

Critical Reflective Assignment: Sport Sciences & Kinesiology in Japan

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Tsukuba Summer Institute

Expected Graduation Date:
December, 2015

Support from UW-Eau Claire:

FILIE Blugold Commitment Funding- \$1,700.00

UW-Eau Claire Study Abroad Grant Committee Viennese Ball Award- \$500.00

I participated in the Summer 2015 Sport Sciences and Kinesiology program at the Tsukuba Summer Institute in Japan. Eight students, including myself, and two professors from UW-Eau Claire traveled to Japan for 2 weeks to learn about Sport and Kinesiology from a global perspective. Along the way we had amazing opportunities to build our professional network and create lasting friendships with people from all over the world. We participated in the TSI program for the first week of our stay. After the program we were able to stay with host families for two nights to truly immerse ourselves in Japanese culture. Finally, we traveled to Tokyo and visited museums, historical sites, and took advantage of our time in the largest city in the world however we could. After taking part in this program I feel that I have an enhanced understanding of Japanese culture, and global sport and kinesiology practice.

My time in Japan really opened my eyes to the diverse values that are held in different parts of the world. I learned that being respectful was engrained in the foundation of Japanese culture, much more so than in America. I could see this heightened respect in the sport practices of the Japanese people. I was able to witness this respect in sport first hand through spending time in a local junior high school, and through participating in some Japanese traditional sports myself. We also attended a lecture on Japanese sport culture, which really widened my knowledge of some of the customs that I had begun to notice.

In traditional Japanese sports, such as Judo and Kendo, participants utilize bows as a sign of respect. The athletes bow as they enter and exit the practice area, as they greet their opponent, and as the match ends. Athletes also show respect to their opponents by not celebrating themselves after they have earned points. In Kendo, if the athlete strikes their opponent to earn a point but celebrates their victory after the strike is completed, they do not earn the point. I think that the high value of respect in Japanese sport reflects the importance of it in the broader culture. The US could definitely learn something from the Japanese in this regard; adopting a culture of respect and humility in US sport could create a more inviting atmosphere for those who may not be as inclined to participate.

Much of my time in Japan was spent learning about physical education and comparing the PE practices of different countries to each other. Japanese physical education was particularly interesting to me because of the sheer intensity of the program compared to American PE. During the time we spent at the Japanese junior high school, I was able to witness the students participating in various sports. Japanese children are allowed to choose one sport to participate in, and they play and practice that sport all year round. There are morning and afternoon practices, Saturday practices, and competitions over the weekends. The level of dedication to their physical education by the students is much more intense than in the US, where students participate in practice a couple times per week, and change sports depending on the season.

I had never thought about there being such a vastly different approach to physical education and sport participation like what I saw in Japan. I think that this is another example of sport reflecting the culture of the participants. I noticed that the work ethic in Japan was incredibly high, as you can see with the sheer amount of practice that is incorporated into youth sports. When we were in the junior high, I also noticed that all of the students were actively participating in their sports, where in America I think many students would be sitting out or not trying as hard as they could because of the long and frequent practices. I learned that sport education on from a global standpoint can be very diverse, and there is not one correct approach.

I believe that the world could benefit from incorporating some of the hard work and dedication that is shown in Japanese sport education.

A decision that will impact both my home, and host community is the decision made by UW-Eau Claire to have a study abroad program in Japan this summer. It seems like a small, maybe even insignificant decision, but I think that mere exposure of a few students to Japanese culture will have an impact on the Eau Claire community. I know that I will continue to share my experiences with my friends and community members, long after the trip is over, and I will try to convince others to travel and become exposed to the global community. This is important because any kind of exposure to the wider world is beneficial to maintaining an open mind, and incorporating global points of view into a smaller, more sheltered community like Eau Claire.

I think that this experience was also impactful to the communities we stayed in in Japan. We were able to expand our personal and professional networks, and expose some of the Japanese locals to American culture. I think that it is also important that UWEC allowed this program so that we could work toward changing the negative stereotypes that many foreign communities have about Americans. I hope that we were able to show some of the positive aspects of American culture to the communities that we were able to interact with, and help them open their minds in the same way they opened our minds. Although the decision to have a study abroad program is not anything that will have a global impact right away, it exposes everyone involved to new and diverse ways of thinking in order to have a more understanding and culturally aware world.

It is very disorienting to be in a country where you don't know the language or customs. I have traveled before this trip, but everywhere I have been I have had the ability to understand some of the language, or at least be able to recognize written words on a menu or street sign. Traveling in Japan was an entirely new experience because I couldn't understand the verbal or written language. Simple things like reading a map or a menu became trying tasks. Cultural norms such as taking your shoes off before entering certain rooms, or expressing your gratitude before and after each meal were hard for me to remember, and overwhelming at first.

This experience challenged my previous ideas that I gained through previous travel because I had never experienced a language barrier so strong, or a culture so different. I learned that even though at first these differences can be frustrating and hard to navigate, after you learn the reasons behind these practices it is easy to appreciate the different way of life. The respectful and giving nature of the Japanese people was particularly fascinating to me. For example, wherever we went we were greeted with gifts, and treated like old friends. Everyone we met was kind and willing to help us learn about the culture and language, and quick to forgive when we inevitably made mistakes. Before this trip my knowledge of Japanese culture was limited at best, so learning how giving and welcoming everyone made up for all of the frustration that came with attempting to learn the customs and language.

This experience really reinforced the idea that to work as a global community you need to be extremely flexible and able to adapt to unforeseen situations. Without maintaining a flexible attitude I would not have enjoyed my time abroad, and I wouldn't have been able to take as much out of the experience as I did. In a place with new values, new foods, and complex new language flexibility being able to adapt was key. A complex and beautiful culture can easily be brushed

aside in favor of what is familiar, which is an area of tension globally. Respecting the values and customs of in Japan, and asking questions when I didn't understand something expanded my knowledge of the culture and my respect for those with different ideals than I have.

Traveling is always impactful and meaningful to me, and this Japan study abroad experience is no exception. I have increased my global network of friends and colleagues, gained cultural awareness, and created lasting memories. This trip provided the opportunity to meet and share ideas with people not only from Japan, but from all over the world. I now have connections and friends in several countries. I always love to meet new people because I think you can learn something from everyone you meet, and everyone you meet can change you a little bit. I have been changed by all of the people that I met while abroad in ways that I don't think I could describe. I am more culturally aware, and even know a little of the Japanese language. I understand some of the different customs involved in Japanese daily life, and I like to think that I can incorporate some of these into my life at home.

The most impactful part of this trip to me is all of the memories that I will have with me for the rest of my life. I don't think I will ever have another chance to play soccer with people from all over the world, sing karaoke with Japanese locals, listen to a world renowned lecturer, or eat lunch with someone from Brazil, California, Japan, Taiwan, and Eau Claire all at the same table. These are experiences that can only be gained by participating in a program such as the Sport Sciences and Kinesiology in Japan program through study abroad. These once in a lifetime experiences are the reason that I hold travel in such a high regard, and the reason that I hope that I am able to participate in these programs in the future.

After returning from Japan, while this trip hasn't changed any of my life plans or goals, it has strengthened my resolve to keep an open mind, stay in contact with people I meet while traveling, and continue to travel throughout my lifetime. Whenever I travel to a new place, or meet someone new, I am forced to remember that not everyone thinks the same way I do. I occasionally forget that not everyone sees things from my perspective, so these reminders are important if I am going to continue making new friends and connections. Its important to remember to always try to put myself in other peoples shoes, and this trip definitely reminded me of that. I also met so many new people that I want to stay friends with despite the physical distance between us. I plan to put effort into staying in touch with the friends that I made, as well as maintain friendships with those people who I knew prior to the trip. Finally, this trip inspired me to continue to travel as far and as often as I can. I love to see new places, and experience new cultures, foods, languages, and people. Each new place I visited in Japan just led me to want to see more places and try more things. I don't think that a desire to travel is every fully satisfied, because each new place you travel to brings another place to visit to the surface. I will never forget my short time in Japan, and will always be thankful to the study abroad program that made it possible.



Some of the Eau Claire group before the “mini World Cup” soccer tournament. We were all split into different teams and played soccer with the international community participating in the TSI program.



The UW-Eau Claire group dressed in traditional Kendo attire, after practicing Kendo and learning more about traditional Japanese sport.