

Study Abroad: Lessons Learned on the Road

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Abstract

The number of US students participating in study abroad programs for credits have more than doubled in the past decade. This increase of student interest together with the internationalization mission of universities has created a need for additional faculty members to develop diverse and high quality programs. This article addresses study abroad narrative that is an infrequently discussed area in literature. From an insider's qualitative perspective, it entailed the dimensions, preparation, execution, and pitfalls to develop and lead a study abroad program.

Keywords: study abroad, international education, higher education, cross cultural competency

1. Introduction

Most universities are now engaging in internationalization efforts on campus and across different global learning sites. The numbers of US students participating in study abroad programs for credits have more than doubled in the last decade. Despite the current distressful economic conditions in recent years, we have witnessed a record number of students completing study abroad programs. There were 262,416 and 260,327 students studying abroad for credits in 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 respectively (Institute of International Education, 2010). American students took part in study abroad programs at various destinations across the globe, among which, Britain, Italy, Spain, France and China were top destinations (Institute of International Education, 2010, a). Most study abroad trips were short term in summer or one semester in duration (Institute of International Education, 2010, b) due to obvious time and financial constraints. It is hard to dispute the benefit of study abroad experiences, regardless of the length of the trip (summer term or semester, academic year) or the nature of study (study tour, intensive courses, service learning, etc).

As the number of students studying abroad steadily increases, faculty members are encouraged to develop more diverse (in content and format) and higher quality study abroad programs to fulfill the need and mission of the internationalization effort. For faculty members who are interested in developing and leading a study abroad program, there are many resources on “how to” lead a successful study abroad program, such as NAFSA’s “The Guide to Successful Short-Term Programs Abroad” edited by Sarah Spencer and Kathy Tuma (2002). However, there are limited publications in study abroad literature that describe the logistical details, length and dimensions for the trip preparation, and pitfalls experienced by the faculty when leading a program. These details provide helpful knowledge for the trip leaders when they develop and execute new programs. This article addresses this less discussed area in study abroad literature from an insider’s qualitative account of the dimensions, preparation, execution, and pitfalls to develop and lead a study abroad program. I will share my experiences of developing and leading two study abroad trips to China. I will also reflect on lessons I have learned from the first trip to improve the overall quality of the second trip and for future ones. This is by no means a “user’s manual” for study abroad programs; rather, it is a qualitative account of my experiences that new faculty who are interested in developing and leading study abroad programs might benefit as well as the pitfalls to avoid.

2. Conceptualizing the Program

The proposal is a good mental exercise to conceptualize the goals and logistic details of the program. The proposal writing is not complicated because there are usually specific guidelines set forth by the university. However, it does require faculty members to have the knowledge of the local language and culture of the proposed host country as well as the detailed plan for the trip.

I wanted to take students on a trip to gain some understanding of the impact of globalization on the cultural and social norm changes, education, and gender roles in China. When I wrote the proposal, I conceptualized the learning goals I wanted my students to accomplish and also the accompanying action plans:

- What specific aspects of Chinese culture do I want the students to explore implicitly and explicitly?

- Which historical and culturally significant sites should they visit? How do we make meaning of these visits?
- Which universities and schools will we visit? How to get in touch with the organization leaders of these universities for my trip?
- What lectures do we want to take in these educational institutions?
- What kind of interaction do I want my students to engage with the Chinese children in the public schools?
- What kind of interactions will my students engage with local people?
- How do we examine these complex learning objectives in a short period of time in China?
- How long is the trip going to be? How much does it cost?
- How many students do I need to make the trip viable? What is the maximum amount of students can I take on the road as a solo leader?
- What items should be included in my budget?
- What does the timeline for the action plan look like?
- What does my trip itinerary look like?
- How many pre-trip workshops should I conduct to prepare the students? When should the workshops occur?
- What strategies do I use to build team spirit with students from different disciplines across campus?
- What techniques should I use to manage the group on the road?
- How should I evaluate the learning outcomes of this trip?

It was easy to complete the proposal once I had a clear answer (not necessarily detailed answer yet) to all of these questions.

3. What Strategies Worked?

Reflecting on the time, dimensions involved in trip preparation and execution, as well as the end trip evaluation, I considered the following strategies helpful to enhance the quality of the trip experience of the students.

3.1. Pre-trip orientations and workshops

I organized three orientations in the fall semester and three workshops in the winter semester before the trip in May. These orientation sessions were aimed at providing basic information for the students, such as preliminary trip itinerary, passport, visa, insurance, immunization, curriculum and tour activities, and of course the cost and payment timelines. Surprisingly, some students did not know that they needed a passport and visa to travel to China until they were informed of this in the orientation. In the workshops in the winter semester, I tried to prepare students for the trip intellectually, emotionally, and mentally. I gave them presentations about the basics of Chinese culture, etiquette, customs, history, as well as some survival Chinese words and phrases to build some foundational knowledge towards their cross cultural competency. I entailed the curriculum activities in China, and suggested books, appropriate documentaries/films for the students to read/watch before the trip. I also reminded them about safety and discipline issues (ie: stay low key and alert, refrain from heavy alcohol consumption, respect) on the trip as well as coping skills with unexpected changes, uncertainties, and stress.

3.2. Budget and record keeping

Budget is probably the most important aspect of the study abroad program after the safety of the students. I investigated all of the details of the budget, including airfare (international and domestic in China), lodging, meals, local transportation, tuitions for the host universities, cultural experiences and tours, gifts to the hosts, and miscellaneous items. The budget may need many revisions due to the enrollment, currency exchange rate fluctuation, inflation, and unforeseeable expenditures on the road. I also took the majority of the program fees in traveler's checks and a small amount of cash (such as \$500) for obvious safety reasons. Even though I could use a credit card with some vendors, I had to pay cash for most of the transactions in China. I kept a very detailed record of the transactions and updated it daily, including the date and amount of cash or traveler's checks exchanged. This was done on an Excel file that included categories such as date, receipt purpose (meal, taxi for example), currency exchange rate of the day, people who were covered by this expenditure, etc. I also translated the receipt and noted its purpose and date if it was not already dated. Then I organized them by categories chronologically, such as meals, hotels, excursions, transportation, tuition, etc. in an expandable folder for each day. This may sound tedious on the road, since leaders are often overwhelmed by the logistic details of the daily activities and the needs of the students, especially when there were late evening activities.

But it is a great time saver in the end. Imagine how cumbersome the end trip accounting process would be with a big pile of disorganized receipts that needed to be translated? Or worse, what if we cannot recall the occasions some receipts were for after the trip?

3.3. Team building

Team building is an essential element of a successful study abroad experience. Most of our students grew up in a cultural norm in which individualism was valued. This could be a challenging dynamic when they had to participate in program activities and tours as a group almost every day on the trip. In addition, they most likely had to share a room with a roommate they did not know before. So their sense of personal space and privacy was invaded. In the orientation and workshop sessions before the trip, I did some icebreaker activities with the group to help them get acquainted with each other. In addition, I divided the group into four smaller groups of 3- 4 persons. I identified a leader in each group to help facilitate the smooth flow of the daily events of the trip. The leaders were in charge of disseminating information about the daily activities and important changes of the itinerary in addition to my announcements. Leaders were also responsible for keeping their own small group together during the program outings to ensure the safety and inclusion of all members.

One thing I learned from leading these trips is the importance of keeping team spirit high on the road. For most students, it was easier to adjust to the cultural differences on the first few days when they were embraced with the excitement and new adventures, such as climbing the Great Wall of China, visiting Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City. But that excitement waned gradually when the jet lag, discomfort from adjusting to the local food, language, people, and culture started to creep into their psyche. Even though they did not encounter many direct or harsh impacts of cultural differences, mainly because they were in a group shielded by the protection of their professor on a well structured and guided study tour, most students still started to feel home sick or experience culture shock during the first week. This culture shock or discomfort became more difficult to cope with in the second week that would challenge the team spirit or worse, turn the group dynamic into negative directions.

To help students adjust to all of these changes and discomfort, I organized debriefing sessions regularly with the group to discuss issues of concerns or to clarify cultural misunderstandings. This was a very helpful forum to counsel students in solving group conflict and to smooth tension among some group members. For dealing with cultural differences, I guided them to decode the culture cues that were often misinterpreted. These regular informal meetings provided an open and friendly environment to help them cope with the culture shock and adjust to the local context. Students were encouraged and invited to offer their input as “peer counselors” when emotional issues called for their help. These conversations were natural platforms to build friendships among the group members. In addition, I asked our host to help our students connect with host university students in each city who were cultural brokers for my students. I will describe these details in a later section of this paper. For connecting with families at home, I helped them get access to the computer lab on campus or nearby internet café as well as helping them purchase inexpensive international calling cards to call home.

We ate family style Chinese food every day for each meal together in the first few days. After they were comfortable navigating the city independently, I made changes in our meal arrangement to allow them some opportunities and flexibility to eat western style foods on their own. In this way, they felt a sense of connection to what they were familiar with at home and also have a sense of control. Once my students overcame the hurdle of initial cultural shock, most of them started to feel more comfortable at the end of second week. Another built-in strategy I used to uplift the group spirit was leaving China via Shanghai. Shanghai has been the most westernized city in China. In recent decades, it is on “treadmill” to westernization with competing skyscrapers in Pudong, some are among the tallest buildings in the world. Across the Huangpu River from Pudong is the beautiful Bund area that is complimented by its adjacent western architecture built in its colonial past. Students identified sights and businesses there that resembled more or less of big cities in the US. Not surprisingly, students could find more local people with whom they could speak English on the streets. To my students, it was much easier to navigate this city by themselves. Returning home from Shanghai gave them a relaxing ending of the program and a psychological preparation for reentry to the US.

3.4. Meaningful interactions with the locals

One important lesson I learned from my previous trip is that I have to help students make meaningful connections to the places and people. Otherwise, as shared in the post trip debriefing, students felt a blank space in their head when they looked at the beautiful pictures of the places they had visited on the trip.

Some students complained that we visited too many places that they all blurred together. So on my second trip, I revised and added more meaningful “encounters” with the Chinese people who could help them feel connected to the local community in some way. One such encounter was to create a platform for the social interactions. I deliberately requested our hosts to arrange local family visits and have lunch or dinner with them. Students enjoyed experiencing Chinese style hospitality, learning from the host how to make dumplings, and observing how Chinese family members interact with each other at their homes. They valued the opportunities to talk with them on their opinions of many social issues, such as the one child policy, income gap, gender roles, educational pressure at school, and so on. They were often surprised by the clean and western style conveniences inside of the homes and their contrasting modest and old exterior of the apartment buildings we visited. Students said it was one of the most memorable activities on the trip. In addition to our standard classroom lectures, I arranged several visits to the universities, high school, middle school, and elementary school in different cities in China, including observing classes and giving short teaching demonstrations¹ to the Chinese students (teaching was only required to education majors, but other students were welcome to join the team teaching effort, which most students chose to do).

Before the trip, I required each student to bring 3-4 children’s books to give to the schools we were scheduled to visit. My colleague and former dean also suggested that I assign my students to read these books to the children. Each one of my students, regardless if they were trained to be teachers or not, read one or two books to a group of children in schools we visited. In one middle school in Anning (a city near our base site Kunming), our group was divided into two groups, each was observing an English class that was taught in English². Some of my students were invited to join the kids to participate in their learning games to drill new words and sentences. After the class was over, my students were all surrounded by these Chinese children who were fascinated about American schools and culture. One Chinese student was teaching one of my students how to play Erhu (a traditional Chinese music instrument). He convinced her that it was fun and easy to learn. The reading program was very successful. We were invited to return to one elementary school called Longxiang Elementary to do a teaching demonstration for their children and teachers. This school has a large percentage of children from migrant and poor families in the city. Even though most children in this school did not have many material possessions compared to most of their peers in elite schools, they were highly motivated learners and performed well academically.

Having not been exposed to many direct interactions with the foreign visitors before, these children loved to be read to and interact with my students. They were amused by the idea that someone from the US was teaching them English. They were also interested in the ways how my students taught, which were quite different from what they were used to in their large classroom of 55 or more students. After we finished a teaching demonstration at the Longxiang Elementary, we were escorted by the student ambassadors (6th graders) to the school playground where children performed group gymnastics and martial arts shows for us during their mid-morning recess time (30 minutes). After the recess, we had a discussion about the pedagogy and assessment with the principal and teachers who did not have class at that block. My students were not only deeply touched by the hospitality of the children, teachers, and school administrators, they also enjoyed engaging in the professional exchanges with the teachers and administrators there even though most students are not education majors. Two students considered returning to that school for their student teaching practicum next year.

3.5. Location and quality of hotels

Hotel accommodation, as I learned from these trips, is one of the most important aspects of the study abroad program. I selected the university dormitories for our group because it was safe and cost effective. It also provided modern amenities (internet, laundry) and opportunities for interacting with Chinese and international students at the host universities. On our second trip to Kunming, we were unexpectedly placed in a very poorly equipped hotel instead of the university dormitory due to a schedule conflict with the university international conference. Even though it was a safe hotel, my students were frightened by the old dark carpet, overflowing water in the bathrooms and roaches on the rug in that hotel.

¹ I did not want to impose our teaching methods to the locals and be perceived as an arrogant “expert” unless we were invited to do so by our hosts. The teaching demonstrations were platforms for starting mutual academic exchange with the teachers and students in these schools.

² I selected English classes to observe because most of my students did not have Chinese language skills to understand classes taught in Chinese.

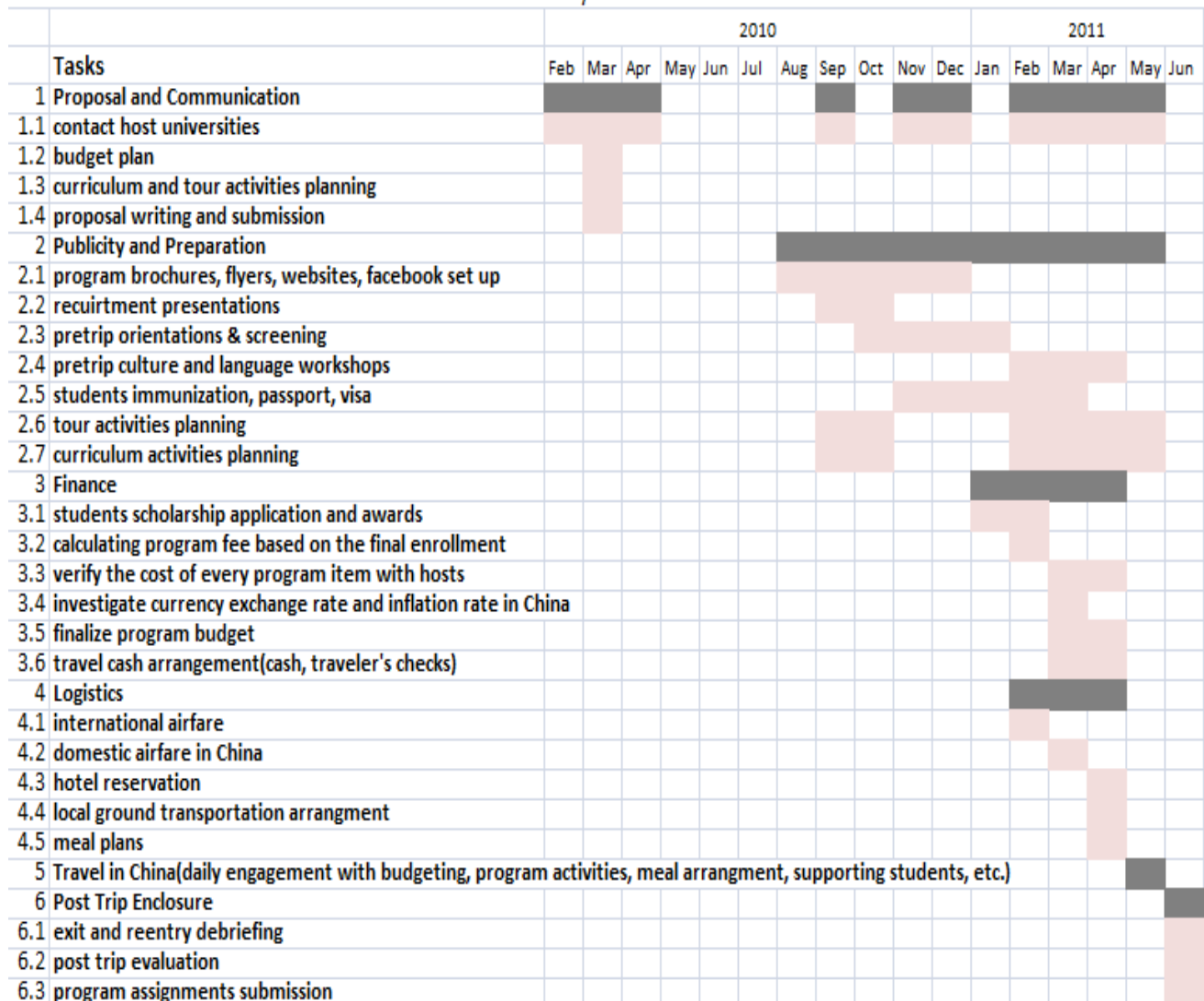
Despite having internet access, my students pleaded with me to find alternative accommodations as quickly as possible. Eventually the dean of our host university helped us find a hotel that was in the heart of downtown, close in proximity to the university at a price within our budget. Everyone was more relaxed and immediately happier once we moved into a hotel that has a beautiful lobby and clean rooms right in downtown. I did not explore the possibility of staying in a “nicer” hotel farther away from the city center. The commuting time and night life options of the suburban locations make it a much less desirable choice given our short time frame in the study locations.

3.6. Careful planning

One aspect of a successful study abroad trip is careful planning. Even though most study abroad trips are short term (2-8 weeks), the preparation time and effort for the trips are not less demanding. It often requires a thoughtful plan and careful execution of multiple tasks in a timely fashion. I started my program proposal almost 15 months before the actual trip. I continued to fine tune the budget details and program activities during the entire year before the trip due to changes of enrollment, currency rate and inflation fluctuations, international oil shortage, and the university procedural changes. Major revisions should be completed before the trip because the actual program is very fast faced with limited flexibility (any change in one event can cause a domino effect to the other events) and leverage for revisions on the road. I created a Gantt chart (modified) to identify my critical tasks and monitor progress (see figure 1). It was a useful tool to manage several tasks of the program that occurred at the same time. It also helped me stay focused on the “big picture” while I was dealing with many logistic details and teaching my regular full load of classes before the trip.

Figure 1.

Gantt Chart of Study Abroad Tasks and Actual Timelines



3.7. Cross the cultural bridge

One big challenge on a study abroad trip is to help students overcome the impact of culture shock and build their cross cultural competency; especially when travelling to developing countries where English is not the official language. Since most students did not speak Chinese, I prepared students with workshops on cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1991) and body language (Hall & Hall, 1987) to give them a tool to identify and understand the cultural differences. I taught them some simple daily Chinese that could help them navigate the cities by themselves. I also recommended that they read books such as “The Geography of Thought- How Asians and Westerners Think Differently- And Why” (Nisbett, 2003), “The Search for Modern China” (Spence, 1990), as well as some popular travel books on China. My goal was to equip the students with some cultural and historical knowledge of the places they will visit before the actual trip started. When we were in China, I usually gave the students a brief background introduction about the places we were about to visit and asked for their impressions and reflections after the visit on the bus or before the group dinner. This frequent communication provided them with meaningful learning opportunities and also platform to process the information from the visits.

Another very useful way to help build cross cultural competency is through personal connections with local students, which I call “student buddies”. I asked our hosts to recruit some student volunteers equal to our student numbers at their universities to be our student “buddies”. The buddies normally came from different majors who could speak fluent English. They were interested in learning more about American culture and universities through interactions with my students. In return, my students relied on their buddies to learn many aspects of student lives, social and cultural phenomenon in China, critical issues, pop music, good restaurants, fun things to do, etc. In the evening introduction meeting, the buddies met and were paired with each other randomly by the hosts. Depending on the development of their friendship and time available, most buddies were able to volunteer to take my students to shopping centers, interesting places not included in our program, interpreted cultural cues for them, and ate at popular local restaurants. I told my students to prepare a gender neutral gift for their student buddy at each of the host universities to show our gratitude for their hospitality.

In turn, our students were actually given gifts by their buddies as their friendship developed. Through these personal connections, the Chinese buddies were very effective in helping my students overcome the fear and confusion they encountered when interacting with people and trying to understand the local culture. They visited many popular spots in the city where only the locals knew about. Soon my students were comfortable exploring the city independently. More importantly, the friendship with buddies made them feel a sense of connection to the local communities and people. Most students cherished that friendship and kept regular communications with their buddies in Beijing and Kunming months after they returned to the US.

4. Pitfalls and Lessons Learned

During the study abroad programs, I encountered numerous unexpected events, despite what I thought was very detailed planning and preparation for my students. More than once I was caught by surprise by events or by student reactions over issues that were completely out of my frame of reference before the trip. I will share some of these pitfalls and strategies for improvement in the following section.

4.1. Predictability of student’s performance

Unlike the “national norm” of the study abroad student profiles, I traveled with a very diverse group of students. There was a varied mixture of traditional, non-traditional, different racial groups (except American Indian), men, women, gay, straight, and from arts and sciences majors across academic units on campus. I attempted to get a sense of the makeup of the student body in my pre-trip workshops and predict how well each of them would perform to various situations on the road. I was surprised after each trip on how my predicted behaviors of each student were often times different from what I had previously expected. For example, in my first trip, I had a non-traditional student whose name is Jenny³. She was in her late 40s and the mother of two teenage children at the time of trip. She had very limited travel experience and up until this point had never visited any places outside the state of Michigan. I was concerned that she would have a very difficult experience with an 18 hour flight to China and all of the planned trip activities. To my surprise, she was not only a capable traveler, but also was a great volunteer assistant when I was busy tending to the needs of other students who were sick or coping with emotional distress.

³ All names are pseudo names to protect the identity of students.

I later found out that she was a Boy Scout camp counselor for many years, and was used to handling crisis and providing emotional support to others. Despite her age, she outperformed most of the students in our group, especially in the physically strenuous outdoor activities. In contrast to Jenny, Amanda was a traditional student with numerous travel experiences out of state and to Canada. I anticipated her being a high performing participant, but she turned out to have a negative influence on the group dynamics due to her many complaints and was demanding accommodations whenever we had to make changes on the itinerary. Even though I did not have any control over the type of students applying for the study abroad program, on my second trip, I required students to provide a reference letter from a professor in order to be admitted into the program. In a study abroad context, students may act very differently under the travel stress in a foreign country compared to that in their classroom environment. However, these reference letters still provided useful background information of the personality and characteristics of the students, such as work ethics, punctuality, intellectual curiosity, etc.

4.2. Fitness and Health

Some program activities can be physically demanding, such as climbing the Great Wall of China, hiking the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, walking up five flights of stairs since many buildings did not have an elevator, and long and often fast-paced walks every day. I did not realize until our first day in China how important it was to conduct fitness and health screening before enrolling students into the program. On our first day, one student became lost in the crowd because she could not keep up with the regular pace of the group when we walked across the streets and tunnels to get to Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City. Her group leader and I retraced our route back to where we got off the bus searching for her, but were unable to find her among the sea of tourists. Luckily she remembered to take the hotel card with her that I gave to everyone at check in, so she was able to explore the Forbidden City by herself and get a taxi home safely. The following day, two students had to sit at the entrance when we visited the Great Wall of China in Beijing and later the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain in Lijiang, Yunnan Province. They were visibly upset when everyone else from the group later discussed the beauty of the landscapes and the exciting experience that they had shared.

Learning from these experiences, I did a health and fitness screening before enrolling students into the program for my second trip. I set the expectations for the students, so they were better prepared for the physical demands of the strenuous program activities before the trip. For those who thought they could not participate due to their fitness level or health limitation (such as asthma), they were asked to have a plan (ie: reading, exploring nearby exhibitions or sightseeing in the city) if they could not participate in day's outdoor program. On the second trip, two students chose to come back with me instead of climbing on the Mutianyu Great Wall. They were in peace when we sat at the foothill reading books and admiring the Great Wall from the distance.

4.3. Conflict resolution skills and discipline

I quickly learned that I needed to teach my students conflict resolution skills after two female students who were also roommates quarreled and the argument came close to elevating into a fist fight. I initially calmed them down and then talked to them as a mediator which helped them see each other's point of view. I made both of them apologize to each other and on the following day found them different roommates. On the following trip, two students got into a serious argument over the proper treatment of a medical condition. I talked to both students privately and then talked to the group in general about anger management and respect for each other. Students learned to solve conflict on their own and respect others when disagreements and tensions occurred. I learned from the trips that I need to address student behaviors problems as quickly as possible. These behaviors included their loudness in classes, impatience with Chinese professors in lectures, being late for the classes and scheduled events, excessive drinking late at night before an early morning activity, and being disrespectful to the local people (servers, vendors etc). Otherwise, these behavior issues by a few students could negatively influence the class image and group dynamics.

4.4. Body Image

Even though I was aware of the aesthetic standards of beauty and acceptable body image in China, I was still surprised by how some Chinese people, particularly those from rural and small towns, reacted to obesity. One over weight student was constantly stared at and occasionally photographed by some Chinese tourists. One young child even came to touch her waist that was not covered by her blouse. I did my best to protect her from the public humiliation, but it turned out to be very challenging to shield her from all the harsh judgment against her weight because I could not be with her all of the time. On my following trip, I gave students some tips of how to deal with the judgments made by people from China.

One student learned to use a good sense of humor to deal with the speculators; in return, people were more empathetic to her. Confronted by the weight perception in China, she was also more interested in healthier diet and exercise on the road. As a result, she lost 10 pounds by the end of the trip.

5. Reflections

Leading a study abroad program is the most exhausting and rewarding teaching experience I have had. I was physically and emotionally drained by the end of the trip, but I felt a great sense of gratification a few weeks later when I met my students in our debriefing meeting. It was even more rewarding when I read how they felt they have been transformed from the trip in their post trip evaluations and journals. Some students told me that they were inspired by the trip experience and went on to teach ESL in Korea and Taiwan; some wanted to return to China and asked me to help them arrange student teaching in Longxiang Elementary School. A few students took another study abroad trip to other countries. Others felt the trip allowed them to understand cultural differences, and to see how much privileges they have in the US that they previously took for granted. They were also surprised to realize how China was much different from what they have learned from the stereotypes in popular media. They all learned more about themselves and their own culture. No matter what they will do in the future, everyone expressed how life changing the trip was to them. To me, that is exactly what drew me to develop and lead a study abroad program in the first place: the memory of the trip and the effect of learning will last a lifetime. I also learned to improve my skills as a trip leader each time I went. I reflected and learned from the mistakes and pitfalls, and expanded “best practices” to improve the overall quality of future trips. It is a rewarding learning experience to me as well.

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