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Bring Your Specialty With You: Customizing Your Fulbright-Hays Seminar Abroad

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INTRODUCTION

Established in 1946, Fulbright international exchange programs exist for American and foreign scholars, educators, researchers, and students to study, teach, research, or consult in virtually all academic disciplines. While the one-year Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program is perhaps the best known, the variety and scope of available grants is very much more broad than that and all Fulbright Program participants may be referred to as “Fulbright Scholars” or “Fulbright Fellows” regardless of the specific program grant category. (Fulbright 2012a)

For many faculty members, travel/study grants are of particular interest because they are usually tailored to occur outside the standard school year. “Fulbright-Hays Seminars Abroad--Bilateral Projects, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education provide short-term study and travel seminars abroad for U.S. educators in the social sciences and humanities for the purpose of improving their understanding and knowledge of the peoples and cultures of other countries.” (Fulbright 2012b; U.S.D.O.A 2012)

This is a grant, usually given to a particular school, to arrange, coordinate, and implement a trip to a foreign country for faculty members from several colleges. The faculty members are usually charged a relatively small fee--mine ranged from \$1,000 to \$1,500. While the grantors seem to specify only the minimum allowable time, six tightly scheduled, very busy weeks seems to be the norm.¹

USE WHAT YOU LEARN BY LEARNING WHAT YOU CAN USE

The Fulbright study tours in which I have participated have been wonderful, worthwhile experiences packed full of scheduled events with never any wasted time and not very much free time. If you simply board the airplane and participate fully in the program, you will have a great deal to say, and much to teach, when you return. It should be quite easy to fulfill “What is expected from Fulbrighters?”

“Fulbrighters are expected to involve themselves in the host community,

¹ At the onset, please allow me a personal evaluation. I am totally supportive of Fulbright seminars abroad and I have been fortunate to participate in more of these than most. On return I enthusiastically gave presentations on the cultures I visited to community groups and presentations on how to incorporate cross-cultural perspectives into classes for educators. For those contemplating applying for such a grant, the first question usually is: “Should I go?” The answer is simply “of course.” Sell your car to meet expenses if you must. If no one will mow your lawn, let it grow. And simply do not worry about whether your college can get along without you. Apply; your chances are better than you think.

sharing their culture while at the same time observing the host culture. After their grant periods, Fulbrighters are encouraged to bring what they have learned through this cultural exchange home and teach others about the cultures they have experienced.” (Fulbright, 2012a, #29)

Usually, when you work to bring your knowledge home you will be incorporating your experiences into existing courses. Despite, or perhaps because of, its inherently multi-disciplinary nature, any well designed Fulbright is all but guaranteed to add rich data and insights, to whatever you teach. Many of these insights fit so coincidentally and fortuitously that they almost just fall into place. I never had a problem finding exciting things that I wanted to convey through classes, community talks, or papers. Instead, my problem was the dreaded situation of having to find room in an already overfull syllabus.

My purpose in this paper is to point out a largely unnecessary but nevertheless quite worthwhile addition to the Fulbright-Hays format. That is, you may be able to tweak and enhance the experience even more by customizing your trip to fit your specialties. Although Fulbright seminars abroad offer precious little spare time, there is some. You can use it well to see those parts of the culture which especially interest you but have escaped the itinerary. So, in addition to bringing your study tour to your class, you may be able to customize your tour to include your own specialty and match the preexisting goals of your classes.

I have attempted this kind of augmentation three times, in India, China and Peru--and have been successful twice.

INDIA

Born and raised in Detroit, I have always been interested in the automobile industry: industrialization, mass production, worker alienation, corporate power, safety, pollution, executive isolation, Henry Ford, Frederick Taylor, Walter Reuther, engineering, design, and pretty much every other related thing.

For me, the Indian auto industry is fascinating. Their cars, including the top-selling Hindustan Ambassador, stem directly from their colonial past, featuring British designs long gone in Britain itself. In an ironic twist, Tata, the giant Indian company now owns Jaguar and Land Rover and has also produced the world’s cheapest car, the Nano, at about \$2,500 new. (Meiners; Olivar)

After mentioning my interest to our program coordinator, I was able to meet one academic whose specialty was the Indian automobile industry. However, I was never able to arrange to see even one actual production line. The problem I had is actually a cautionary tale. Because this was my first Fulbright, the idea of supplementing the itinerary just did not occur to me at the beginning. In fact, our first two “stationary” weeks, consisting of lectures and seminars,

might have been a great time for me to travel to Chennai, one of India's three auto production clusters. Once we were into the travel phase of the study/tour things became decidedly more rural. Since we were never again near a center of automotive production, I shifted my focus into a rural direction to "appropriate technology."

Everything worked out wonderfully in India, but there is a lesson. A bit of pre-departure research would be wise. Had I overlaid a map of India's automobile factories with a map of our itinerary, I would have discovered my only good chance of being able to compare an Indian production line with what I knew from Detroit.

CHINA

By their very nature, factories are few, large and clustered while health care units are easy to find wherever there are populations.

My interest in health care stems from a long-standing unit in my Social Problems course. Having covered this unit many, many times, I have become firm in the belief that any analysis of a health care system that does not involve serious international comparisons will be hopelessly inadequate and predictably ethnocentric--if not downright jingoistic. In China, I knew that studying the health care system would be productive and that whatever I found could be placed instantly into my Social Problems course.

This all proved to be very easy. First, the itinerary of our study tour already included more on the health care system than on any other single topic. We had tours, scheduled presentations, lectures, visits and interviews. We went to a hospital, a medical school, a remote clinic where we talked to professors, practitioners of all sorts, and patients alike. Amazingly enough, we spent just as much itinerary on the other facet of Chinese health care: Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). TCM was separate from but parallel to the "Western Medicine" system. TCM was perhaps a bit lower in status, but by no means a backwater. There were full fledged, well established TCM medical schools, practitioners, and clinics. Citizens could take their choice of which system to use.

Given that the pre-planned Fulbright Hays schedule fit my interests so well and that our coordinators had already done so much of the work, supplementing this program was just a matter of extending an existing trajectory. First, I asked among fellow participants whether any one else had enough interest in health care to investigate it further. A nursing professor said yes and that she particularly wanted to see more hospitals. Actually, that connection should have occurred to me sooner. From there, our topics selection and methodology were mostly casual and opportunistic. If we saw an opportunity we took it. On shopping or market excursions we would go to pharmacies and apothecary shops

and attempt to communicate simple questions. “Are you TCM or Western?” “What is this powder for?” “How much is that gigantic ginger root in the window?” “Really!?”

We interviewed English speaking Chinese citizens who we encountered (an “accidental sample”) about their satisfaction with their care and whether they preferred TCM or “Western medicine.” We found most people were reasonably satisfied and virtually everyone believed that Western medicine was fast acting but harsh and that TCM was gentle but slow.

We found hospitals and clinics by asking for directions, looking at maps, and by just stumbling across them. Then we bravely popped in unannounced and asked for interviews and tours. How well this worked absolutely shocked us. Of course, it probably helped greatly that my colleague was a nurse who could ask to see her counterpart and who could share her own specialized knowledge as well as learn. We were turned away only once--at a mental institution. This lone denial included a sincere apology and the explanation that “some things foreigners should not see.”

Once home, we passed our experience on via presentations at both sociology and nursing meetings. Of course, the Chinese health care system also became a part of my Social Problems course.

PERU

Peru is full of diverse wonders. There is the Amazon region with exotic animals, overwhelming foliage, and tribal cultures. There is the very different Andes region where the Inca heritage is palpable, and a past that includes empire, colonization, human sacrifice, and Machu Picchu. There is more: The sea coast, the desert with well preserved mummies, the Nazca lines, and the active city of Lima from its upper class Miraflores district to its poor “young towns” where settlers more or less create a city. So, why would anyone bother to add anything? I certainly had no intention of doing so. However, I was simply presented with an opportunity so tempting that I could not let it pass.

Our group included the participants, the American grant administrator, and there was a Peruvian student who served as translator, go between, problem solver, transport arranger, doctor finder, restaurant critic and the like. There was also a Peruvian colleague who was our general tour guide during the whole trip and who arranged for local tour guides at our many destinations.

Early on, I mentioned to our general tour guide that I was a criminologist with a particular interest in prisons and I would appreciate if he could arrange a prison tour. This was simply something I wanted him to keep in mind. It took no effort on my part and I had no realistic hope that anything would come of it. Something did.

After a very full day of lectures at Catholic University in Lima, we were honored guests at a welcoming reception. Our tour guide found me, and told me that he had arranged for me to meet a lawyer who was at the reception. The lawyer was a man in his early forties, who had worked on the election campaign of Alan Garcia, the sitting president of Peru at that time. After some preliminary small talk, the lawyer said that he had arranged a tour of Lurigancho prison and that someone would arrive to take me and a translator/colleague there the next day. Given that he had done all of this on virtually no notice, I was amazed and at least a bit skeptical.

The next day, a Peruvian teenager I had never met before found me, presented me with a letter in Spanish, and then escorted me and my stunned translator to a taxi and then to Lurigancho—arguably the highest security prison in Peru. Our escort took us to the gate and then waited with the taxi.

Everyone was expecting us and we were taken directly to the warden who gave us a statistical and historical overview of the institution and its inmate population. He then began our tour and eventually turned us over to another administrator who took us wherever we asked to go and wherever he thought we might want to see. He answered our questions and allowed us to talk to inmates and guards. The guards appeared a bit cautious, but I recall no one who showed any signs of irritation or imposition at our presence. It was a long, hot day in a foreboding, classic prison set in the most barren desert landscape I have ever experienced. For a criminologist, it was a great day.

Not until the taxi ride home did we settle down enough to translate the letter that I had been given. What I expected to be a simple greeting turned out to be a letter of introduction for me, on government stationery, and signed by the national head of the Peruvian prison system. It instructed any warden of any prison in the country to honor my request to tour their institution. Apparently seeing the disbelief in my face, our young escort assured me that it would work.

Indeed, the letter turned out to be all but magic. Throughout the rest of the country, if there was a prison that fit our itinerary, our guide would tell me—just as he would tell others of good places to shop for crafts or of interesting local sights. I, always with the magic letter and a translator, was able to just take a taxi, show up at a prison, ask to see the warden and ask for a tour. There were no appointments, no prior notice. We were never refused or treated as a nuisance. The letter was always returned and no one ever made a protective copy for their files.

In one instance, the power of the letter was demonstrated dramatically. A gate guard escorted us to the warden and explained, without mentioning the letter, that we were Americans who wanted a tour. The warden told us that that would be “quite impossible.” This was the first break in the stream of events that allowed us to produce the letter. The warden read the letter, looked totally

astonished and then said “What would you like to see?”

Eventually, I saw quite a lot. I was able to see men’s prisons, women’s prisons, local lock-ups, and court proceedings. I got a real “feel” for the Spanish/Napoleonic styled justice system. I found things to be admired. For example, there was a relatively low incarceration rate of 114/100,000 vs. 756/100,000 for the U.S. (Turner, p. 988; Clear Et Al p. 505) Most prisons maintained connections with the community, including one where inmates sold their prison-made items at a gift shop open to the public. There were also things to dislike. Conditions were usually crowded and sometimes grim. Individuals, who had been charged but not convicted, were held for trial, often for years. (Turner, p. 988; Clear Et Al p. 505)

Given that I had been able to fit my experiences to my specialty, it was then a natural progression to communicate those experiences via the established and familiar routes within the discipline. There were papers to meetings I was already planning to attend and articles in journals with which I was already familiar. In an unexpected reversal, I was also asked to give an overview of the American corrections system to a meeting of Peruvian prison officials in Lima. At that point, the audience contained several familiar faces.

CONCLUSION

Fulbright-Hays seminars abroad feature high level lectures, tours, interviews, seminars, direct experiences, cultural immersion and much more. They are broadly based and intensive. If you participate, you will be glad you went and much of what you learn will all but automatically fall into place into your classes. They most certainly do not need to be supplemented or customized to fit your specialty-or for any other reason.

Nevertheless, there is the matter of accepting opportunity. My research in China took just a bit of effort, focus, and “squeezing in,” but the yield was high. And so far I have had no further opportunity to simply “pop-in” to medical institutions anywhere else.

In a sense, Peru required even less of me. I simply had to accept and make use of an extraordinary gift of unparalleled access which had simply been dropped in my lap. Again, the opportunity has proven unique. No other countries have since arranged for me to investigate their prison system.

Adding the depth of your specialty to your Fulbright-Hays experiences is worth a try. You have much going for you. Respect for college professors is high. As anthropologists have long noted, most cultures tend to treat travelers protectively and with some tolerance for those who are ignorant of local folkways. You can usually also count on people in your specialty to be as interested in your unique professional insights as you are in theirs. And,

interestingly, the words “Fulbright Scholar” are well known and carry much weight abroad.

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