
Student Reflections on a Study Abroad Course to the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing

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ABSTRACT

Int J Exerc Sci 1(4) : 136-141, 2008. The authors lead a study abroad trip to Beijing, China during the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. Included are reflections from the students who participated. Throughout the visit, students had the opportunity to complete learning outside of the traditional classroom setting. In addition, various challenges were faced and overcome which also constituted a learning experience and was the cause of reflection. The country of China and all of its historical landmarks had a great impression on these students, especially the day that was spent at the Great Wall. Finally, being able to be at the Olympic Games was a life-changing experience, from the Opening Ceremony to the events that were attended. In all, it was a thoroughly worthwhile adventure and one that we hope to replicate every two years.

KEY WORDS: Student-engaged learning, out of country travel, Olympic Games

INTRODUCTION

In addition to serving as Editors-in-Chief during this inaugural year of the *International Journal of Exercise Science*, we decided to offer a study abroad course to the students of Western Kentucky University and Winston-Salem State University. In desiring to provide them with an unparalleled experience, we embarked upon the organization, effort, and difficulties involved with taking students to a foreign country. In all, 25 students and 16 friends, professors, and others took a 15 day circuitous trip from Bowling Green, Kentucky to Beijing, China and back. Below are reflections of the journey that provide evidence that all of the work and headaches were ultimately of worth. We have categorized these responses into themes centering on the

overall learning experience, various difficulties encountered, the Chinese experience, and the summer Olympics.

STUDY ABROAD AS A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Tristan Hood: While I was in China, I learned a lot about myself. First of all being in a foreign country will make you appreciate what you have so much more. I got a dose of humbleness for the two weeks that I was there. Not having the luxuries that I have everyday back home really made me miss home. Another lesson I learned was kindness. The Chinese people were the nicest people I have ever met. I and a group of people got lost while out one night. All we needed to know was what bus to get on to get back to our hotel. It was pouring rain and three Chinese people came and stood over us with umbrellas and

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waited with us until our bus came. The people had the greatest impact on me because I had to think, "Am I being that gracious to the visitors in my country?" I know I have not shown them the hospitality that they had shown me. China was the first time that I have been out of the country and after experiencing my first overseas trip; it made me want to travel. Before I have a family and settle down, I would like to travel the world and see all of what God has made.

Brian Soverns: This once in a lifetime experience is something I will think positively about for the rest of my life. There are not many people who can say they were in attendance at the Olympics in Beijing, China in 2008. I am proud to say I was one of those individuals. This not only will have an effect on my personal experiences but it is information that will be included on every resume I submit in future years. These are not just credit hours that will go towards my bachelors degree but are hours that provide valuable information and insight for my future years, which is more than I can say for many of my other classes. This experience could even help me get into the graduate school of my choice, which is something you cannot put a price on.

Robert Woodke: My overall experience of China was a special one that I will long remember. From the Olympic events, to the cultural barriers, and to the Great Wall I knew this would be life changing. While I was there, I learned a lesson that my parents have been trying to instill in me for years: Appreciation. I have a new appreciation for the country that I am living in and for what I have. As I look back, the

three main highlights were the Olympic events, the acrobatic show and the Great Wall. Even though this was my first Olympic experience and the main reason for the trip, my favorite part was the Great Wall. When we arrived at the Wall, we found out that we had to climb 2000 steps to get on it, and that we only had three hours. I thought three hours was way too long. But after I reached that beginning of the wall, and started that march to the end I knew I wasn't going to stop until I reached the end. The walk was pretty treacherous but it sure was worth it.

Tyler Spencer: Overall, this trip was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. To be lucky enough to see the Olympic games in a foreign country is really a once in a lifetime experience. Not only did we see the spectacular venues such as the Bird's Nest and the Cube but we also got to see one of the Seven Wonders of the World in the Great Wall. This trip just proves that you learn more from actually getting out and doing it than by sitting in a classroom listening to a lecture. I learned so many lifelong lessons that I will be referring back to for many years to come.

CHALLENGES OF THE STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE

Lauren Edsten: Overall, this trip was the trip of a lifetime!!! I had never been to that part of the world and was glad to have experienced this trip with the group of people that I was with. If I go back again, which I hope to someday, I will try to go with some sort of touring agency or a smaller group. That was somewhat of a challenge to try and coordinate forty-one people to get together and go all the places

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we went and travel through the airports and such. I think that many of us developed a new appreciation for the culture of China. They have a very rich history and although we could not always understand what was being said, I think that most of the people in our group picked up on that. It was wonderful to see all the bold colors that the Chinese use in all their buildings, especially the older buildings and architecture. The Chinese' history was very plain to see when we visited places like the Summer Palace, Forbidden City, and the Temple of Heaven. I think for me, the highlight of the trip was climbing the Great Wall. Not many people can say that they actually had the opportunity to go there and actually climb it. That was a blast and a great workout too!

Allison Dial: The three most important lessons I learned on this trip were: 1) Learning to be flexible. We had so many changes in our schedule and it was frustrating, but we still got to go see a lot of great things. 2) Always be open to try new things. I had to try new things such as food, hard beds (but really soft pillows), talking to people you would not normally talk to, and conversing with the locals even though it might be hard with the language barrier. 3) Everything happens for a reason. If something gets canceled, maybe the secondary option was a better pick for the group. Things change sometimes for the better and I experienced that a lot on this trip. Even though I didn't get to go see the Longqing Valley, I got to see the Great Panda's at the Beijing Zoo, which was a blessing for me. A life changing experience for me was learning to be okay with no personal space and learning to be adaptable and flexible. Things are so different in our

cultures that if you didn't adjust, you would get easily frustrated and upset. The greatest challenge for me was making friends. Going on a trip where I initially knew no one, was a little scary for me. So I overcame my fear and put myself outside of my box.

Drew Howard: Looking back on the trip to China, my memories are scattered all over that country. The experience was great, challenging, and rough. On one front, you cannot help but have fond memories of going to a new country for two weeks. It was fun to get out of town, and go to the Olympics. We didn't have to go to work or worry about the business of our lives at home. Essentially it was a type of vacation. On top of the trip I got to meet many individuals that I did not know. This will indefinitely form new lasting friendships. There were times when I thought this was a "great trip." The challenge came from within my own self. It was hard being away from home for two weeks. It was a challenge to spend this much time with so many people that I did not know. The challenge really came in trying to stay positive when things seemed to be going against us. The flights being cancelled, changes in the plan, the things we could not do because of the games. The challenge came from trying to look past these things and remember the positives. The trip defiantly had rough times. Getting on that bus became harder and harder. Traveling all over China took its toll on me. The days we spent traveling felt like lost days. I felt like we spent so much time on the bus or waiting on someone. This really ruined whole parts of the trip for me. It made the overall experience suffer. The experience came with the good, bad, and the ugly.

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Overall, all three must be taken into consideration.

REFLECTIONS ON CHINA

Jennifer Hamblin: The highlight of the trip for me was actually climbing to the top of the Great Wall. I felt like I had actually accomplished something that is very difficult that everyone tries and some even fail. Just the fact that I was able to do it made me a "hero," which is what people are considered to climb the Wall. The biggest life-changing experience to me was being over in a different country with people who speak a totally different language and trying to make my way around a city. I was able to survive with hand gestures and simple words such as "hi" and "bye" when I never thought I would have to do that. I also feel now a sense of security in my own country because I can understand the language. This trip helped me learn that there are so many different opportunities to understand that people are different. I now don't just look at a person on campus and judge them before I get to know them; I came to understand that everyone came from a different background and that everyone has their own talent.

Kelly Hargis: I was in some places in China that were created before our civilization was even started. I stood in the place where many people have stood and very important people have made history. It is a life changing experience to visit another country. I feel that I have changed because I visited China. I have a greater appreciation for my home country and for my family and friends.

The event that had the greatest impact on me was visiting the Great Wall. I felt like I became apart of history. The Great Wall is starting to fall apart and some Chinese are using part of the Great Wall to build their homes. There is talk of renovating and restoring the Great Wall. It is said that you are only considered a hero in the eyes of the Chinese if you step foot on the Great Wall.

Matthew Love: It was probably one of the greatest but at the same time one of the most draining experiences of my life. As for appreciation, I have a new appreciation for the Chinese people. They live in a rough world compared to ours. I think the highlight of my trip had to have been the Great Wall. Sure, we did a lot of things I will not soon forget, but out of everything we did, the Great Wall was the best. I never thought being on a wall could be so cool, but once you are out away from everyone and all you can hear is the breeze it really starts to sink in just what that wall has seen and what it took to build it.

Rachel Maloney: Overall my experience cannot be narrowed to one or two words. It was more than a "vacation." This trip was an experience I will never forget and will tell stories to my children one day. I have gained so much insight to the culture of China and of course, the Olympics. I noticed a lot of differences between our two cultures: traffic laws, food choices and availability of other foods besides Chinese, the etiquette, mannerisms, cleanliness, the environment, people's rights, etc.

I have never met so many teens and adults excited about taking a picture with us. As we accepted each offer to snap a photo it never crossed my mind that we would be

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so popular. I appreciate the people of China for hosting the Olympics. I know it took a lot of hands and voices to bring the Olympics to Beijing and I am so grateful to say I was one that attended. The one highlight of the trip personally was becoming a hero as I climbed the Great Wall. I can remember when I was a young girl and my grandpa saying if he could travel or do one thing before he dies was to climb the Great Wall. I felt like he was with me as I took my first step that Friday morning.

THE BEIJING OLYMPICS AS A STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE

Beth Weimer: Overall I thought the show was incredible. I like how ancient Chinese culture was combined with today's culture and the world. Seeing all the countries walk out with their participants, wearing their uniforms was exciting. I have never watched the opening ceremony before and I was not sure what to expect. But it was great to see all of the athletes unified together for at least one night. When the United States team walked out I got a huge burst of pride. I became extremely excited, especially since we are in Beijing. It feels like we're giving them even more support than everyone back at home because we are here with them.

Kristin Howard: The Olympic events were definitely the highlight of my trip. The best day of the trip for me was the day Drew and I left early to go scalp tickets to any event that we were interested in that the tickets were actually affordable for. We wanted swimming tickets, but they were outrageously priced, so we settled for tennis tickets, not knowing if it was men's

or women's, or doubles or singles. When we arrived at the venue we lucked up and realized we had great tickets that let us into any court we wanted, and that we were going to get to watch Serena Williams, and Venus Williams play. It was awesome!

While we were at Tennis, we met a couple girls that were on the U.S.A. field hockey team and they offered us a couple tickets to their game that night. So, after we met up with the rest of the group and watched archery, we got to go to a U.S. field hockey game. This was probably the most fun event we went to. We were sitting with the families of the team and they offered us about eight more tickets for other people in our group. We got to chant, "USA, USA..." and cheer for our country! This was the day I had been waiting for the entire trip! I would also have to say that this event had the greatest impact on me. I watched girls that were my age playing in the Olympics representing their country. It gave me a sense of pride for the United States and inspired me.

Emily Bickett: The Olympics were amazing. To be at the Olympics, and in China, were just two great experiences in one. We attended canoe/kayaking, archery, weightlifting, and some of us went to a USA women's field hockey game against Japan. All of these events were great. The canoe/kayaking facility was built just for the Olympics and was going to be torn down after the games were over. When we went to weightlifting we saw a man from Hungary dislocate his elbow. It was definitely not pleasing to the eye to see this. When about eight of us went to the field hockey game, we got to sit with the parents from the USA team and cheer on USA. It

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was such a great atmosphere to be in, cheering for your home country. I am so grateful for being able to go on this trip. We all had a great time together and got to see so many amazing things. The Chinese culture is very different, but I learned to respect them and the cultures of other countries.

Maggie Roe: The new appreciation that I have for China is their rich history and how they are able to survive with the amount of people living there. They are able to preserve their history while also being futuristic in their endeavors. I think that the Opening Ceremony is a great example of this. The highlight of the trip was being able to attend the Olympic events and see the Olympic venues, such as the Bird's Nest and the Watercube. I absolutely loved seeing the US Men's Basketball team play, canoe/kayaking, archery and weightlifting. Although I liked seeing the sites of China, nothing can beat being at the Olympics. One of the most important lessons I learned was that the Olympics really does bring the world together despite differences. I think the whole trip was a life-changing experience because it really opened your eyes to a country that is completely different than ours and seeing Olympic athletes that are at the best in the world compete is a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Mitch Sharber: I cannot even begin to describe how great of an experience this trip was for me. I was able to do some things in my life that I could possibly never do again: I was able to travel outside of the country for the first time, and I made some lifelong friends while doing so. The trip was truly and opportunity of a lifetime and will be something I will never forget. The

Olympic part of the trip was amazing. It has always been one of my dreams since I was a little kid to be able to watch the Olympics in person. Although the events we saw were not the mainstream events that most people think of when they think about the Olympics, the events we did see were all very interesting in their own respects. I loved being able to watch the women's team handball as it was an exciting and fast paced sport that most people at least in the United States do not even know about. I have a new found respect for the competitors in the archery events. I never really thought about how hard that would be and it is amazing how good those competitors are. The men's light weight weight lifting was also very cool. Although we did not get to see the main events, the Olympic spirit was amazing and something I will never forget.

CONCLUSION

This trip was an experience neither we nor our students will ever forget. While we met many challenges over the course of 15 days, the life-long satisfaction of seeing world-class athletes on an international stage, visiting multi-million dollar facilities, climbing the Great Wall, and witnessing other facets of history and culture much older than our country's will remain with us for a lifetime. Though we have not yet "recovered" from two weeks in China, we are already planning our next project, Vancouver 2010! If you have questions about our projects or would like information about what we do, e-mail us at editor@intjexersci.com.