

# Study Tour in Central and Eastern Europe as a Part of Education for International Understanding

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## Introduction

*"Certainly, travel is more than the seeing of sights; it is a change that goes on, deep and permanent, in the ideas of living."* - Miriam Beard

(Miriam Beard wrote the first international cultural history of the businessman in 1938)

As part of an experiential education program, students from the Faculty of Education, Yamaguchi University traveled to Central and Eastern Europe to learn about the country's political, socioeconomic, and ecological conditions and get into contact with the cultures in this part of the world. Pre-trip preparation included studying preliminary lectures, a special seminar offering data and first images of the countries visited, practicing simple language phrases and words of politeness, as well as practical instructions. During the trip itself students were monitored with respect to their progress in learning. This paper discusses the experiences, problems and outcomes of this student trip abroad.

## 1. EDUCATIONAL TRAVELS

Educational travels are certainly fun, but at the same time people learn about the history, the culture and the politics, and get a sense of the visited places. Educational travel is different from vacation travel because its focus is on learning, and not leisure. As technology shrinks our world and brings us all closer together, the opportunity to learn about other cultures grows. By viewing and experiencing different cultures, we come away with a much better view of not just them, but also ourselves. "Educational travel gives us the ability to do this in ways nothing else can. Travelers gain a deeper knowledge of the world. They get to experience life and truly live it. It can be a life-changing experience" (Merz, 2009).

Many authors have pointed out different benefits that travel offers. Here are just a few of them,

the list derived from different publications and our own experience:

- Viewing beautiful and historic sites.
- Learning about the culture and history of distant places.
- Discovery, learning and growing.
- Challenging difficulties in foreign places, while gaining new perspectives.
- Gaining a global viewpoint.
- Satisfying curiosity about places of special interest.
- Developing lasting memories and friendships (Semler, 2007)
- Stepping outside of the comfort zone of the domestic culture.

Guided travel of students, when carefully planned and prepared to meet the educational demand, is a way of dynamic learning with many merits. Traveling abroad, students acquire better consciousness of their own cultural identity. Exposed to different natural and cultural environments, they get a new awareness of foreign and their own home places and learn how to compare them. A very important point in our globalizing world is learning how to be tolerant toward different cultures, and guided study travel offers very good opportunities to raise this type of education. The same applies to learning how to adapt to and be flexible in different cultural environments, how to be confident among other cultures, and how to support oneself away from the domestic culture. A study tour offers unmatched opportunities to learn how to observe other cultures, their features, problems and conflicts.

Educational travel tours may have different formats, depending on educational targets, types of participants, the time and distance covered, available finances, and last but not least, the instructors' imagination. Some of the most often used points and elements of a study tour include:

- a. Careful preparation (educational, financial, administrative, etc.).
- b. Planning of the travel itself (transportation, accommodation, meals, etc.).
- c. Planning of lectures (types of lecturers, venues, costs, etc.).
- d. Planning of conditions for cultural communication with local people.
- e. Planning for experiencing the local natural environment.
- f. Planning for experiencing the local types of recreation and entertainment.
- g. Planning for experiencing local food.
- h. Planning for free time.
- i. Planning communication within the group (boys, girls, age, type of participants, etc.).

Before starting to organize a study tour, it should be clear that this is a very time-consuming undertaking, requiring a lot of dedication, negotiations and imagination. Even if the help of a travel company is available, a study tour requires special design, so that it should meet the educational aims set up originally. In addition, organizing and realizing a study tour relates to lots of responsibilities such as securing the educational outcome, safety, financial organization, communication among different parties (group members, teachers, parents of students, local organizers, travel companies, school authorities), etc.

## 2. STUDY TOUR PREPARATION

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned features, requirements and concerns, a study tour was set up for a group of students in the specialty course of International Understanding of the Faculty of Education, Yamaguchi University. The preparation started one year before the tour. The travel was held in the period August 30 – September 15, 2009 following the route Yamaguchi City (Japan) - Taipei (Taiwan) - Vienna (Austria) - Cracow and Auschwitz (Poland) - Lviv (Ukraine) - Budapest (Hungary) - Vienna and back. The group consisted of 20 students and two teachers.

The route set up envisaged introduction of the students to the Central- and Eastern European cultures. The learning outcome had to support the students' knowledge about European cultures. The aims were to experience specific cultural environments, to learn about differences of other cultures, to identify students' own culture, based on comparisons and practical experience, to get a sense of cultural diversity and co-existence of cultures, to understand more about cultural conflicts, borders, political influences etc. Last, but very important, chances of inter-cultural communication were envisaged.

The tour organization included several aspects:

- Educational aspect,
- Administrative aspect,
- Travel and accommodation arrangements,
- Other.

The educational preparation included a one-day preparatory seminar. Students were instructed on:

- The cultural landmarks and features of the countries to visit (basically the cities of Vienna, Cracow, Lviv, Budapest). They listened to some lectures, listened to some music, and saw movies about these places.
- Lectures about the historical background of this part of the world were delivered, mentioning some important historical facts and the current political situation.
- Some basic words and expressions of politeness were taught basically concerning the German and Ukrainian languages.
- A method of demonstrating Japanese culture was discussed (the students prepared some texts of popular Japanese songs, which they sang later during a visit to a Ukrainian school).
- Students were instructed on some issues of security, behavior abroad, etc.

It should be mentioned that in preparation for this tour the students were stimulated to study English harder, in order to be able to communicate better in Europe.

The administrative aspects included arrangement of the tour permission from the Faculty of Education and issuing the respective documents, arrangement of documents for continuation of the international exchange between the "Ivan Franko" University of Lviv and the Yamaguchi University, etc.

The travel, accommodation and insurance arrangements were planned with the help of the CCI Tours travel company, but it should be mentioned that it took a lot of negotiations until the tour fit the educational and financial requirements of this group.

An important point of this study tour was to make such planning as to achieve a good balance between the objectives of visit and time. Since it was a study tour, it was necessary to use the time most efficiently for better learning. At the same time, conditions for personal encounters with the local cultural environments had to be planned and arranged.

In addition to visiting the popular landmarks in Vienna, a special guided tour at the United Nations Vienna Headquarters (VIC) was planned and organized.

A visit to the studio of a famous Austrian artist and film maker was organized. He works jointly with Austrian and Japanese teams, and the students had the chance to see how foreigners see their culture.

Encounters with local people were planned and organized, offering explanations about the everyday life style of Austrians, their habits and food culture. The Japanese students had the chance to experience them and ask questions directly.

Meetings with University students and school children in Lviv were planned and organized (including ways to implement them, timing, appropriate people, city transportation, guides, etc.).

As a part of the European experience, a visit to the Lviv opera was organized beforehand. A detailed itinerary was developed (see appendix), which was strictly observed. All tours, visits, encounters planned in the itinerary were carried out as planned.

### 3. OUTCOMES FROM THE EUROPEAN STUDY TOUR

A study tour should be evaluated to identify the outcomes, both achievements and possible mistakes in the course of the tour organization and practical execution of the plan. An evaluation method was planned, namely to carry out 5 surveys with the students at different stages of the tour. The respective questionnaires were prepared, and the situations and timings of their administering planned. Additional questions were also prepared for informal discussions with the students on suitable occasions, aiming at gathering information about the learning process.

Half of the students were sophomores and the other half were juniors. Half of them had never been abroad before. The others had traveled abroad, but not in the countries included in this study tour. Obviously this study tour was very important for the first impressions of the students of Central and Eastern Europe.

In the beginning of the trip, the aim was to establish the effectiveness of the preparation for this trip and students' expectations about the cultures they would encounter.

Among the 4 major cities included in the itinerary, namely Vienna, Cracow, Lviv and Budapest, Vienna was the most popular, as they had more information about it. It is interesting to notice that the preliminary mental maps of the students reflected very closely the information given them during the time of preparation. Most information given to them about Vienna was predominantly audio-visual. The Ukrainian city of Lviv was second as far as the quantity of information was concerned. It was basically about history, culture and language with less visual materials. Obviously, preliminary audio-visual information was more effective in the formation of the expectations.



Figure 1. The group at the UN headquarters in Vienna.

In their expectations, students mentioned elements of culture, but as far as human characters were concerned, they did not mention any feelings. Later, after encountering foreign cultures, the answers to the questions in the subsequent surveys had a vocabulary rich in words expressing emotions, such as “cold”, “kind”, “gentle”, “friendly”, “cheerful”, etc. This shows one of the important outcomes of the study tour: students not only learn facts, see places, but they develop particular feelings born from the contacts with them.

From the very beginning, the expectations of the students were that European culture is rather far from than close to Japanese culture. Only four

students said that the distance is extremely big, but nobody said “close”, or “a little close”. The whole group admitted that they did not know or knew very little about European culture. In other words, from the very beginning the students identified themselves as “rather different” to “very different” from the cultures of places they came to contact with. This feeling did not change very much throughout the entire tour, but in the final surveys, answers such as “it is like Japan” (especially about Ukraine), appeared.

The mental maps of expectations showed an interesting point. The cities Cracow, Lviv and Budapest are not so far north of Vienna, especially Budapest. But students expected a colder climate there than in Austria. There is some truth in this but it also matched the preliminary knowledge of students about the places concerned. They felt “warmer” about places for which they had some preliminary image and “colder” about places of which they had almost no image.

As a whole, the first impressions about Europe (Austria and Vienna) were exciting. From 5 options of answers from “extremely good impression” to “very bad impression”, half of the students answered “extremely good” and half wrote “very good”. In most of their answers they said that what they had seen exceeded their expectations. Asked to compare with the atmosphere in Japan, they could exactly outline the basic differences, not sparing some negative points such as paid washrooms. The survey answers showed clearly that the students compared not only the elements of material culture; they were deeply interested and impressed by the differences of life style such as ways of relaxation, the meaning of free time, drinking habits, service personnel’s behavior, etc. This can be considered one of the important points of study tours: only after experiencing the respective places’ atmosphere and sharing the style of life, can they get the “taste” of the place – something that cannot be achieved through reading and watching materials.

In addition, the teachers' own first impressions from observation were that the students got along together well in a group and learned how to help each other from the very beginning. Boys helped girls with the heavy luggage, everybody was involved in the organization, and all were basically punctual. A tendency to behave like children did occur, but that was not very serious. The role of the teachers was to be firm in the attempt to teach the students that this was not a simple sight-seeing excursion, but a study tour. All in all, team-building was successful.

A major purpose of the study tour was to make students compare the differences between foreign cultures, as well as to compare them with the Japanese culture. In the 3rd survey, they had to answer how much difference they felt between Poland and Austria. It was clear from the answers that they found "big" and "rather big" differences between the cultural landscapes of these two countries. They also cited their arguments concerning both material and nonmaterial elements of cultures. This demonstrated clearly their active observation skills—an important aim of this study tour.

The visit to Auschwitz (the Nazi extermination camp from the Second World War) obviously left a deep mark in everybody's mind. Students learnt a lot about it in the preparation phase. But after the visit a student wrote: "I felt that this is not a thing that has nothing to do with me". Obviously the visit had a great impact on making her realize that all people in the world are concerned, and they should have firm solidarity to support human rights and stand actively against war, ethnic cleansing and genocide. Without experiencing the real history on the site, these ideas remain more "on paper".

As far as cultural differences between Austria and Poland are concerned, they noticed similarity of religions, some similarities in the townscape, etc, but also some important differences. About Poland they did not fail to mention the regional economic differences, reflected in the landscape. There was a difference in the amount of initial knowledge about these countries and the practical outcome after the contact with them. With the exception of Auschwitz, students knew very little about Poland and did not know what to expect, some were even a little scared, as seen from their survey answers. Asked to compare the differences they saw or felt, the general feeling was that Austria (Vienna) was much more organized, people were more relaxed and confident. But in Poland students felt more kindness, friendliness and a good attitude toward Japan. In general, the



Figure 2. The Lviv Opera.

initial image—or no image—about Poland changed very much as a result of the study tour.

A major task of this study tour was to realize inter-cultural communication. Of course, it applied for the entire trip, but the special focus was given to Ukraine. Arrangements were made to provide for meetings with Ukrainian university students, school children and other local people and groups, to offer the Japanese students chances

for direct contacts. The idea was to make our students feel more independent, without the help of teachers or mates. They had to use all their communication skills, including languages, manners, behavior, etc.

In spite of the careful preparation for the study tour to Ukraine including learning some phrases of respect, greetings, some historical and cultural facts, the students had a vague image about this country. Some of them had prior expectations of a country strongly dominated by Russia. A student even wrote: “By some prejudice, I had a negative image of this country”.

Surveying the real outcome after the visit showed totally different results. The most important and valuable fact all the 20 students pointed out was the chance of communicating with Ukrainian university students and pupils from a school in the city of Lviv. Some of them were invited to Ukrainian houses, visited different places in groups, all had meals together and went to the Opera and sight-seeing tours together. During this time they discussed different topics, compared their ways of studying, attitudes to different personal and world problems. Japanese students could see the similarities and differences in the school systems and school atmospheres (as evident from the surveys).



Figure 3. Inter-cultural communication by all means [using English, Japanese and body language]

The Japanese students had a chance to communicate in English and put their knowledge into practice. They had the chance to feel how other people in the world live in diversity. They could understand how four cultural groups live together on the same territory. This topic was discussed in a lecture they heard about the history of Lviv at the “Ivan Franko” University, and their attention was focused on it during the sightseeing tours. But nothing matched the experience

from direct communication with the students and ask-answer questions.

Not failing to mention some problems in Ukraine such as difficulties in the maintenance of old world heritage and problems with public washrooms, all students pointed out their pleasant feelings raised by the kind attitude to them and the warm, friendly atmosphere they felt in Lviv. Most of them wrote in their surveys that they would like to continue the contacts with their new friends. The answers reflected personal satisfaction from the contact with people of the same age, but from a totally different culture, both emotional and educational. That may be considered one of the best merits of this study trip.

During the study tour the teachers often focused the attention on environmental differences in Europe and Japan, environmental problems, political systems and borders, etc. Traveling by airplanes and trains and crossing different types of international borders also became a part of the learning process.



Figure 4. The Japanese students enjoying their encounter with children from a school. Both parties look happy.

The 5th questionnaire aimed at checking the students' ability to summarize their impressions from the four countries (cities) they visited, including attitudes to Japan, as well as their general impressions from the study tour. The survey answers met the planned educational outcome, which justified all the efforts to organize this form of study. Almost all students pointed out that their knowledge of the European culture increased significantly, while all of them (without exception) answered that, "This study tour was highly meaningful".

## CONCLUSIONS

On the whole, it may be reported that the study tour achieved the purposes for which it was designed. Students gained a lot of experience in observation of cultural landscapes, had good chances for cultural communication, understood many problems of cultural differences and attitudes among cultures, which they might not have had a chance to experience in their own country, and had the chance of practical use of a foreign language (English), etc.

At the same time, it should be mentioned that preparation of such a tour should be extremely careful and well-grounded, which takes a lot of time and effort. Many travel agencies try to be helpful; a lot of them even offer pre-designed educational tours. But our deep conviction is that any tour itinerary should be individually designed to meet the particular educational aims set beforehand by the teachers. Moreover, when one of the aims is "inter-cultural communication", previous personal contacts with people from relevant educational circles in the respective places to be visited are indispensable.





Figure 5. The Japanese students walking with Ukrainian students in the Old Town of Lviv, Ukraine.

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## 概要

### 国際理解教育の一環としての中欧・東欧研修旅行

—2009年8月30日～9月14日—

小粥 良・ミホバ ディミトリナ

本稿は、2009年8月30日～9月14日の二週間、山口大学教育学部の学生を対象として実施された、中欧・東欧への「異文化体験研修旅行」に関する自己評価の試みである。このような研修旅行の目的と意義、それらを実現するための準備と計画、その成果を、準備段階から終了までの旅行全体を振り返りつつ吟味した。まず、教育目的の旅行についてのさまざまな論を参照しつつ、評価の際に判断基準として役立つようなメルクマールを列举し、整理した。次に、旅行の計画、準備、実施に際し、そのような特徴がどのように考慮され、組み込まれていたかを個々に検討し、さらに、体験を通じての異文化学習という主たる目的がどの程度達成されたかを、旅行中5回にわたって実施された参加者アンケートの結果に基づいて、「体験」、「問題点」、「成果」という観点から分析した。実施された研修旅行にはさまざまな側面があったが、特に、「自文化」と「異文化」の差異と相似、また、ヨーロッパ内にも存在する文化の多様性を感じ取り、意識することが、一つの大きな柱であった。この関連においては、多民族が混在する地域の歴史の負の遺産として、ポーランドのアウシュヴィッツを訪れた体験が、平和と共存の大切さを参加者の心に深く刻むこととなった。加えて、ウクライナでの、リヴィウ大学文学部日本語学科の学生や、その他の現地の人々との交流を通して、異文化間コミュニケーション能力を実地に磨く機会を得たことも、海外研修ならではの貴重な体験であった。旅行を通して、ヨーロッパ、特に東欧についての学生たちの認識は深まり、あまり馴染みのない土地であった東欧に親近感が芽生えた。全体として、研修旅行の所期の目標は達成されたといえるが、このような旅行を成功させるには、計画を立てる教師の意図を十分に反映させるように、周到的な準備を事前に行うことが極めて重要である。

キーワード：国際理解、研修旅行、異文化間コミュニケーション

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