan. In the US, each classes are quite small, so all students can have opportunity to speak while lecture. Also in most of classes we have to debate for some topics. It was hard for me for first couple weeks. We don't have any classes like the US so I think it would be nice if we had same classes like I took in CSB SJU.

I have never experienced discussion style of classes in Japan so I was really struggle with get used to it.

In a collective, homogeneous culture such as Japan conversation tends to be indirect, inferred and complex. The importance of personal relationships and of group membership means that Japanese people must be sensitive to the feelings of others and consider the impact of their words. The burden lies with the listener who must be aware of implied meanings. In individualistic cultures the burden lies with the speaker to convey their message clearly and explicitly. This is especially important in multicultural societies in which people do not share cultural backgrounds. Students seemed to pick up on these important cultural differences.

I think the difference is not only in class but also in daily life. [In America] people say what they think. In other words, if I don't say what I'm thinking, they might get confused, and it would be hard to communicate. In Japanese culture, people tend to guess what people think and avoid to hurt someone. I don't know which culture is better because I think sometimes, people need to say things honestly, but also, people need to care each others. I feel I learned very important things."

In a collective, relationship-oriented society, harmony is essential to continued group membership. Harmony is maintained through interdependence and mutual reliance, and this generally means voicing the same opinion as others. Ensuring the continuance of the relationship is more important than being right. Individualistic societies are more transaction-oriented, wherein reaching a clear decision or conclusion is more important than a consideration of others' feelings. Or as one student put it, "Japanese think before speaking. Americans are the opposite".

Japan is collectivistic culture and America is individualistic culture, and I found out the difference in the class. I had to discuss with all of my classmates or in a group, and a teacher asked us what we talked about. We told the teacher some of opinions that are said by different students. We didn't have to have the same opinion, and no-one cared what the correct idea was. However, I think Japanese teachers tend to make students have an answer in each group. So we try to have the same idea and some people gets afraid to have different ideas and tell other people those. That's why Japanese people tend to be the same as other people and don't like to discuss. When I was in the US, I didn't have to feel afraid if my opinion was wrong or different from others. If [my] mind was different, my classmates even got interested in why I had the opinion. I understand the Japanese culture and that being the same as others makes us feel better. But American people are different, and they prefer to be paid attention by others and being different from others make them better or special. It's said that Japanese like working with a group, but Americans don't. I understood the reason and collectivistic and individualistic culture through the experience.

In individualistic cultures, academic success results from personal effort. Students therefore tend to be self-motivated to study, to complete homework assignments and to be prepared to contribute to debates in class. Additionally, most students are also responsible for paying their own tuition fees, often through academic loans. They are therefore eager to succeed academically and to graduate on time. This encourages independence and self-reliance, and affects their attitude to their work, as Japanese students noticed.

I was surprised aggressiveness of American students ... I thought American students are really aggressive because [each] of them has their own opinion and raise their hand and say their opinion without fear. Japanese students are less aggressive than American students.

It is obvious that more American students work harder than majority Japanese college students. In CSB/SJU, I got a lot of homework almost every day from any class. When I visited a library for studying, many seats were occupied by other students. By compare to the United States, there are a lot of empty seats at a library of my college because majority of students get much less homework and they wouldn't study hard except for exams. Moreover, almost all students were eager to learn at class in the States ... In Japan, some people sleep, check their cellphones, have a makeup, and chat with their friends at class sadly. These scene never happened in CSB and SJU at least. Precisely, majority of American students were more positive to learn something from class than that of Japanese.

Students have much more homework than Japanese students. After 30, 40, 50 pages reading, students discuss about the topic. They study much harder than Japanese students.

Why don't Bunkyo Gakuin students study hard? Returnees suggest that in a society based on interdependence and mutual reliance, they simply rely on their teachers and the university to pass them.

FAMILY AND SOCIAL LIFE

The importance of family is emphasised in Japan. The warm *danran* of the home is a powerful symbol. Students were therefore surprised that although the West is noted for its individualism, western families seem to spend more time together than those in Japan.

Having time with family was more common in the United States. I was surprise how much American family get together and make memories. Mostly, they gather for Thanksgiving and Christmas at least a year to spend time. Although majority of students live on campus, they visit their families for these special holidays.

I think many American family like to keep good relationship with their families especially and relatives.

It should be noted however that students who went to Minnesota were often there over Christmas and were consequently invited to family Christmas parties. Other students saw family life on homestays. Neither group was likely to be invited to dysfunctional homes, or to places where they would not be welcomed. Nevertheless, students felt that people in general were very friendly.

One of the biggest differences for me was that people are so friendly in the US. When I walk on the street and meet people, people say "Hi" to me even though I don't know them. When I get on the elevator, some people talk to me, "I like your boots. Where did you get?" I was so surprised, because Japanese people never talk to strangers.

Initially, students seemed to have nothing but praise for their hosts. Returnees noted how they felt much freer abroad, even to the point of not having to care so much about what they wore. They also felt that members of their host society were more cheerful and upbeat than the Japanese.

When I was walking down the street in NZ, I could hear peals of laughter anywhere. As Japanese, it was really fresh but also weird because in Japan, you can hardly see such a peaceful situation when you walk along the street.

In my opinion, Kiwi people are relatively gentle and optimistic compared to Japanese people because they aren't fettered to time and business and each one has a hobby and they've got enough time to devote themselves to their leisure ... On the other hand, Japanese people always look busy and tired due to the daily overwork and the bonds of a lot of things that can lead to stress. Most of them can't afford to be absorbed in their hobbies or something fun.

Such experiences led to reassessments, not only of the host society but of their home culture and people. Nevertheless, in time, students began to see not just the differences but also the similarities between cultures.

One of the similarities I notice is that no matter where we are from, people are nice to foreigners. I can say same thing in Japan too. Japanese people like foreigners and are nice to them.

It's personal warmth. I felt American people are really kindness and Japanese too. American people say hello even they don't know each other and Japanese people has a hospitality mind.

One of the biggest similarities among us is preoccupation and consideration for other people. If

you find a person who has a trouble, you help in nature. If you have a trouble, you try to get away from it with someone's help. So the people help each other without thinking of nationality.

Reassessment also led students to realise what it was they liked and missed about Japan.

In my case, I was a foreigner in the US so people asked me about my country and culture a lot. Every time people show the knowledge they know about Japan, I could be proud of being from Japan. I also realized I like Japan.

Many of the students were abroad on 11th March 2011 when Japan was hit by a devastating earthquake and tsunami. For most of them it was the first time they had been placed in a position to aid their own country. It was also a lesson for them in how Japan is viewed by another country.

When the big earthquake and tsunami hit Japan in middle of March, Japanese students worked hard for fundraising activity. Then I found out when people or country got suffered by something, people become to be supportive. I think Japanese people don't care about others so much in daily life, but when something big happened, people get together and cooperate then try to help. I was so glad people in the US listened to our words and story, then start to help Japan. I was happy I could feel some spirit of Japan from people in the US.

Especially when I worked for fundraising for the earthquake in Japan, I was moved by how supportive people in the world are. Once I was in a church in Saint Benedict for collecting donation, a woman came and said "How long are you going to be here?" and after she left, she came back to donate money. She didn't have cash when she spoke to me, so she went home to get money, and came back to the church for Japan. I was very happy and was so glad to see people doing this actions.

Japan is a society in which one is an insider or an outsider (*uchi* or *soto*). Foreigners are *gaijin*, outside people. Despite having met some of the American exchange students before departure, many of the students were initially extremely nervous about attending classes with `foreigners` and not confident in their ability to make `foreign` friends whilst abroad. They were, in fact, shocked to realise how shy Japanese people are, including themselves, compared to people in their host communities. They were therefore surprised and grateful when `foreigners` made the first move to introduce themselves and to express interest in Japan. Once that mental barrier was overcome, students blossomed and worked hard to accustomise themselves to their new surroundings.

But it wasn't all praise. In two major areas, Japanese students were extremely unimpressed by their host cultures: food and bathrooms.

FOOD

Criticisms about food ranged from the oiliness of dishes to the amount of fried food served and even the amount thrown away.

Mainly food is meat in Australia because they like eating meat so much. On the other hand, we eat meats, vegetables and fish, so food culture is poor in Australia, whereas food culture is very wonderful in Japan.

Their way of thinking about the food is very different from that of Japanese people. Most American people simply consume a lot, even though Japanese people, at least me, can't come up with any idea to do so. When I was eating at a refectory of the school, I saw a lot of students who threw away the rest of foods that they took. Even though they had a rest food with more than half of their plate, they seem to be willing to throw it away, while I was trying to take food with an appropriate amount for me and trying not to make any [leftover] food. I just got surprised from what they did.

Many students missed Japanese cuisine and were horrified to gain weight abroad, embarking on strict diets as soon as they returned to Japan.

BATHROOMS

The importance of cleanliness to Japanese people is well-known. This became somewhat of an issue for many of the students, from wearing shoes in the house to how often they could wash their clothes (and whether or not they had to put their dirty clothes in the machine with those of homestay family members). Their overwhelming concerns however were with the bathroom.

First, big difference between Japan and USA culture is bathroom. Because there is big space each door and side walls, we can see someone's leg. Also no-one cares sound. As you know, Japanese people too much care about noise they make while they are in a bathroom. However in the US, no-one care about it and [I] start thinking it's silly too much care about noise in a bathroom.

In Australia, they don't have enough water, so when I was in Australia, I had taken a shower for

3 minutes. This experience was the most hardest for me, because I can't think about it in Japan.

When I lived in a dorm, I didn't have enough chance to use bathtub. Most of students don't use a bathtub so I thought using bathtub every day is great culture in Japan.

The bathroom was one area where there were major culture clashes. One student was scolded by his homestay family for using too much toilet paper. Another added over one hundred dollars to her homestay family's electricity bill by leaving her heater on 24 hours a day.

CONCLUSION

Fewer Japanese students are going abroad to study. Numbers have dropped from 82,945 in 2004 to 66,833 in 2008. While stressing the importance of overseas study for Japanese students, education minister Masaharu Nakagawa also noted [1] that students are increasingly hesitant to go in case they lose job opportunities and feel that society, in particular companies to which they are applying for jobs, may not value their overseas experience. This is a great pity because the above excerpts clearly show that students gain valuable cross-cultural experience from their time abroad.

In fact, I went through many hardships to get used to the life in NZ because of the gap.

Students return motivated to take control of their learning and to be more active in class.

I like the American way more than my home country. Why can't we say what we think about the topic when we want to? School should think about this system more.

Aggressiveness of American students acted as a good stimulus to me. I decided to act like American students in Japan.

Finally, students return convinced that studying abroad is a vitally important experience in university life.

I learned English but also culture. This exchange program is really precious for me. There are so many differences and similarities, also there are so many disadvantages and advantages to live in other countries but study abroad is one of the things we should do at least once in a life.

[1] Fukuda, Takahiro, The Japan Times, 24th September 2011, *Society must value overseas study: Nakagawa*.

(2011.9.26 受稿, 2011.10.7 受理)