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ESSAY

Studying Abroad at Home: The Meaning of Education Abroad During the Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic virtually ended studying abroad. New (online) formats are offered, but this has not stopped universities from having to revise curricula, renegotiate partnerships and consult with students about studying abroad in 2020 and beyond. This short essay stems from the author's experience of cancelling his own Japanese study abroad program in late February 2020 to avoid the program participants taking unnecessary risks in the face of the unknown speed at which COVID-19 was spreading in Europe. The cancellation of that study trip brought to the fore, however, entrenched issues with short term study abroad programs and pushed the author to consider what the value of the 'abroad' in 'study abroad' had been until then. A short comparison with the practice of ethnography ensues, inspired by early pandemic debates on the future of anthropological fieldwork, which is another endeavour that has traditionally depended on relatively extended stays abroad. The essay closes with two problems that study abroad organisers will have to think about in a post-corona world.

Keywords

Study Abroad; Higher Education; Japan; Digital Anthropology; Inequality; Financial Issues

Since 2014, with colleagues at Chiba University (Japan), I have been involved in the organization of a short-term collaborative study abroad program called Global Study Program (hereafter GSP), which has acquired a reputation for being very intensive. The reason for this reputation, which has been both a blessing (because we mostly receive applications from

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motivated students) and a curse (because the number of these applications is lower than the other short-term study abroad programs at our university), is as much related to the program's format (which I will not dwell upon here) as it is to its length: only two weeks. Indeed, the trend towards shorter and shorter stays abroad for students has become ubiquitous in higher education, with at least sixty per cent of Japanese university students choosing to study abroad for less than a month ([Yokota et al. 2018](#)).

Many program organizers who wish to make the most of such limited time spent abroad, have therefore tended to lengthen the span allocated to preparing and reflecting on these programs, pre- and post-participation. And the GSP is no exception. In fact, since its inception, the pre-departure education for students who take part in the GSP has expanded from a few sessions to nearly fifteen classes of ninety-minutes each. By mid-February 2020, as my small group of 12 Chiba University students was getting ready to fly to Greece for a thirteen-night stay at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTh), we had already completed at least twelve hours of lectures and perhaps about the same amount of time on tasks that students were asked to engage with at home and in online conversations with our counterpart group from AUTh. Then the pandemic came, and one week before departure, everything had to be cancelled. It is difficult to describe the disappointment of students at the time. I kept in contact with them for at least until the start of April, but it was evident that the escalating crisis in Japan and abroad meant that any eventual postponement of the program was impossible.

Since the beginning of March, educators around the world have started pondering on the future of study abroad, with many universities already offering online study abroad programs to make up for what we can assume will be a year with the lowest number of international student travel ever. However, the appearance of these new online alternatives essentially brings back to the fore the eternal question: can study abroad have meaning without the physical mobility of students from one place to the other? How does student immobility affect our conception of the pedagogical value of studying abroad?

In this essay, I explore ideas coming from the fields of anthropology to think about the future of study abroad where I live and work, in Japan, and the potential changes in the perceptions regarding the pedagogical objectives of this type of education. I argue that, like new anthropological manifestos calling, for example, for a post-pandemic [patchwork ethnography](#) ([Günel, Varma, & Watanabe 2020](#)) based on issues already existing in the field, study abroad had even before the pandemic been replete with inequalities. In fact, during the last decade, study abroad programs have dramatically benefited certain types of students and encouraged certain kinds of experiences that the new online environment, whether we consider it capable of replacing the 'traditional' study abroad or not, may be in danger of reinforcing.

This essay is based on my experience of cancelling and dealing with the post-cancellation of a study abroad program during the first months of the pandemic. I am an Assistant Professor at Chiba University (Japan). I have worked for the last six years with several study abroad programs in Japan, have been a member of various university committees managing such programs, and have also contributed to a university-wide study abroad preparation course that is currently optionally offered to 2,500 first-year students. I am, however, neither an (online) education expert nor an anthropologist, at least by-training. My broad field of training is Japanese Studies, and my research usually deals with contemporary religion (in Japan) which I look at from a multidisciplinary perspective, using historical, sociological and anthropological theories and methods. My particular interest in anthropology stems from the impact that my supervisor, the social anthropologist Victor T. King, had on both my formation as a doctoral researcher and on my understanding of Area Studies.

Cancelling the GSP and Re-thinking the Value of “Abroad”

I still vividly remember the several days of sleepless nights spent weighing the pros and cons, before I finally decided on 20 February 2020, to cancel the GSP. The reason for that decision was at the time related to three risks: 1) the risk of taking the virus with us to the as yet uninfected Greece; 2) the risk of having one or more students infected during our stay in Thessaloniki and therefore having to quarantine (and cancel the program on-site); and 3) the (perhaps lesser) risk of facing discriminatory behaviour that had already been reported in other European countries ([Coste and Amiel 2020](#)). Three days before our previously planned departure, on 26 February 2020, Greece announced the first confirmed case of infection: a woman resident of Thessaloniki. On 12 March, two days before what would have been our final day of the program, Greece announced its first death from the virus, and all educational institutions had, by then, already been closed down by government request. Japanese schools had been in the same situation since 2 March. I believe that this must have been one of the best decisions I have ever taken in my professional life. My decision, however, brought to the surface and made me reconsider entrenched inequalities in the implementation of study abroad in higher education.

The first and perhaps most significant problem that immediately became apparent was financial: even though the purchase of a more expensive group ticket with a good cancellation policy had been recommended to all students, some students had taken the risk of buying a far cheaper option that could not be refunded. Luckily, the university decided to compensate all students of study abroad programs cancelled in March 2020 due to the pandemic. Still, it was evident that perhaps half of the students had searched deep into their pockets to finance that two week-trip to a country like Greece, which, except for the airfare, has a significantly lower cost of living than Chiba.¹ And even for those students who had been granted a scholarship for this study abroad program (80,000¥), the stipend would have covered only between 70% and 85% of the airfare. This is perhaps no surprise: there are less and less students who can afford even a 2-week program, so as expected, it is often the same privileged students who gain from multiple opportunities to spend time outside of Japan. No one discourages repeaters, but the fact that there is a lot of them does not necessarily mean that there are fewer students willing to participate in study abroad programs. Of course, the financing of such programs is not a Japanese particularity. But contrary to the fact that students spend more and more time preparing for shorter and shorter study abroad programs that they can barely afford, it is my impression that the majority of teachers would agree that the ideal study abroad program, especially for someone who wants to study at a foreign university, would last at least six months, if not the classic span of one year.

Admittedly, shorter study abroad programs were initially meant to offer opportunities to students who had less time, money or language capabilities to experience studying in a different pedagogical and socio-cultural setting. Intensive language learning formats have perhaps been the more successful in achieving their goals despite shorter spans. Other programs include pedagogical excursions to visit locations and communities discussed in class on some aspects of the history, society or religion of another country; international workshops framed around a specific target that mixed groups of students collaborate on; and volunteer work or internships at non-governmental organizations or multinational companies. The breadth of what is being called ‘studying abroad’ in our age of time- and cost-efficiency has expanded both in scope, content, but also in quality. In a sense, like a regular course, the more limitations are introduced, the more effort is expected on the part of the course organizer to ensure the achievement of its learning outcomes; otherwise, it is time, and (in the case of study abroad) money wasted. Everyone understands the importance of ‘study’ in ‘study abroad.’ But how about the ‘abroad’? What is the value of that? This question might sound silly, but in the COVID-19 age of (thankfully) an increasing number of opportunities to access online

¹ The website numbeo.com reports that, in general, prices in Thessaloniki are between 35 and 45 per cent lower than Chiba, Japan. (Accessed 29 August 2020)

pedagogical material, lectures and academic scholarship from around the world, what would be the value of encouraging someone to make a trip abroad?

‘Well, the experience, of course!’ would be a standard answer to my question. Be there, see things with one’s own eyes, taste, smell, touch. ‘Go native,’ as many anthropologists of the last century would have (problematically) encouraged their students to do. Similar to anthropological fieldwork the value of ‘abroad’ lies simultaneously in and outside of ‘study.’ It is in the ‘being here,’ the tiny details that one notices in a foreign classroom, in the experience of learning to adapt to an environment one is unfamiliar with. I would even argue that the ‘study’ in ‘study abroad’ is sometimes only a minor element in a study abroad program; the cherry on the cake, the reason such programs acquire budgets, course credits and the support of often hesitating parents. But, as I mentioned above, there are not only less and less people able to afford them; students are also constrained in terms of time, work/study and family commitments, to fulfil the ideals of a long-term life experience in a new location. There is, therefore, a gap between the ideal length of study abroad, the fragmentation of study abroad objectives based on curriculum and student needs, and the reality of university lives.

Indeed, thinking back to the various dilemmas related to the yearly selection of GSP participants, besides the question of affordability, timing has been another significant problem: between part-time jobs, promises to return to their family home for the holidays, job hunting and extracurricular study to pass a language proficiency test, a driving license or another form of qualification, the shorter the study abroad programs have become, the more difficulty students face to fit one into their already busy schedule. Qualifications that students can acquire between semesters are often worth more than a two-week trip to Greece, which, by the end of their undergraduate degree, would only appear as a 4-credit course among the (at least) 124 credits required by Chiba University’s conditions for degree conferment. To put it bluntly: if one had only two weeks to spare and a hard-earned, small budget to fund a trip abroad, why would they choose a study abroad program that takes 20 hours to prepare before departure? I am not necessarily underestimating the students’ willingness to learn; I only want to argue that the meaning and ‘value’ of going abroad to study, under increased unequal access to such opportunities, has shifted.

Can the Digital Replace the Physical ‘Abroad’?

One of the first pandemic webinars I took part in was a fascinating roundtable of scholars from all over the globe on the topic of *Fieldwork in an Era of Pandemia: Digital (and Other) Alternatives*, organised by the World Council of Anthropological Associations in May 2020. Like many researchers who need to physically visit specific locations outside of their own country to collect their data, anthropologists, for whom ethnographic fieldwork is nearly a prerequisite of their discipline, immediately worried about access to their areas of interest. One of the first solutions that was immediately brought up was digital anthropology, which has been developing for several years now as a sub-discipline with textbooks and dedicated postgraduate degrees (see, for example, [Horst & Miller 2012](#)). The audience immediately reacted, of course, by suggesting that despite the many possibilities that digital ethnography offers in an increasingly networked world, there are still communities around the planet that do not possess (regular) access to the internet, and even for those who do, that part of their activities represents only a fraction of their daily lives. On hearing these comments, I could not but think back to our dilemmas over study abroad programs: listeners of the webinar, like teachers’ ideal image of studying abroad, considered that going abroad and living there could not be replaced by fragmented pieces of interaction and (digital) information. The digital sounded like an exciting alternative, but for many, perhaps, only an alternative.

Even before the pandemic, as Günel, Varma et al. point out:

‘traditional’ anthropological fieldwork was in trouble. For some time now, ethnographers have been questioning fieldwork truisms: separations between “field” and “home,” the gendered (masculinist) assumptions of the always available and up-for-anything fieldworker, and anthropology’s proclivities toward suffering subjects.’ (Günel, Varma & Watanabe 2020: para. 1)

These troubles can be found in our assumptions about studying abroad too, albeit under different forms. First, the idea that skills acquired by studying abroad cannot be honed at ‘home’ has been repeatedly challenged by educational programs and institutions that aim to offer a ‘foreign’ learning environment to students who want to ‘study abroad at home.’ In Japan, for example, English language camps promise ‘the real English experience’² and put into question the degree to which study abroad reifies nation-based cultural divisions and, thus, ignores that increased globalization (and internationalization of education) have already weakened the ‘foreignness’ of ‘abroad.’ Secondly, as discussed, students are less and less able to put aside both money and time to freely spend on a free-spirited experience abroad. Hence, they need more detailed learning plans and better preparation, which, in my experience, often ends up putting into question their originally ingrained images of ‘the foreign’ and helps them reflect on the ever shifting and often self-imposed boundaries between national identities. Finally, anthropologists’ traditional tendencies to go abroad to research others’ problems, reminded me of the general tendency of candidates for study abroad programs to divide the world in two: the countries that they think are doing much better than their own (which for Japanese students often means countries where English is the primary language, or Scandinavia) and countries where they can learn about social issues and development (which, again, for Japanese students often means Southeast Asian and African nations). This third issue has been really difficult to solve, although progress can be seen when there are genuine efforts to foster interaction between home students and the (pre-pandemic) increasing population of international students on Japanese university campuses.

As I write this essay, my university has implemented temporary online measures to fulfil students’ wishes to take part in classes taught in languages other than their own. It is impossible to know if (physical) study abroad will be allowed in the next academic year, but my initial impression is that, from a crisis management perspective, negative news on some countries’ reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic may impact on students’ initial choices of destinations. There are more immediate issues at hand, however, and I would like to end this essay by laying two of these out below.

- 1) Once restrictions are lifted, those students with the financial stability to travel abroad (even for leisure) will perhaps not feel much of a change, but the slowdown of the economy and the accompanying loss of part-time job opportunities and struggle for parents to make ends meet, perhaps means that study abroad will remain at the bottom of study priorities well after the pandemic is over.
- 2) The lack of international student mobility brought upon by the pandemic (and, particularly in the case of Japan, the ostensibly problematic nationality-based restrictions regarding non-Japanese long-term residents)³ has and will continue to impact the much-needed internationalization of our campuses, which as I already mentioned, helps break down stereotypes regarding the image of ‘abroad’ among home students.

I risk sounding unnecessarily alarmist if I say that the pandemic’s highlighting of entrenched issues in the ways both teachers and students imagine and actualize their dreams of extended time spent abroad, should

2 See for example, the organization *British Hills* (<https://www.british-hills.co.jp/english/>).

3 Foreign nationals on long-term visas, such as permanent residents, even if they have lived, worked and raised families in Japan have been subject to stricter conditions for re-entering the country than Japanese nationals (Dooley 2020).

be a wake-up call to totally re-think what is and how we foster the pedagogical value of ‘experience abroad.’ Like anthropologists, we ought perhaps to rethink our methods of implementing such programs into our curricula and to lay the ground for more informed and equal opportunities for prospective participants.

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