Cultural Adjustment
Seven Ways to Succeed
Study Abroad is not for the Easily Discouraged

Article by Genevieve Wareham

Studying abroad in any country is the opportunity of a lifetime, something that every student should try. But study abroad can also be a difficult experience, not for those who are easily discouraged. The following tips derive from my own experience.

1. You cannot fully experience another country if you don’t leave home behind. Study abroad is cultural immersion; so while you are in another country focus on getting in as deep as you can. If you are preoccupied with what’s going on at home, this will be difficult to do. Avoid constantly talking on your cell phone to people at home or spending too much time on the Internet as it will isolate you from your group, your host family, and the culture around you. You may miss the world you are in if you are preoccupied with the one you’ve left behind. While everybody gets homesick during study abroad and wants to talk to family and friends at home, you will have a harder time adapting if you don’t live in the here and now.

2. It is up to you to make the effort. You have made a choice to study in another country. As always in life, nobody can set the goals but you. If what you want is to be fluent in the language, you have to practice. If you want to make new friends with the people of your host country, you have to go out and meet them.

3. Let go of your pride and don’t be afraid to make mistakes. It is natural for anyone learning a new language to make mistakes. This is how we learn. Don’t be afraid to speak to people even though what you want to say may not always come out right. Communication is the goal here, and the more you practice speaking with people, the larger your vocabulary and the greater your ability to express yourself will become.

4. Homestay is the way to go. Living with a local family is invaluable. They are an immediate support structure in the community, as well as the easiest people with whom to practice the language. A homestay provides you with the opportunity to gain an immediate perspective on everyday culture and is likely to leave you with some close personal relationships.

5. Be 10 times more polite than you would be normally. People are more likely to be helpful and patient if you are nice and polite. Learn the proper customs so as not to embarrass yourself or offend anyone. If you are staying with a family, make sure to clean up after yourself, make your bed, and always be courteous when talking with them.

6. School is important, but so is the cultural experience. We all like to get good grades and do well in school, but if all you want to learn about the culture is in the classroom, you could have stayed home. Challenge yourself socially. Try things you’ve never tried before. Studying the language is good, but using the language in conversation with native speakers is better. Do not stress yourself out over your schoolwork. You will make yourself miserable and miss out on a lot of fun.

7. Learn to laugh. A good sense of humor can be your best asset. Remember that not only are you meeting people from a different country and culture, but you also may be studying with all types of people from your own country. Many differences between cultures can be comical. The same words can mean different things in each language. Be able to laugh at yourself and at awkward situations and you will have an easier and more pleasant experience.

Everyone has bad days when they may want to return home. These days will pass. Do not squander the time you have; rather, keep in mind that you are one of the few fortunate people who get to experience study abroad. Go learn about the world and, most importantly, have fun.

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Just as nine-tenths of the iceberg is out of sight and below the water line, so is nine-tenths of culture out of conscious awareness. The out-of-awareness part of culture has been termed deep-culture.
Hints to Make the Cultural Transition Easier

**Ask Questions**
Ask questions of a practical nature, such as, “Where may I find foodstuffs from my home country?” or “Where is the nearest bank?”, but also ask questions about a person’s opinions on things, and about their experiences. Ask for their reactions to happenings, newspaper articles, television programs, etc. You may find that some stereotypes you held about your new host culture are crumbling!

**Practice the Local Language**
There are regional and local variations to most languages. Learn the version that pertains in your new host culture. Watch television, listen to the radio, read local newspapers, and Talk! Talk! Talk! with people you encounter everywhere you go during your everyday routine.

**Observe Ritual Social Interactions**
Notice what people say and how they say it when they greet an acquaintance, when they are introduced to a stranger, when they take leave of a friend or of someone they have just met. Watch for variations with age, sex and apparent social status.

**Take “Field Trips”**
A field trip is a visit to a place where you can observe what happens. Yours may be conducted in a visit to someone's home, at the grocery store, riding public transportation, attending a church service, or visiting a public school. You may be amazed by how much you can learn simply by observing.

**Talk with Experienced International Students**
One of the benefits of studying at most universities abroad is the presence of other international students from different countries. Their experiences can be an invaluable resource for you, the new sojourner. Don’t limit yourself to members of your own culture group: **Be Adventurous!**

**Keep a Journal**
Journal-keeping is a time-honored method of coping with a new culture. Writing about your experiences forces you to be observant and to reflect on what is happening to you and around you.

**Read**
An abundance of materials exist about your new host culture. Newspapers, magazines and the university library are excellent resources for your quest.

**View Yourself as a Teacher**
You can use your time in the U.S. to teach at least a few host country nationals about your home culture. Thinking of yourself as a teacher may give you additional patience and help you avoid becoming irritated when asked questions which may seem just plain stupid to you!

**Reflect**
An essential part of the cultural adaptation process is taking time to reflect on what is happening to you and around you. Demands of academics are rigorous and reflection time won’t happen unless you purposefully set out to reserve the time for it. Ask yourself such questions as “What did I expect from my study experience?” and “How does reality compare with my expectations?” “What can I do to make my experience more constructive and interesting?” and “How is the experience preparing me to meet my goals for the future?”
Stages of Cultural Adaptation

The Honeymoon Stage
(The early stage in any activity, before problems set in.)

Common thoughts during the Honeymoon Stage include:

*Isn’t this exciting? I can’t wait to tell _______ about this. Aren’t they interesting!*

Characteristics of the Honeymoon Stage

- You are busy taking care of business (registration, housing, bank account, etc.)
- You are observing the new culture and familiarizing yourself with the new environment
- You are meeting useful and friendly university staff
- You are making your first social contacts with member of the host culture
- You are seeing and doing new things and enjoying a new world

The Conflict Stage

Common thoughts during the Conflict Stage include:

*We would never do that in my country! Why can’t they just _______? I only have ____ months before I go home. These people are so ______!*

Characteristics of the Conflict Stage

- You begin to desire more personal relationships with members of the host culture
- You find you have little time or opportunity to make friends
- You are feeling isolated, out of place
- You may feel tired, sick, depressed, angry or frustrated
- You have a growing awareness that your home culture’s behaviors may not be accepted in the host culture and you may have to give up, suspend or modify your own behavior
- Your high expectations remain unmet
- You blame the host culture for your problems
- You spend lots of time with members of your home culture complaining about the host culture
- You experience problems with the subtleties of the target language

The Critical Stage

Common thoughts during the Critical Stage include:

*Why shouldn’t they say/do that? We say/do that too, but differently.*

Characteristics of the Critical Stage

- You choose to become an “explorer” in the new culture
- You accept the challenge of self-reflection
- You assume responsibility for your own cultural adjustment

The Recovery Stage

Common thoughts during the Recovery Stage include:

*You don’t understand them like I do. I’m beginning to like this.*

Characteristics of the Recovery Stage

- Your language skills improve noticeably
- You begin to understand the actions of members of the host culture
- You have finally made friends and feel part of the community
- You develop a greater tolerance for what is strange and new
- You become a mediator between the two cultures
- You feel proud that you can make yourself understood in the target language and that you can understand native speaker
Getting Along With Americans

Like any other society, American society includes people who are friendly and people who are not, people who are intelligent and people who are not, and so on. Also, American society includes people representing large numbers of ethnic, religious, socioeconomic, age, occupational, and other types of groups. People in any of these various groups are likely to have ideas and opinions that differ from those of people in other groups. Even with this diversity, it is possible to mention certain characteristics, which, in general, describe attitudes and practices that are common among Americans and that tend to distinguish Americans from people who have grown up in other cultures. Keep in mind that the following remarks are generalizations, and that you will find individuals who are exceptions to any or all of them.

Individualist vs. Collectivist Cultures
Social scientists seeking ways to compare cultures have recently worked on a distinction between individualist and collectivist cultures.

While collectivists can be found in the United States and individualists can be found in many collectivist societies, it is no doubt safe to generalize that the United States has an extremely individualistic culture, while the cultures of most foreign students and scholars in the United States are collectivist. Collectivists seeking to live and work among individualists will want to learn certain things about individualists, so as to understand them better, be able to predict their reactions, and interact with them more constructively. Individualists are likely to:

- pay relatively little attention to groups (including families) they belong to.
- be proud of their accomplishments, and expect others to feel proud of their own accomplishments.
- be more involved with their peers and less involved with people who are older or more senior in an organization and be more comfortable in social relationships with those who are their social equals, and less comfortable in relationships with people of higher or lower status than themselves.
- act competitively.
- define status in terms of accomplishments (what they have achieved through their own efforts) rather than relationships or affiliations (the family or other group to which they belong).
- seem relatively unconcerned about being cooperative or having smooth interpersonal relations.
- seem satisfied with relationships that seem superficial and short-term.
- be ready to “do business” very soon after meeting, without much time spent on “getting acquainted” conversation.
- place great importance on written rules, procedures, and deadlines, such as leases, contracts, and appointments.
- be suspicious of, rather than automatically respectful toward, people in authority.
- assume that people in general need to be alone some of the time, and prefer to take care of problems by themselves.

Notable Characteristics of Americans
Individualism – Americans generally believe that the ideal person is an autonomous, self-reliant individual. Most Americans see themselves as separate individuals, not as representatives of a family, community, or other group. They dislike being dependent on other people, or having others dependent on them. Some people from other countries view this attitude as “selfishness.” Others view it as a healthy freedom from the constraints of ties to family, clan, or social class.

Equality and Informality – Americans are taught that “all men are created equal.” While they continually violate that idea in some aspects of life, in others they adhere to it. They treat each other in very informal ways, for example, even in the presence of great differences in age or social standing. From the point of view
of some people from other cultures, this kind of behavior reflects “lack of respect,” while to others, it reflects a healthy lack of concern for social ritual.

Time Consciousness – Americans place considerable value on punctuality (being on time). They tend to organize their activities by means of schedules. As a result they may sometimes seem harried; always running from one thing to the next, and not able to relax and enjoy themselves. Foreign observers sometimes see this as being “ruled by the clock.” Other times they see it as a helpful way of assuring that things get done.

Materialism – “Success” in American society is often marked by the amount of money or the quantity of material goods a person is able to accumulate. Some foreigners see all this as a “lack of appreciation for the spiritual or human things in life.” Others recognize it as a way of assuring a comparatively high standard of living in the country.

The Communicative Style of Americans

Another way of describing differences between people from diverse cultural backgrounds, besides comparing their values, is comparing their communicative styles. According to communications scholar Dean Barnlund (writing in Public and Private Self in Japan and the United States), “communicative style” refers to:

- The topics people prefer to discuss
- People’s favorite forms of verbal interaction (ritual, repartee, argument, self-disclosure)
- The depth of involvement people seek from each other
- Communication channels people tend to rely on (vocal, verbal, physical)
- The level of meaning to which people are generally attuned (the fact that there are emotional content of messages)

When people with differing communicative styles interact, they frequently feel ill at ease, and they often misjudge or misunderstand each other. To help understand why that happens, and to try to reduce the communications problems that arise when it does happen, it is helpful if foreigners (anywhere, not just in the U.S.) know something about the communicative style of the local people and the way it compares with their own communicative style. With that knowledge, the foreigners will be better able to understand what is happening when they are dealing with the local people, and will know some of the ways in which the local people are likely to misunderstand or misjudge them. Here are some generalizations (subject to exceptions) about the communicative style of Americans:

Preferred Topic – In casual conversation (called “small talk”), Americans prefer to talk about the weather, sports, jobs, people they both know, or past experiences, especially ones they have in common. As they grow up, most Americans are warned not to discuss politics or religion, at least not with people they do not know very well, because politics and religion are considered controversial topics. Sex, bodily functions, and perceived personal inadequacies are considered very personal topics, and are likely to be discussed only between people who know each other very well. By contrast, people in some other cultures are taught to believe that politics and/or religion are good conversation topics, and they may have different ideas about what topics are too “personal” to discuss with others.

Favorite Form of Verbal Interaction – In the typical conversation between Americans, no one talks for very long at a time. Participants in conversation “take turns” frequently, usually after the speaker has spoken only a few sentences. Americans prefer to avoid arguments; if argument is unavoidable, they prefer it to be restrained, carried on in a normal conversational tone and volume. Americans are generally rather impatient with “ritual” conversational exchanges. (Only a very few of them are common: “How are you?” “Fine, thank you, how are you?” “Fine.” “It was very nice to meet you.” “I hope to see you again.”) People from other countries may be more accustomed to speaking and listening for longer periods when they are in a
conversation; they may be accustomed to more ritual interchanges (about the health of family members, for example) than Americans are. They may enjoy arguing, even vigorous arguing, of a kind that Americans are likely to find unsettling.

Depth of Involvement Preferred – Americans do not generally expect very much personal involvement from conversational partners. “Small talk” - without long silences, which provoke uneasiness - is enough to keep matters going smoothly. It is only with very close friends (or with complete strangers whom they do not expect to see again) that Americans generally expect to discuss personal topics. Some people from other countries prefer even less personal involvement than Americans do, and rely more on ritual interchanges. Others come from countries where much more personal involvement is sought, as one wants to learn as much as possible about another person and keep open the possibility of developing a relationship of mutual interdependence.

For Americans, getting to know another person is generally a process of learning more about the other person’s feelings and experiences in life. For many Europeans, by contrast, getting to know another person is likely to involve learning about their ideas.

Methods Preferred – The ideal among Americans is to be somewhat verbally skillful, speaking in moderate tones, using relatively few and restrained gestures of the arms and hands. They do not touch each other very often. By contrast, others might prefer even quieter conversation, less talking, and even more restrained gestures. Or they might be accustomed to louder voices, many people talking at once, vigorous use of hands and arms to convey meanings or add emphasis, and/or more touching between conversation partners.

Level of Meaning Emphasized – Americans are generally taught to believe in the “scientific method” of understanding the world around them, so they tend to look for specific facts and physical or quantifiable evidence to support viewpoints. Underlying this search for facts is the assumption that there are “truths” about people and nature that can be discovered by means of “objective” inquiry that is carried out by trained people using “scientific” means of measurement of observation.

Compared to Americans, people from some other countries might pay more attention to the emotional content or the human feelings aspects of a message, and be less concerned with what Americans would call “facts.” Many misjudgments and misunderstandings can arise from interactions between people who have different communicative styles. Here are some examples:

- Foreign visitors in the U.S. might hear little but “small talk” among Americans, and draw the mistaken conclusion that Americans are not intellectually capable of anything more than simple talk about such subjects as the weather, sports, teachers, or their own social lives. The conclusion that Americans are intellectually inferior is also reached by many people who regard argument as a favorite form of interaction, and who find that Americans are often not very adept at arguing.
- Americans might use the labels “shy,” “too formal,” or “too polite” to describe people who by custom speak little and/or who rely heavily on ritual conversation.
- Vigorous arguing (with raised voices and much use of hands and arms, and perhaps more than one person talking at a time) may be “natural” to some people, but may alarm Americans, who expect violence, or at least long-lasting anger, to result from loud disagreements.
- What Americans might regard favorably as “keeping cool” - that is, not being drawn into an argument, not raising the voice, always looking for the “facts” - might be seen by others as coldness and a sort of lack of humanness. On the other hand, Americans are likely to see those who do not “keep cool” as being “too emotional.”
- Embarrassment or uneasiness almost always results when someone raises a discussion topic that the other person thinks is inappropriate for the particular setting or relationship.
- Americans are likely to view a very articulate person with some suspicion.
These are just a few of the many misjudgments that arise between Americans and people in the U.S. from other countries. It can be very helpful to be aware of the differences in communicative style that produce them. Talking about differences in communicative style, when such a difference seems to be causing problems, is usually a good way to reduce the negative effects of the differences.

**Nonverbal Communication**

When we think about communicating with people from another country, we tend to think only about their spoken language. However, much (some scholars think most) communication between people is nonverbal, involving dress, ornaments, facial expressions, gestures, postures, and body positioning. Here are some more comments:

**Eye Contact** – When they are talking to someone, Americans alternate between looking briefly into the listener's eyes and looking slightly away. When they are listening to another person they look almost constantly as the speaker’s eyes. Americans tend to distrust people who do not look into their eyes while talking to them.

**Touching** – People in some countries touch their conversation partners far more frequently than Americans do, while those from other countries touch each other even less often than Americans do. American men rarely touch each other, except when shaking hands. American women touch each other somewhat more often, but with rare exceptions they do not walk hand-in-hand or arm-in-arm the way women in some countries do.

Americans usually get nervous if another person stands closer than about an arm's length away, unless the other person is a partner in a romantic relationship. They stand a bit closer if they are side-to-side rather than face-to-face. This is not to say that there is a taboo on touching conversation partners. There is not. Some Americans periodically touch their conversation partners lightly on the arm or shoulder while talking. If one does so with you, you can do likewise.

**Hygiene** – As you can readily tell from television commercials, Americans have been taught that the natural smells of people's bodies and breath are unpleasant. Many Americans bathe or shower daily (or more often if they engage in vigorous exercise during the day), use an underarm deodorant to cover the odor of perspiration and brush their teeth with toothpaste at least once a day and perhaps more often than that. In addition, they may rinse their mouths with a mouthwash or chew mints in order to be sure their breath is free of food odors.

Some foreign students and scholars come from cultures where the human body’s natural odors are considered quite acceptable, and where efforts to overcome those odors are, at least on the part of men, considered unnatural. Still other students and scholars come from countries where personal cleanliness is considered more important than Americans consider it to be, and they may view most Americans as “dirty.”

**Guidelines for Practical Situations**

The comments in the previous section are very general. This section contains more specific information about the behavior that Americans usually expect in certain situations.

**Shaking Hands** – Men usually shake hands with each other the first time they meet. Men usually do not shake hands with women unless the woman extends her hand first. After the first meeting, shaking hands is relatively rare. However, if someone offers his or her hand, you should shake it. In general, Americans avoid physical contact with each other. To them, physical contact frequently connotes sexual attraction or aggressiveness.
When Americans shake hands, they normally exert a small amount of pressure on each others’ hands, move their clasped hands a bit upwards, then a bit downwards, then release their grip, all the while looking directly into each other’s eyes. People from other places where handshaking is customary may hold the other person’s hand more or less firmly than Americans do, and may sustain the contact for a shorter or longer time than Americans generally do.

Names and Titles – American names generally have three parts: first (or given) name, middle name or initial, and last (family) name. In most cases, the first name appears first, then the middle name or initial (if it is used - often it is not), and finally the last name. For example, “I would like you to meet my teacher, Albert Einstein.” However, on many forms and applications the last name is listed first, followed by a comma and then the first and middle name(s). For example, a person named John Fitzgerald Kennedy would probably give his name as Kennedy, John F., on official forms. People are seldom addressed by their middle names, as is the practice in some other countries.

The matter of a married woman’s family name has become confusing. Traditionally, a woman took her husband’s family name upon marriage, and perhaps used the “maiden name” (that is, her previous family name) as a middle name. Some women still do that. Some add their husband’s family name to their own, separating the two with a hyphen. And some do not change their names in any way upon marriage. Thus, when Martha Clinton marries Tom Jordan, she might call herself Martha Jordan, Martha Clinton-Jordan, or Martha Clinton. This practice is another indication of the individualism and relative lack of concern for tradition in American society. First names are used in the U.S. more frequently than elsewhere. People may call each other by their first names immediately after they have met.