

Views from the bridge: Evaluating a short-term study abroad program

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Abstract

This paper examines the 2010-2011 Pacific Bridge program and students' evaluations of their progress. A brief outline of the program is provided and the students' self-evaluations are discussed. Instructors' comments on the cohort's progress are explicated along with reflections on the program in general. Recommendations on how the program can be improved are also given.

Keywords

Evaluation, experiential learning, study abroad programs

1 Introduction

This study focuses on Ritsumeikan University's 2010-2011 Pacific Bridge (PB) program cohort and the self-evaluations of their progress. A brief background to the program is given followed by a discussion of the students' self-evaluations. Comments from the PB instructors are included on the cohort's progress and the author's reflective thoughts on the program are provided.

2 Background

The PB program is a joint undertaking between Ritsumeikan University and the University of British Columbia (UBC). It aims to provide students with the chance to experience Canadian culture first-hand. The program is offered each year over a four-week period from mid-February to mid-March. It was designed by UBC's Continuing Studies' Centre for Intercultural Communication (CIC) and aims to "provide a unique, elite level, full-time, educational opportunity for international university graduates" (UBC, 2009, p.1). The PB program's comprehensive study plan tries to maximize the students' cultural and educational environment within a short period of time.

3 Evaluations

Student evaluation and feedback from the UBC instructors is meticulous and invaluable. After the

students have returned to Japan, the UBC PB program coordinator sends a detailed report outlining the comments of the instructors on each student along with their grades. In addition to the instructors' comments, Ritsumeikan University is also sent the results of a questionnaire administered to the students on the last day of the program after their final presentations.

The self-evaluation of each student's (n=14) participation and effort was extremely high and positive. The experiential nature of the program certainly seemed to result in high levels of self-satisfaction with their individual achievement. Comments on UBC's facilities, the cultural assistants and the staff were also positive.

4 Instructors' Comments

One of the many admirable aspects of the report given to Ritsumeikan by the UBC PB program's instructors is the detailed grading breakdown of each student with comments on each student. The instructors were pleased with the majority of the learner journals which were either handwritten, or submitted via e-mail. The course coordinator commented that many of the submissions were detailed and thought-provoking. She noted that those students who put the effort into writing their journals seemed to go beyond mere superficial evaluations of Canadian culture and began to '*get below the surface*'.

5 Reflections

After three years of helping Ritsumeikan University with the running of the Pacific Bridge program one underlying theme has been the importance of group dynamics in determining the smoothness of each cohort's journey. All the cohorts I have overseen have worked well together. Group bonding activities both within the pre-study PB program and through extra-curricula activities serve to create a close-knit group similar to the '*han*' system which the students experienced during their formative school years.

One fear as an educator and a concerned adult is for the students' physical and mental wellbeing. At times a student may get sick or experience other difficulties and this is where the presence of the support structure provided by Ritsumeikan professors and UBC staff, as well as their peers, is vital in helping the stricken student.

6 Recommendations

One of the keys to any successful study abroad experience is preparation. The five-month preparation program offered by Ritsumeikan University for students before they attend the short-term program in Canada does go some way in helping students prepare for the academic reality of student life at UBC. Practice presentations and group work on Japanese-Canadian themes provide a taste of what they will experience. In terms of preparing the students for the cultural and linguistic challenges I believe that more effort should be made. Despite the fact that students receive advice from their '*sempai*' (seniors) on life in Canada and what to expect, many students fail to study English hard before leaving for Canada.

A study abroad handbook would be an invaluable resource for the students. The handbook could contain useful expressions, advice, and other information. Of course students receive a comprehensive handbook from UBC once they arrive, but a pre-PB program package would go a long way to helping the program run smoother.

Another way to help the students adapt to life in Canada once they arrive would be to provide support through language workshops. During the first few weeks (especially the first week) of their program students could study language and cultural themes that they come across in their day-to-day lives. Support could be provided by student counseling either in small groups or one-to-one. These meetings could focus on specific issues and the instructor could suggest certain ways to resolve the situation. A further suggestion would be for each student to have a UBC mentor i.e. a student from UBC with whom they could consult. These mentors could visit the host families with the students to help discuss any difficulties which may have arisen.

Many applied linguists acknowledge that there is a close relationship between learner autonomy and new technology (Hall, 2011, p.157). The students on the PB program are used to working with technology and they rely on their mobile phones and computers for information. Benson (2001) agrees that through multimedia support student autonomy can be developed and that online activities can lead to self-directed learning. The creation of an Online Study Abroad Centre (OSAC)

which the students could access before, and during the PB program, could provide essential linguistic and cultural support.

It is important to create a link between those students who have attended the PB program and those who are planning to attend. After students have completed the program it is essential that their comments and suggestions should be garnered. This reflective feedback could be used to create a valuable corpus of advice for future cohorts. Apart from written comments and talks with future attendees, a further way of improving the program would be to video the returnees. They could record their advice to future students and discuss their experiences. These 'video letters' could be housed on the Online Study Abroad Centre for future students.

7 Conclusion

Study abroad programs represent a challenge for students and educators alike. For many of the students it is their first time to go abroad and to live with a family other than their own. The host families have a completely different cultural make-up and this makes for an extremely steep learning curve for the students and for the families.

It is up to educators to do what they can to create a learning environment where students are free to interpret and experience the world in their own individual ways. Programs such as the PB program are ideal crucibles for experiential learning.

Students taking part in study abroad programs are living bridges spanning countries and cultures. It is through them that cultural understanding can take place free from the perceived constraints of formal tertiary education. Each day Japanese students such as the 2010-2011 PB cohort are challenging themselves and it is hoped that future study abroad cohorts will build more bridges between Japan and other nations.

References

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