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## Study Abroad Experience – Critical Reflective Essay

In the beginning, I contemplated about rather I wanted to delay my graduation to study abroad, or if I wanted to travel the world later in life. It was the most challenging decision to make; however, I decided to study abroad in the summer and delayed my graduation. Since study abroad in college was a once in a lifetime opportunity, I knew that I should give it a chance instead of regretting it in the future. On the positive side, I would still be traveling the world as I studied abroad. The process of study abroad was long and difficult because of the paperwork and payment, but it was definitely worth it in the end.

When I finally arrived in South Korea, I knew instantly that it was one of the best decision that I have made in my life. South Korea was beautiful because of the green landscapes, mountains, and lakes that I saw across the country. The Korean people who I met were also very kind and generous with their time and assistance. During my study at Ajou University located in Suwon, South Korea, I learned about myself, other individuals and cultures, and made numerous international friends from all over the world. I explored the country almost every weekend, learned about the Korean culture and people, and even learned to recognize the strengths and challenges that I had. The combination of various cultures and people in the program was fun and exciting. My study abroad experience was so diverse and positive that I grew into a more open-minded person who wants to expand my knowledge on South Korea, the culture, people, and language.

While I was in South Korea, I encountered many differences that helped me reflect on my own culture. One example would be the Korean dating culture versus the American dating culture. I became friends with one of the Korean leader who shared his knowledge on the Korean dating culture with me, while I shared my knowledge on the American dating culture with him. I

felt that I have learned a great amount of information about the Korean dating culture through him. One of the first thing I learned about the Korean dating culture was the events. As a fact, the Korean dating culture was more “serious” in a sense because there was a holiday every month of the year for the couple to celebrate together. In the United States, couples usually only celebrated the big holidays and anniversaries, such as Christmas, Valentine's Day, and birthdays. Also, I learned that the Korean boyfriend's parents could not meet his girlfriend if the couple was not in a serious relationship. If the couple encountered one of the boyfriend's parent – especially the mother – the girlfriend would have to run away. The reason for this was because Koreans did not want to create relationships with individuals who will not be a part of their future. Building an attachment to individuals who will not be a part of the family would be a burden for them. For Americans, parents were often excited and happy to meet their child's significant other, even if the couple was not in a serious relationship. If the couple did decide to separate, it was still possible for the family and individual to stay in contact.

Another difference that I encountered was when I went to a Korean bathhouse. My friend and I decided to try the bathhouse because it was a new idea and we always saw it in the Korean movies and dramas, but it was not how we were expecting it. Having been raised up in the American culture where many American women were usually uncomfortable with exposing their nude body to others, my friend and I felt scared and challenged at first. The women in the bathhouse were comfortable in their nude skin, while we were both awkward and tried to cover ourselves. For about fifteen minutes, we tried to shower without looking at each other or at the other women. Eventually, we both gave up and blended in with the rest of the women because it took too much time and energy to cover ourselves from each other and from the other women. Although it was a challenge in the beginning, we both overcame it and learned to accept the

cultural difference. We realized that once we accepted the cultural difference, it helped the both of us to immerse in the authentic Korean culture, and it made us feel more comfortable in the environment. If we did not follow the Korean practice in the bathhouse, we would have never truly embraced the Korean culture. The acceptance of the Korean practice also helped my friend and I build our confidence and self-esteem, which are both important elements to have as American women.

At Ajou University, I took a course named Korean Culture from an International Perspective. This course compared the practice, values, and relationship of power of various cultures and countries. Usually, we compared South Korea to the United States. Both cultures and countries were often seen on opposite ends, which indicated that both countries and cultures were significantly different from one another – such as collectivism and individualism.

Reflecting on what I learned in class, I observed that many traditional Korean practices and values were still in place today. One of this traditional practice was the education system. I learned that the Korean education system was highly competitive as compared to the American education system. For the Korean education system, even if every student attended class and aced all assignments and exams, about ten percent of the students was still required to receive a grade of a C or below. As for the American education system, students were graded based on their knowledge and effort; it was also possible for the entire class to pass with a grade of an A.

Another difference in relationship of power I found was the working schedule and environment. Korean employees were more flexible with time at work. This would include calling in late to work and having the ability to use one's own cell phone while working. These were cultural shocks to me because as an American, calling in late to work was not always excusable and cell phone usage was often prohibited by employers. The difference showed that

Korean employers treated their employees at the same level as them, while American employers treated employees differently depending on work title.

An important skill that I worked on while I attended class was my decision-making skill. Developing my decision-making skill was important because I will work with many people who will rely on me to make decisions in the future. I observed that there were numerous and equal opportunities for all students to make an important decision when sharing and discussing about various topics in class. This included picking group members and sharing one's own culture and perspectives. Because the professor provided these opportunities for us, it allowed us to put our decision-making skill in practice and to learn about other classmates' cultures and perspectives. Some topic examples we discussed in class were superstitions, proverbs, and etiquette. These topics helped further my knowledge and for me to recognize how different each culture was, as well as how similar some of them were. Since the professor divided the class up based on country, all students always had the opportunity to discuss and share about their own culture and perspectives. Within our groups, we worked on our decision-making skill by choosing who to speak and share first. As an overall, I had a positive experience with decision-making in class because we all had equal turns sharing about our own culture and perspective. The class and its setup helped me to further develop my decision-making skill and to increase my knowledge about my classmates and their cultures.

Another positive decision-making experience that I had was when I went out with the Korean students. Although not all of them knew the bus or subway system well, they worked hard together and always did their best to navigate and help us find our destination. Their decisions in choosing correct routes saved us money and time. Also, when I was lost and lacked Korean language skills, I took the initiative to use my limited Korean language skill and asked

strangers for help. Surprisingly, strangers were willing to help me out despite the fact that I could not speak the Korean language well. Although I felt uncomfortable because they were strangers, they made me feel welcomed and comfortable with their assistance. My decision to ask for help and to put myself on the spot helped me learn more about the culture, people, environment, and language.

Although I had first assumed that all the international students in the South Korea program were open to learn more about the country, Korean culture, and about other classmates' cultures, I had never expected to be disrespected by a classmate. One of my classmate disregarded my cultural beliefs because it sounded too “unbelievable.” Her lack of open-mindedness made me feel uncomfortable in sharing my own culture and beliefs, and this really challenged my assumption and trust with the other students' open-mindedness and respect for other people's beliefs, practices, and values. This particular experience also challenged me to learn how to face situations that made me feel uncomfortable. Fortunately, I had a friend who I could discuss with about these complicated situations. After discussing with her about how I felt, I gained courage to open up to my classmate about how I felt with her action. It really helped me reassure that everyone was open-minded, but to a different degree. In the beginning, it may have been difficult to open up to my classmates because of the differences we all had, but we learned to accept the differences in people and cultures.

Another disorienting experience that challenged my assumption was the bus and subway systems. At first, I had the assumption that sitting next to strangers in the bus or subway would be similar to that of the American culture, but the Korean culture was different. From my experience, Americans usually did not sit next to strangers willingly due to being uncomfortable, claustrophobia, or germophobia. Americans liked to have space and to keep their distance from

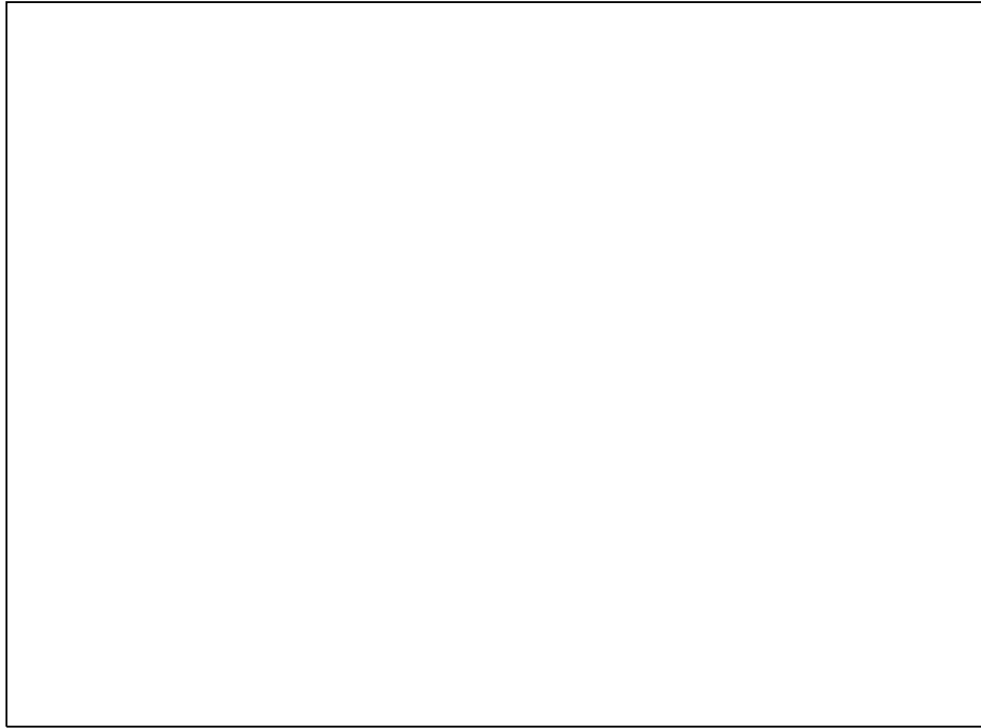
those who they did not know well. Additionally, I saw that many Americans tended to not take the opportunity to take the open seat and would just leave it open, even if it was during rush hour. However, in South Korea, if there was an open seat, people would take the opportunity to sit there. As a fact, it was usually a challenge to find an open seat in the bus or subway system when it was busy, so many Koreans would sit wherever there was an open seat. South Korea's bus and subway systems allowed me to learn to take the initiative when finding an open seat, as well as fast thinking and decision-making when deciding which bus to take or what car to enter in the subway system.

After my study abroad experience in South Korea, I realized that many of my goals have changed. For a long time, I wanted to become a speech language pathologist who works with children or individuals who struggled with speech or language development. However, I now know that I want to pursue another career. During my time in South Korea, I helped many Korean students with the English language, while they helped me with the Korean language. I really enjoyed learning about the Korean culture, people, language, and country, and I also enjoyed helping and teaching the Korean students the different English sounds and the English language. While in South Korea, I also worked on my listening skill and felt that this skill has inspired me to become a teacher. Teachers have many roles, and one of them is a listener. As a listener, the teacher also acts as a counselor, which is an important role for a teacher. Because of this experience, I realized that I want to pursue a different career path as an English teacher in South Korea. My study abroad experience and skills that I gained and polished have helped me realize what I want for my future.

With my determination to become an English teacher in South Korea, I applied and will complete the TEFL certification as I work to pay off my student loans. I also plan to continue

learning the Korean language because I find it useful, especially since I want to teach in South Korea, and it is a beautiful language. This may take me approximately one year to complete my TEFL certification, so I hope to start teaching in South Korea in the fall of 2016, with the earliest in the summer of 2016. With my study abroad experience in South Korea positively influencing my goals, I am happy that I finally found a career that I have always wanted to do, and I am excited and motivated to complete my dream.





Picture 1: Credits to Oxnard Ong Wee Xiang from Singapore; Jebu Island – Our Midsummer Vacation

Although we were halfway through the program, our midsummer vacation really helped me grow closer to some of the students who I did not know well. One of the Korean student who I was close with planned a vacation to Jebu Island, and there was a total of eleven students who attended the trip. We explored the island and lake, ate pork barbecue, and played and learned numerous Korean games. Through our struggles, tears, and laughter, we grew closer to one another. Our experience together on Jebu Island was an important memory because of the friendships we made that blossomed and strengthened.



Picture 2: Credits to Hala Abdelrahman Awad from Jordan; Gwanggyo Lake Hangout

The women who are in the picture with me have become close friends of mine. Before I started the program in South Korea, I did not know anyone. However, once I opened up and met new people, I met these wonderful ladies who showed me a new side of life. Each come from a different culture, and we began to hang out together often. Our time together helped each of us bear the difficulties that we had to face, but it also helped us face the opportunities that were in front of us. We each motivated and encouraged one another, and we all accomplished many goals together. Our friendships continued to grow, and our memories cherished forever.