

# PASSING ON THE PASSION: INTRODUCING MSW STUDENTS TO INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES

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*My own international travel and study experiences created a passion for more of the same. They have allowed me to not only experience new settings and cultures, but also to see how those experiences can impact my teaching. My travels continue, but my main efforts are now in creating international experiences for my students. I hope they get the passion.*

Like many of my marginally pre-boomer generation, international travel was not part of my background. So my own first international experience, beyond a weekend family visit to Niagara Falls in my youth, which included a one-day on-foot crossing to the Canadian side, came as part of my military experience. Although I served in the U.S. Air Force during the Viet Nam War era, the country was not a place I had any interest in 'visiting'. However, at some point I was informed that I would be receiving orders for an international assignment. Given the time left in my military commitment, the possibilities were Viet Nam, Korea, and Greenland. For different reasons than those that made Viet Nam unattractive, I did not welcome the possibility of being sent to Greenland. Ultimately, I received orders to spend thirteen months in the Republic of South Korea.

Living on a military installation in another country doesn't guarantee a true international experience. Many military personnel isolate themselves on the base or, when they do leave, do so in groups in order to maintain a comfort zone that limits the potential for real immersion into the local culture. Some years after my military service in Korea, as a graduate student having been offered the opportunity to study the German language at a branch of the Goethe Institute in Germany, I frequently ran into large groups of U.S. military personnel stationed in Germany on my weekend sojourns. They usually seemed more interested in their own group than in the sights and experiences surrounding them.

My own interests and desire to step outside my comfort zone and experience new things allowed me to travel, almost always alone, around Korea, usually on commercial trains and flights. Not speaking the language necessitated some creative use of body language and trusting those I dealt with. Buying travel tickets usually meant placing a pile of money in front of the ticket agent, saying (phonetically) the name of the city I wanted to get to, trusting the agent would give me back any excess money, then shrugging my shoulders and placing my palms hands up in a "Where do I go?" mode, with a typical response being a number of fingers being raised and a point in some direction to indicate something like "3 tracks that way." Once there I repeated the shoulder shrug while showing some other waiting traveler my ticket. This usually got a nod, with that person then escorting me onto the correct train or plane, then indicating when I should get off. Similar experiences helped me gain access into cultural events, usually musical, since I didn't understand the language. My willingness to trust in the helpfulness of my fellow travelers, both on the specific trip and in my life journey, always worked out well.

My two-month Germany experience afforded the opportunity to take my wife and our toddler daughter along. During the week, we lived in a picture postcard village where I studied the language during the day. Although we had access to a small kitchen in the dorm we lived in, we generally ate most meals in restaurants and hofbrau houses in the village.

The village was so small that, within a few days, word spread around the community of the "American family" that was there, and we were often greeted by that appellation when we would go into a local establishment to shop or eat. Every weekend we rented a car or took the train to some area of interest within Germany, as well as finding our way into Austria, Switzerland, Lichtenstein, France, and East Germany – this was some years before the wall came down.

Our travels necessitated some facility with the language in order to buy train tickets, make hotel reservations, shop, order food, etc. Having always understood and appreciated that many Europeans, among others, speak English, I would occasionally ask, in broken German, whether the person spoke English. On one such occasion, a hotel proprietor replied in German that since I was in Germany and obviously spoke some German I should not expect to be addressed in English. During our stay there he refused to speak to me in English, which forced me to practice what I was learning at the Goethe Institute during the week. That experience boosted my confidence and self-reliance enough that I was less inclined to ask that question in subsequent encounters.

Several years later, as a part-time faculty member, I had the luxury of escorting a group of freshman students on a week-long trip to London. I was appreciative for my own opportunity, but especially pleased that these students, many of whom had never had an international experience before, were able to participate. I had to deal with some youthful behavior, including one eighteen year old who discovered she could legally drink over international waters, and an occasional desire for one or more of them to want to sleep in, causing a delay in our daily schedules, but the experience was overall positive for everyone.

These opportunities helped create a passion for international travel and experience that has persisted. I now take every available opportunity to travel and immerse myself in the culture of the areas I visit. As a teacher, I now work to pass on that passion to my students.

As I started my current academic appointment, I discovered that one of my

colleagues shared many of my academic and travel interests. Over time we developed international internship placement opportunities for our MSW students, some as block field internships and others for shorter stays that included volunteering in the area where students traveled; followed by an independent study project that focused on some aspect of their international experiences. These opportunities allow me to introduce some of my students to international experiences, offering an aspect of education most had not considered before entering the MSW program.

To date, students have all been sent to English-speaking countries (England, Northern Ireland, Australia – with an upcoming experience in Scotland) or situations in which English would be spoken (a U.S. military hospital in Germany). At graduation, many students have commented that their international experiences were the most memorable aspects of their education. This was not just because of the travel, but mostly because they got to experience a new culture, see how their social work knowledge and skills applied in those settings, and learn how their own attitudes were affected by international travel and work.

The experiences our students have had include working in an in-patient addictions treatment program in Northern Ireland; a day program for elders and camp programs for youths in London; a counseling program in Australia; and a U.S. military hospital in Germany working with service members experiencing PTSD as result of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. Their independent study papers have addressed either direct practice or policy implications, sometimes comparative papers addressing both their host country and the U.S., depending upon student interests or practice concentration. In addition to the papers, some students completed other projects, including a photo essay and educational presentations to their colleagues in their field placements or paid employment situation.

The value students see in these experiences has been addressed by comments in their independent study papers such as:

It is imbedded in my heart, mind, and

soul now and forever more that humans are inter-connected and the human component is ever-present.

It was interesting to see that two different countries can face the same issues when attacking drug addiction.

Overall, the author noted more similarities than differences in the types of services offered through both systems (England and U.S.). The differences include the more developed system to support carers that England offers, as well as the comfort of knowing that they do not need to worry about how they are going to pay for their medicine, their doctors' bills or their hospital stays.

The problems of alcohol and other drug abuse are worldwide and much can be learned through an exchange of cultural perspectives. When I left for Northern Ireland I was heavily steeped in the treatment modalities of the United States. My experience in Northern Ireland brought about many questions as to the efficacy of treatment in the United States.

During my studies at Shimna House, I had the opportunity to explore their programming, philosophy of treatment, and made comparisons to the inpatient treatment within the United States.....Their treatment is extremely different than a traditional inpatient facility found in the United States.

Experiencing Northern Ireland has certainly been a chance of a lifetime and I will always be grateful for the opportunity. I have a much broader understanding of the world in general, a deeper respect for cultural issues and the strength of the human spirit.....I was deeply moved by the people I met in Northern Ireland in both a personal and professional way.

My most poignant memory came from the child whose behavior had caused me the most angst. Before boarding the bus back to London he turned to me, and with tears in his big brown eyes, he hugged my neck and said, "I guess you really liked me." He was right.

In the fall of 1997, I had occasion to apply for a trip to North Ireland to study alcoholism. Having had personal experiences with alcoholism at home, the idea of studying alcoholics in another culture fascinated me.

I continue to travel internationally whenever possible. Both my own international experiences and those of my students, whether formally connected to the social work curriculum or not, continuously reinforce for me the value of cross-cultural experiences for the enhancement of different perspectives and the opportunity to reflect upon personal values regarding other cultures and other people. The image of the "Ugly American" is still alive and well (maybe sick?) and one way for every individual to gain insight into their own perspective on the wider world is to experience more of it. I value my own international experiences and offering the opportunity for students, especially those without prior international travel, to gain insight into other cultures and the need to understand various cultural perspectives for their work at home in the U.S.

I hope my students get the passion.

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