

An Unexamined Exchange Life Is Not Worth Living

By

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When I thought about the topic for my writing, a well-known quote by Socrates came into my mind: “an unexamined exchange life is not worth living for men.” This saying, which I learnt from my philosophy class in Alfred University, is a good summary of my thoughts about my exchange life in the United States. Before I came to study, I had set different goals for myself in order to maximize the gains from the exchange life. However, as I have been studying here for over two months, I find I have changed a lot, not only in terms of the perception of my identity, but also the perception of my future life.

First, it is an interesting story about why I choose to study abroad in Alfred University. After I was admitted to participate in the International Student Exchange Program, I was asked to choose ten favorite universities in the United States. However, I was assigned to go to Alfred University, which was not even included in my choices. Frankly, I was shocked because I did not know anything about this university. The reason they assigned this school to me is it encourages inter-disciplinary study, which suits one of my goals to study abroad. Since I have finished most of my credits in major, I wanted to study different subjects in the rest of my university life to enrich my life and broaden my horizon. Among the subjects that I am taking here, *Introduction to Philosophy* and *World Politics* are the most inspiring classes this semester.

Active class participation and the critical mind of students are outstanding in this university. For example, studying in philosophy requires daily discussion with group mates in class. As an ordinary Asian student, I was shy to express my opinions in the beginning. This is not only because I am not very

good at speaking English but also because I am afraid that my unspoken opinions may seem wrong to others. ‘What if others challenge me because they have different points of view?’ ‘How can I respond to their challenges well and speak fluently in English?’ These were the concerns that I had. Therefore, I was only a listener instead of a frequent speaker in group discussions. Then, the rest of my group mates could not hear my voice during the exchange of ideas. Thus, American students in my group discussed with each other and I was an “outsider”. This situation further worsened my worry to speak up in the group and so a vicious cycle resulted.

Unfortunately, the same situation happened in my *World Politics* class. In every class, the professor required students to read world news in the Washington Post on that day and to give feedback for further discussion. Almost every student felt free to speak and the atmosphere was really good for discussion. However, again, I was shy to express personal views on the world news. In one class, we were discussing the 2012 presidential election in the United States. The professor asked me if there were prevailing views about the candidates in Hong Kong and in Asian countries. Since I was not familiar about that, I felt embarrassed that I could not answer. This embarrassing experience forced me to rethink the meaning of studying abroad. If I could not express myself in English and, as an exchange student, represent my home city in class, then why did I choose to study in the United States? After self-examination, I determined to express myself more in front of others, no matter if I spoke wrongly.

Since then, I have been doing much better in both speaking English and learning concepts in class. I have started to speak up in defense of my own ideas in group discussions. Even though sometimes other students might not understand totally what I’ve said, they were nice and helpful to listen to me and to correct my pronunciation. The more I spoke, the more I could know where I made mistakes and then improve. I did not know that Americans could not sometimes not understand my

accent. If I had never spoken in front of others, I would have been unaware of this problem. With longer exposure in an environment where I could use my second language, I was urged to learn more vocabulary and to explore the meaning behind words. In this way, I began to better understand the concepts illustrated in English. For instance, we have a daily quiz in every philosophy class. More than a half of the class misunderstood the meaning of 'egalitarian', but I understood it after I did my reading. These significant and encouraging improvements proved that I should not regret changing my learning altitude.

Invited by the Director of International Programs, as an international student, I attended a preparation class for American students going to study abroad in the next semester. Originally, we were told to watch a movie together and then to share our experience in small groups. Unexpectedly, after watching the movie, the instructor invited almost every international student to talk about ourselves in class. Every European student spoke a lot. However, it was natural for Asian students to feel uncomfortable to speak in class. Being quiet in class is considered as good discipline rather than inactive participation in Asian countries. Also, speaking in a second language in front of many foreigners brings pressure and thus needs much confidence. Even when all Europeans had finished sharing already, there were still no Asians speaking. Then, the instructor looked at me and asked whether I wanted to share. If it was several months ago, I might not have been brave enough to do that. Finally, I spoke up and I was the first Asian student to begin the sharing. I think that I had made progress to pass through my mental barrier. In fact, difficulty to speak in front of foreigners is just an assumption we set by ourselves. Once we break the limit successfully, it is not that terrible speaking wrongly in English. At least, we can still bear this cost to improve ourselves.

Another one of my achievements I made here is doing well in learning piano as a beginner. I wanted to learn it for a long time already since I did not have the chance to do so when I was a kid. It is rare for a university in Hong Kong to have a piano class open for students from all disciplines. Therefore, I was surprised that I could enroll in a piano class here. However, at that time, I considered whether I should start to learn piano because I am already a university student. After seeking advice from the piano teacher, I was encouraged to take the course because playing the piano is one of my dreams.

Since I decided to add the class in my schedule, I insist to practice the piano every day. Until now, I can still keep this promise to myself. I know that I should I do my best in my favorite things and sometimes we should not think too much before making a decision. When we have too much consideration, our will would be limited to do whatever we want. This is true especially when we want to try something new in a new environment. I could have spent my time playing computer games instead of playing the piano, and doing other ordinary things that I was used to doing in the past. However, I



said to myself: studying abroad is a journey learning to jump out of my comfort zone. We may take risks in facing unfamiliarity, but the positive consequences it brings can be much more than you can expect. Being active to speak in class and insisting in whatever we like to do are examples. Otherwise, we would just stand here merely for safety

and not move on. In addition, I had a great time playing the piano with international friends. Even

though the songs we played are not challenging, piano acts as a “common language” for us to stick together.

Soccer is another “common language” that works for people from different parts of the world. We organized an International Soccer Team to join an intramural soccer match. This is my first time to

have teammates from different countries, namely Brazil, France, Sweden, South Korea, Columbia, China and Switzerland. In the first two matches, we did not have enough communication about our positions and then it led to misunderstandings. All of us tended to play offenders and then



no one was willing to play defenders. This was the main reason that we lost with conceding many goals. Even worse, many of us were not willing to be substituted as the time of playing would be reduced. This selfish behavior was unfair to the initial substitute players. As a result, an atmosphere of tension and lots of conflicts were created in the team. In order to solve these troubles, we started to communicate more since the third match. All of us were willing to be substituted if there was a need to switch positions or players. Then, we started to win consecutively and even reached the semi-final. Although we eventually lost by only a small gap, I experienced the best team game of us since we organized the soccer team. Through improving communication and teamwork, we had more passing and less individualistic play.

Even though we have finished all matches already, I will not forget what everyone did for the best of the team. Players stayed rather than left the team in hard periods because we all loved soccer. Sometimes, we may care too much about winning and losing and even blame each other for who should take responsibility for losses. But if we think back to the original position, all of us do something together because we just share the same interest. Then, no problems cannot be solved because we enjoy the time with each other. This experience inspires me. I realized that many conflicts in a group are unnecessary if we can communicate more and care about each other.

At this moment, I have a month left before this semester ends. I know that time is short and therefore I will grab every chance to do whatever I want here before going back to Hong Kong. I treasure every moment with my international friends, learning new things and being inspired. Studying



abroad in a totally new environment has been a stimulus to me for examining my life and pushing my limits. I expect a new ‘me’ when I go back to Hong Kong. This semester must undoubtedly be one of my best and memorable periods in my life.

About the author

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