RYUGAKU

STUDY ABROAD SIG NEWSLETTER

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Message from the Coordinator

Dear Members and Friends,

In the wake of the massive Eastern Japan Earthquake on March 11th.and the continuing problems in Fukushima and the resulting effects on millions of people in the Kanto area, our thoughts go out to all those affected, and we hope for a swift resolution to the problems. The events will surely bring about many challenges for Study Abroad professionals especially those dealing with foreign students studying in Japan. Providing these students with reliable information about the situation and allaying fears and worries will be crucial to providing an experience with as little stress as possible in such a difficult time.

The Pan-SIG Conference on May 21st and 22nd at Shinshu University, Matsumoto, Nagano promises to be an interesting event, with some interesting presentations from members of the Study Abroad SIG. We look forward to seeing many of you there. The deadline for submissions for the JALT National Conference in Tokyo this year is also fast approaching on April 22nd, and I would really encourage as many of our members as possible to submit a proposal about Study Abroad related issues.

Warm regards,

Andrew Atkins

The SA SIG Executive Team

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Towards a Richer Understanding of the Study Abroad Experience

Julian Pigott
Ritsumeikan University

Introduction

Research on the effects of study abroad (SA) has traditionally used statistical analysis of questionnaire data to examine the relationship between time spent in the L2 environment and proficiency gains (Jackson, 2008). However, more qualitative methods of inquiry reveal that students may have a variety of SA-related goals beyond simply gaining L2 proficiency, including learning about culture, getting away from their parents, and sightseeing (Dewey, 2004). In this paper, I explore the 'bigger picture' of the SA experience through interviews with five English learners. I argue that proficiency gains can be seen as a concomitant feature of more fundamental changes in knowledge, motivation and world view. Seen from the student's perspective, SA is a potentially life-changing experience *first*, and an opportunity to improve one's linguistic skills *second*. By broadening the research focus to include the full diversity of the SA context, we can gain a richer understanding of student experience, and discover practical ways of improving SA programs.

Existing research

Studies have shown that long-term SA tends to result in a number of proficiency gains, including increased fluency and better use of communicative strategies (Cole & Anderson 2001; Tanaka & Ellis 2003; Segalowitz, Freed, Collentine, Lafford, Lazar & Diaz-Campos 2004; Jackson, 2008). However, Coleman (1998) warns that much of the existing *product-oriented* research examining these factors ignores the social, historical and cultural aspects of the SA experience that should rightfully be considered "essential elements of the true linguistic proficiency which residence abroad is expected to enhance" (p.18). In other words, existing conceptions of what students *learn* in the SA context are too narrow. In addition, the findings that Coleman criticizes may be increasingly irrelevant to the Japanese context: Long-term programs have been declining in popularity recently in favour of shorter-term programs of a month or less (Harris, 2010). In 2007, more than 10,000 Japanese

university students studied abroad in such programs (JASSO, as cited in Churton, 2009).

Research on shorter-term programs has identified non-linguistic gains such as improvement in attitude to learning the L2, increased motivation and inter-cultural awareness (Geis and Fukushima, 1997; Bodycott & Crew, 2000; Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004). Although the most obvious gains arising from a short-term SA trip may be non-linguistic in the short term, they may exert a significant effect on learning over time. Dewey (2004) argues that it is the diversity of activities and corresponding goals in interaction with characteristics of the individual (expectations, needs, personality) where the real strength of SA lies. He argues that every student has a unique experience and gains a particular set of skills, and recommends encouraging students "to establish goals in advance, select an SA program based on these goals, and then maintain habits while abroad that will facilitate the achievement of these goals." (p. 324).

Method

To give this study some context, it may be useful for the reader to understand that the interviews from which its data were drawn were undertaken as piloting for a larger-scale doctoral research project. The interviews focused broadly on issues of identity, motivation and interaction. Upon reading the transcripts, I was immediately struck by way in which certain sections addressed issues relevant to the improvement of SA programs, in particular comments on memorable experiences, the relation between culture and motivation, and recollection of interaction difficulties. I decided that these aspects of the data warranted a more detailed treatment in the form of the study presented here.

The data consist of transcripts from semi-structured interview with five sophomore university students (Aika, Naoko, Yumika, Momo and Tetsuya) who participated in short SA programs as part of their university studies. Informed consent was obtained from students. The interviews lasted between 25 and 50 minutes. They were transcribed, and coded according to procedures set forth in Gillham (2005) in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines on *thematic analysis*: relevant sections were highlighted, then copied to a spreadsheet in the form of a matrix

which afforded easy perusal and comparison of the five accounts. Follow-up emails were sent to two of the students in order to clarify some points and ask further questions. Students are referred to throughout by pseudonyms.

Results and analysis

Three themes that hold implications for the understanding and administration of SA programs were identified: (1) *the unique SA context*; (2) *motivation and culture*; and (3) *interaction difficulties*. I will address each of these topics in turn. In order to be as concise as possible, I have paraphrased student accounts for the most part. Direct quotes that I feel more effectively convey intended meaning are rendered in italics.

The Unique SA context

All of the respondents' favourite memories from their SA experience can be characterised as *new*, *different,* and/or *unexpected.* Aika, for example, recounts a trip to Columbian River Gorge, where she could enjoy views unlike those found in Japan. Yumika recalls being taken to a rodeo and standing up to a round of applause as her name was called out by the announcer. Naoko fondly recalls cooking Japanese food (hand-rolled sushi) with her host-sister for her host-mother's birthday and enjoying the subsequent party.

Interestingly, Momo and Tetsuya recount events that caused them a degree of consternation at the time. Momo recalls her host brother and sister (both much younger than her) mocking her pronunciation of "Australia" after she gave a speech in front of her host school. The reason why it was a favourable, rather than a painful, memory was because it functioned as an icebreaker. Tetsuya, upon arriving in Adelaide, was given a bicycle and a map by his host family, and instructed to cycle around Adelaide. For him this was a rather stressful event, because he did not have much experience riding a bicycle on the road, and none at all of using a map. He recalls being honked at, sworn at, and learning as a matter of expediency the appropriate hand signals required of cyclists in Australia. This is his favourite memory because it was new and novel experience for him.

The way in which even stressful events can be turned into positive memories, is a testament to the powerful, positive SA context. It is also interesting to note that four of five recollections have nothing to do with language learning (and the fifth - Momo's - only indirectly).

Motivation and culture

Culture plays an important role in students' explanations of their motivation to learn English both in general, and with specific reference to the SA context. Aika, for example, notes that her experience of speaking English is limited primarily to non-native speakers. Through this interaction, she could gain insights into how people live, think, and feel in other countries, and the desire to gain such knowledge fuels her motivation. Momo also mentions the allure of culture, and the way in which learning about the world is in some way self-enriching. She is interested in the relationship between Japan and other countries, and through speaking English she could gain a different perspective on these kinds of issues; not as a Japanese person, but as a foreigner. Momo believes that somebody who can speak English has a wider and more sophisticated understanding of the world than someone who does not.

Tetsuya reminds us that learning about other cultures can often simply be good fun. He says it is a pleasure for him to experience foreign cultures *for real*, after years of *textbook culture*. Like the other students he expresses interest in the cultural idiosyncrasies, and this interest extends to learning about how his own culture is viewed by others. For example, he fondly recalls a conversation with Arab classmates in which they expressed astonishment on learning that some shoplifting in Japan is perpetrated by bored old-age pensioners. Naoko wants to share her own culture in addition to learning about that of her host country, and there appears to be a strong link between this desire and her motivation to learn English. She remarks that her failures to communicate properly were the most motivating aspect of her stay in New Zealand. Next time, she says, she will do better.

Cultural exchange appears to be the most motivating aspect of the SA experience. Linguistic ability is a tool through which to accomplish this, but there is a lot more to experiencing a culture than simply learning a language, and one could argue that

'learning' should therefore be defined more broadly than in purely linguistic terms, as Coleman advocates (see above). Another theme that emerges from the data is the importance of the international community of speakers of English as a second language rather than the Western-centric notion community of native English speakers with which the non-native wishes to integrate (Gardner & Lambert, 1959).

Interaction difficulties

Aika found herself embarrassed at sounding like a *Japanese English speaker* and wishing to withdraw from interaction because her mother made too much of an effort to speak *easy-English*. Tetsuya recounts similar misgivings to Aika, adding that asking the teacher to say something again in class is much easier than asking people in the *real world*. Aika's host mother's non-linguistic, as well as linguistic behaviour, led her to feel uncomfortable at times, and she attributed these problems to *cultural differences*. By contrast, *cultural understanding* is the reason that she gives to explain why she enjoyed interacting more with Hiroko, a Japanese friend of her host mother residing in America.

Yumika and Naoko also experienced difficulties, but in their case they appear to have enjoyed more support to push through these difficulties from their host parents. Naoko complains that her inability to communicate effectively led her to feel sad and like withdrawing from interaction. However, her host mother and friends supported and encouraged her to persevere. In a similar way to Aika's discussion of Hiroko, she recounts that her host mother's cultural understanding played an important role in their maintaining a good relationship. She recalls that she discussed food culture with her host mother, who said that there are many different cultures in the world and that eating whale was part of Japan's food culture; the expression of such sentiment obviously made Naoko feel at ease. Yumika contrasts interaction with her mother, with whom she felt a sisterly kinship, with interaction with a member of a Mormon community, with whom the topic of discussion (religious faith) was discomforting, presumably for interpersonal/cultural reasons as well as linguistic reasons.

The data speak to the power of the environment in determining the degree to which students encounter interaction difficulties and how they cope with them. The

presence of a culturally sympathetic host family offering support and encouragement appears to be particularly important in facilitating L2 interaction.

Discussion

In this section, I will discuss in more detail the power of the SA context before moving onto some concrete recommendations for administrators of SA programs.

The power of the SA context

Kinginger (as cited in Collentine, 2009) warns that a sense of distance between the individual and the target culture can lead them to abandon their language-learner role, impeding the development process. Data from Aika and Tetsuya, in particular, appears to offer support for Kinginger's argument. However, with reference to short-term stays (which, to be fair to Kinginger, was probably not her focus) Kinginger's argument requires critical re-evaluation.

First, the idea of a homogeneous 'target' culture does not do justice to a SA reality in which most students find themselves surrounded by diverse and unique people, often from different countries. It would appear that personalities and circumstances, as much as disaffection with a culture as a monolithic entity would dictate interaction difficulties. Second, on the evidence of the data from this study, any disillusionment is likely to result only in limited, context-dependent withdrawals from interaction. This is likely to be particularly true of short-term study participants, who are still in the 'Honeymoon' stage of cultural acclimatisation (Pedersen, 1995). For example, Aika was able to enjoy a rewarding experience away from her host mother and the unsatisfactory compulsory English classes by taking matters into her own hands and arranging access to a music class with regular American students. She was also able to interact happily with enjoy interaction with Hiroko, her host mother's friend. One could argue that even if a learner did feel like withdrawing from learning completely, it would be hard to do so. To a certain extent students *have* to cope, *have* to interact, and *have* to get through the SA experience even when events turn sour. In this sense the SA experience seems to be something of a win-win situation.

Recommendations for administrators

Four recommendations for program administrators can be derived from the interview data and analysis. The first two derive from the main drive of this paper - that an emphasis solely on proficiency gains misses the essence of the SA experience. The final two derive straightforwardly from comments made by the students concerning aspects of their SA experience.

1. Evaluate host parents according to the cultural understanding they display.

Some students can be expected to revel in the *new* and *different* more than others, and administrators should take care to ensure that occasional, healthy adversities such as those discussed above do not develop into a situation where students do actually feel like withdrawing from the SA experience and just 'surviving' until the flight back home. Perhaps one way to do this would be to pay attention to the selection of host parents. To this end, a worthwhile question to ask on any feedback form would be the extent to which the students felt at ease talking to their host parents, and the extent that the parents were perceived to be non-judgmental and accepting of cultural differences. On future stays, students who administrators feel may have more trouble adjusting to the host country environment can be accommodated by a host family that has scored more highly on such measures.

2. Offer as many culture-specific experiences and give students freedom to choose between them.

It is the opportunity to enjoy new and stimulating culturally-related experiences that appears to be the most important feature of the SA experience. The data suggest that each student is likely to enjoy the SA context in his/her own unique way. It follows that the more the students are able to choose from a range of experiences, the more they will value the SA experience and, presumably, the greater the long term implications for motivation, investment in the learning process and, ultimately, proficiency. A corollary of this is that administrators should, broadly speaking, resist well-intentioned urges to micromanage the learning process in terms of what language is learnt and in what circumstances.

3. Avoid mono-cultural classes

Both Naoko and Aika expressed dissatisfaction with the idea of travelling thousands of kilometres, only to be stuck in a classroom with Japanese students doing the same kinds of things they do during term time in Japan. Administrators are advised to make every effort possible to ensure that classroom elements of a SA program are multicultural.

4. Raise awareness of pronunciation differences.

Four of the five students interviewed experienced a certain degree of "pronunciation shock". Typical of these was Naoko's complaint that the pronunciation of New Zealanders is different to that of university teachers in Japan. Likewise, Momo recalls initially feeling a little angry at her host siblings for mocking her pronunciation - after all they speak Australian English and she had studied American English in school. Interestingly, all four participants recount a marked improvement as their stay progressed, until they could understand significantly more toward the end of their stay. Considering the very short duration of the students' stays, there might be some benefit in raising awareness of potential pronunciation-related comprehension difficulties by directing students towards resources such as YouTube videos that could prepare them for the idiomatic sound-scape of the language in question and save them some valuable acclimatisation time.

Conclusion

SLA researchers have traditionally concerned themselves with the search for universal, or context-independent laws of language learning. If there is any context which illustrates the problematic nature of this positivist endeavour, it is the SA context. Where else would the mocking of a learners' pronunciation turn out to be one of her most valuable experiences? In this paper, I have argued that we should neither plan nor judge SA programs solely in terms of proficiency improvements. Instead, we should concentrate on allowing students to benefit from a life-enriching experience as much as possible on their own terms. Perhaps rather depressingly for teachers, but happily for students, the SA experience tends to be something of a win-win situation at least in part because it is everything that the average university EFL lesson is *not*. We should resist the urge to micro-manage the SA experience, instead giving students the choice to explore the rich SA context on their own terms.

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Critical incidents in study abroad: Some contrasting multidisciplinary perspectives

海外研修での危機的出来事：対照をなす学問的見解

Tim Newfields
Toyo University

Abstract

This article compares four notions of what a "critical incident" implies in study abroad contexts. Rather than viewing critical incidents as a singular concept invariant across time, this article suggests how prevailing psychological and sociological theories as well as changing research contexts have constructed our understanding of "critical incidents". It concludes by pointing out how critical incidents are needed for transformative study abroad programs. In the next issue of this newsletter, some actual critical incident response strategies will be considered.

Keywords: critical incident theory, intercultural awareness, culture bumps, culture shock, criticality, study abroad

　本稿は、海外研修中に起きた「クリティカル・インシデント」を4つの概念で比較する。「クリティカル・インシデント」を普遍的な概念として捉えるのではなく、むしろ研究状況の変化と同様、その時代に優位性を保つ心理学や社会学理論が「クリティカル・インシデント」に対する我々の認識をいかに構築するかについて、本稿は示唆している。最後に、有意義な海外研修プログラムにおいて、「クリティカル・インシデント」の重要性を指摘して結論とした。

キーワード：クリティカル・インシデントの理論、異文化間の認識、文化衝突、カルチャーショック、臨界、海外研修

Introduction

　Retrospective reports by many study abroad (SA) participants suggest that far from all interpersonal change occurs in unilinear ways – certain incidents seem to spark significant shifts in how SA participants view their host cultures, themselves, and even their native cultures (Laubscher, 1994, 77-134; Savicki, Adams, Wilde, & Binder, 2007, 111-120; Pederson, 2009, 73 - 86). These events, which may be

understood as critical incidents, can potentially change how SA participants handle unfamiliar experiences. Often it also influences their willingness to undergo more such experiences. This paper examines some ways critical incidents have been envisioned and suggests why they may be essential for SA programs that are life-changing.

First, let us seek to clarify some of the meanings implied by the term "critical incident," and then distinguish it from some related notions.

Flanagan's Original Concept

Critical incident theory can be regarded as a child of World War II and to some extent, of behaviorism. During the early years of that conflict, John Flanagan was commissioned by the U.S. Air Force to study pilot performance. In his own words, Flanagan (1954) describes a critical incident as "extreme behavior, either outstandingly effective or ineffective with respect to attaining the general aims of the activity" (p. 338). In other words, a critical incident was first envisioned as any action substantially contributing to the success or failure of a specific outcome. Flanagan's initial focus was on identifying job-related behaviors that were considered "effective" or not. However, in subsequent years the scope of critical incident theory has expanded to explore topics as diverse as customer satisfaction (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990, cited in Gremler, 2004, p. 65), student compositions (Naidu & Oliver, 1994), and online data access trends (Urquhart, et al., 2003).

Flanagan's vision of what a constituted a "critical incident" was closely linked to a technique bearing that name. In 1954 he outlined a retrospective interview procedure to pinpoint factors thought to influence the success/failure of desired outcomes. This procedure seems optimally suited to tasks having well-defined target outcomes with clear performance criteria. However, it is not without critics. In particular, Chell (1998, pp. 51-72, cited in Gremler, 2004, p. 67) raises concerns about the reliability and validity of this technique. For example, since the critical incident technique requires informants to recall key elements of an experience, it is subject to a phenomenon known as *recall bias* in which memories are either distorted by later recollections or else neglected entirely since some events were not imprinted in conscious memory (Hassan, 2009, par 3). Flanagan's critical incident

technique also depends on the willingness of informants to provide detailed, accurate narratives. However, unless there are clear incentives for informants to offer detailed information as well as a widespread belief that their confidentiality will be respected, the data will be meager and/or biased. A final criticism of this technique is that raters seems to vary in how they set analytic categories (Norman, Redfern, Tomalin, & Oliver, 1992, p. 595-597).

While acknowledging the merits of this procedure for some contexts, thoughtful readers should question how appropriate it is for most SA research. One quandary is that many SA programs lack single, precise outcomes because many factors influencing each SA outcome vary widely. Another issue is practical: do most SA programs have the resources to conduct detailed ethnographic measurements of participants? At least in Japan, many staff responsible for evaluating SA programs lack the time and expertise needed to conduct professional program evaluations.

Crisis Models of Critical Incidents

The word "critical" is derived from the Latin *criticus* and Greek *kritikos*, which means to judge, decide, or discriminate (Weblio, 2011). However, by 1600 this word also came to mean "at the point of a crisis" and this meaning prevails not only in the medical field, but also in many school settings. For example, some university SA programs have adopted emergency response procedures drawn from "critical intervention" protocols, which I believe would be more appropriately termed *crisis intervention protocols*. Such protocols often define how emergency psychological and/or medical care should be given in calamities (Fishkind & Berlin, 2008, pp. 9-24). In this vein, Roberts (2005) defines a critical incident as, "an event that has the potential to overwhelm one's usual coping mechanisms, resulting in psychological distress and an impairment of normal adaptive functioning" (p. 779).

In a similar tone, The University of Sydney defines a critical incident as a ". . . tragic or traumatic event or situation . . . or the threat of such, which affects, or has the potential to affect students, their family members and other persons including staff and friends, in a traumatic way" (par. 2). As school shootings sporadically devastate campuses around the globe, institutional response protocols are being drawn up. Importantly, specific response procedures for so-called "critical incidents" are

outlined because mishandled responses not only have the potential to aggravate misery, but also result in lawsuits. As a case in point, in 2004 an Ohio State University student sued her alma mater for failing to respond adequately to a incident involving multiple rape charges by a male student (Cantalupo, 2010, p. 70-71). The university's lack of a timely, emphatic response in this situation ended up costing them millions of dollars.

With large amounts of money and schools' reputations at stake, it is not surprising that many educational institutions envision "critical incidents" from crisis intervention paradigms. Unfortunately, all too often the focus is on short-term emergency responses. My belief is that more focus needs to occur on pre-crisis preventative interventions. In SA contexts involving Japanese students, students need to be informed of how safety protocols vary in different cultures prior to departure. Without engendering obsessive paranoia, students should understand how activities which would be "safe" in Tokyo might not be in other cities such as Tijuana, Toronto, or Tel Aviv.

Local orientation modules, such as the one Gilmour (2010) has designed for Japanese university students preparing to the UK, may be helpful.

Tripp's Descriptions of Critical Incidents
Drawing on the writings of Giroux (1983) and others who have shaped our notions of critical pedagogy, in 1993 David Tripp published *Critical incidents in teaching*. Basically, this text underscores the importance of constant self-monitoring and checking the alignment between action and intentions. It also encourages teachers to consider how they impose societal values in their classrooms.

For Tripp, a "critical incident" is simply anything that is interpreted as a "problem" or "challenge" in a particular context. Farrell (2008) echoes his notion by claiming it is, "any unplanned event that occurs during class" (p. 3). Tripp points out that what may be considered a "critical incident" to one individual might be seen as a routine norm to another. No doubt influenced by constructionist thought, Tripp maintains that events by themselves are neither "critical" nor "non-critical" – only <u>after</u>

participants go through a process of attaching some sort of personal meaning to them, can they become "critical". To encourage teachers/learners to reflectively examine events and reflect on their meanings, Tripp recommends keeping a *critical incident file* resembling a research journal. The structure of each critical incident file depends on what one is researching, but the overall purpose is to bring to light unrecognized assumptions. A good example of some sample critical incident files by teachers can be found in the University of Birmingham's ProDAIT project (2006).

Related Concepts

Before contrasting the notions discussed so far, let us briefly explore some concepts related to "criticality" in general.

Culture Bumps

Carol Archer's description of a *culture bump* (1986) draws upon expectation theory and posits that when a culturally determined expectation is not fulfilled, a sort of "bump" occurs. In this sense, it might be useful to think of culture bumps as culturally driven cognitive dissonance. Archer's culture bump concept shares a number of similarities with Thorp's (1991) portrayal of a "confused encounter". Both cases involve foiled expectations. Whereas Thorp points out how unmet expectations tend to stir up negative emotions, Archer recognizes that culture bumps can have many emotional shades.

Culture Shock

Archer goes on to suggest that culture bumps are mild forms of culture shock which are ". . . over within a few minutes or even seconds" (p. 171) even though the cognitive shifts they trigger may persist for years. By contrast, culture shock is described by Archer as a state of persistent maladjustment. It seems the term "culture shock," at least as first popularized by Oberg (1954), denotes "the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (p. 1). The process has been described as a roller-coaster ride with several distinct stages. Interestingly, Oberg portrays culture shock as a condition of weakness to "get over" (p. 9).

Instead of regarding culture shock as inherently negative, I prefer to think of it as part of a lifelong accommodation. Particularly for those living abroad "culture shock" can be viewed as an ongoing process of adjusting to ever-changing environmental conditions. Indeed we might regard culture shock as an example of "creative destruction" (Cowen, 2004) in the sense that pre-existing expectations are shattered to accommodate new environmental shifts.

Criticality

A vast body of literature and sociological research has influenced how "critical incidents" are conceptualized. At the heart of this discourse is a vigilant questioning of the status quo. In many cases it also involves skepticism of absolutist or universal claims. In SA contexts, this means questioning the popular wisdom of Oberg's (1954) assertion that culture shock invariably progresses through similar stages. In many cases, it also involves questioning the notions behind such concepts as "internationalization", "host family", or "studying abroad".

Critical theory represents a rich pool of 20th century thought that has contributed to such diverse discourses as feminism, liberation ideology, critical race theory, and some post-colonial writings. Even if one has never read Habermas, Hall, Lyotard, or Lacan directly, their influence is likely to be felt because many of their ideas are now part of mainstream academic rhetoric. In particular, the Umberto Eco's 1977, 1984, 1990 works on critical semiotics should not be underemphasized. Eco underscores how we are often limited in our ability to decipher meaning across culture and across time. He reminds us how cultural phenomena should be studied as forms of communication. In SA contexts, many extended pre-departure and post-return programs would be enriched by discussing the themes he raises. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a detailed exposition of critical theory, however readers who have not already entered that ocean might enjoy Dino Franco Felluga's *Introductory guide to critical theory* (2011) as a starting point.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has shown how our understanding of "critical incidents" has evolved over time. Whereas Flanagan's notion of a "critical incident" is rooted in a behaviorist, technique-driven paradigm, many institutional notions of what constitutes a "critical

incident" are informed by crisis intervention models. Those working in SA contexts will probably find Tripp's discussions of "critical incident" particularly useful because of pedagogical procedures he describes can readily applied to SA contexts. The next article in this series will consider practical issues of how teachers and SA chaperons respond to critical incidents.

One way to conclude this paper would be to imagine for a moment what a SA experience without any critical events might be like. In other words, can you envision going to another country yet somehow avoiding any unpleasant shocks, unexpected surprises, or significant miscommunications? For many, perhaps this would be a splendid tour to some a safe Club-Med or Disney-like destination in which all "foreignness" is carefully packaged and sanitized. Such a tour might afford relaxation and amusement, but it would be unlikely to foster any deep cross-cultural insights. Although some SA programs – particularly those for primary or secondary school students – attempt to create such scenarios, a perfectly safe, critical-incident-free SA program is not only unfeasible but also undesirable. The reason is that critical experiences, though often stressful at first, should be understood as necessary steps in the process of breaking down some of our limiting mindsets about host cultures and ourselves. Those organizing SA programs should not, in my opinion, seek to eliminate all unpleasant or stressful experiences – but simply to find an optimal "criticality threshold" for participants. To do this takes maturity, focus, and flexibility. While the possibility of being overwhelmed by too much stress in a foreign culture should to be acknowledged, the very real possibility of being underwhelmed in an overly protective or excessively insulated SA program should be recognized as well.

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2. Ryugaku Forum (short articles and interviews): Maximum 1500 words
4. Classroom Ideas: Maximum 1500 words
5. Book reviews
6. Study abroad program reviews
7. Study abroad experiences from students: Let's hear what our students have to say!

Format for submissions:
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