In celebration of the winners of the 2013 International Student and Study Abroad Essay Contests, we hope you will share in their lessons learned through their experiences while at the same time broadening your own world view.

OFFICE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND SCHOLARS

OFFICE OF STUDY ABROAD
OFFICE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND SCHOLARS ESSAY CONTEST

The presence of international students at MSU provides us with extraordinary opportunities to learn about other cultures. MSU is deeply committed to building international understanding through education and is proud to host students from all over the world.

The goal of the International Student Essay Contest is to build greater cross-cultural understanding and to learn from the experiences of international students. Living outside one’s own culture can trigger a complex range of feelings that lead to powerful insights. This contest is an opportunity for international students to reflect on their experiences and share their stories as international students at Michigan State University.
“Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you’re gonna get.”

When Tom Hanks said it in Forrest Gump, the first English movie I watched without Chinese subtitles, I was right on the flight to Detroit two years ago, heading for my doctoral study in a country I never been to. At that moment, little did I know my life would be full of surprises and serendipities.

In a sunny afternoon, a year ago, my mum screamed in the other end of the line, “No way, no way! You must finish your five-year PhD study in United States,” she said arbitrarily, “Earning a doctoral degree in US is the dream of our family and you must take it seriously.” My mum was astonished by the decision of her beloved son - quit the Chemistry PhD program and become a Master student in Marketing Research at Michigan State.

In my first 20 years life in China, I pretended to be a stereotype of so-called “Straight-A” student”: study all day and night in order to get a marvelous GPA in college, learn pianos for ten years to prove myself not a GPA ‘Nerd’ and eventually get an offer with a full tuition scholarship from a prestigious PhD program in United States. Apparently, my unconventional decision destroyed the stereotype completely, at least in my mum’s mind.

“Mum, I know this decision will shock you,” I took a deep breath and continued, “But let’s me tell you what I experienced here in my first year.”

On the first day of orientation at Chemistry Department, each new PhD student was assigned to an advisory faculty, who would help us to adapt to the new life here. When I met my advisor professor in his office, the first question he asked me was simple but challenging,

“How do you want to pursue a PhD?”

I stared at his face and found myself at a loss for words because I never thought about this question before. As a “Straight-A” student in China, I was accustomed to follow the career path admired by my family and the entire society. In China, everyone kept asking me what you did and how I did, nobody ever cared about why I did, not even myself. This “why” question was definitely unexpected.

“I…just wanna a PhD” I murmured, with my eyes staring at the clock on Professor’s desk.

“It’s important for you to know the answer.” The professor said, but still with a mild smile on his face.

I forgot how we finished the conversation on that day, but the question was kept in my mind all the time: Why? Why I want to study here?

New life in this beautiful college town apparently is not willing to spare me too much time in working the answer out. I was busy taking the graduate-level classes and working as a TA for undergrads. Life here was so different from what I experience in China. I knew my box of chocolates was opened: in the website of reg.msu.edu, I can register for any course from any department if I want to, instead of taking courses from a predetermined list made by someone else. It made me feel that the entire university opened doors to me. However, all doors open doesn’t mean I have the time to knock at each door. When I was in college, I involved in a marketing project in Procter & Gamble. Thus, Marketing courses stepped into my mind.

“Is marketing a good choice for me?” I hesitated and
asked myself.

The first day of Marketing class dispelled my doubts because the class was beyond my imagination: it’s at the classroom of MSU that I knew, as a student, I was very welcomed to interrupt the professor and blurt out my questions or concerns, instead of glazing at the professor and keeping listening passively. It was in the syllabus here that I knew I have the rights to do “window shopping” and pick up the course I thought fitted me well, rather than stick to a course which was only interesting for me at the first glance. It was... Everything was fresh and I was excited.

The excitement didn’t last for a long time. I found the chocolates in my box were not as sweet as I expected. The exams were no longer the single criteria of final score, I cannot achieved a 4.0 as I did in China by simply studying day and night. Instead, I need to a dynamic part of the class: participating the discussion with professors, sharing the team project with my classmates, and speaking out my questions anytime anywhere. The deliverables that professors cared about for each assignment and projects cannot be addressed by memorizing the contents of the textbooks. Instead, I need to apply the theories in the book to analyzing the real business scenarios in my own words. I need to absorb 30-page reading materials and go through ten annual reports in two days for a five-minute per person presentation in the class. I need...

Chocolate might not be sweet at first bite, but it taste awesome eventually. At the end of the semester, I achieved more than a 4.0 in the course, but also decided to pursue a marketing analyst’s career rather than a chemist’s. Two month later, my dear mum will fly to East Lansing to celebrate my Master’s graduation. Currently, I work at Hershey’s (yes, the biggest chocolates manufacturer in US) as a marketing analyst.

When I look back on my life, MSU gives me the answer for the “why” question: life is like a box of chocolates. There are lots of unknowns. Don’t be afraid to open your box because you never know what you’re gonna get.
SECOND PLACE
“A WONDERFUL HOME, FAR AWAY FROM HOME”
CHIWIMBO GWENAMBIRA
HOME COUNTRY: ZIMBABWE

Subway: A thousand choices!
Waiter: Hello! What can I do for you today?
Me: Hi, a sub please. Which ones do you have?
Waiter: We have BLT (I had no idea what that was), black forest ham, cold cut combo (wow, sounds fancy...I thought.), egg and cheese omelet, veggie delite, spicy Italian, meatball marinara, oven roasted chicken, tuna, turkey breast, sweet onion chicken teriyaki, roast beef, Tuscan chicken...

Oh, how dumb I must have appeared, it took almost 15 minutes to do something as simple as ordering a sub. After I ‘chose’ the sub I wanted, more questions came my way about the type of cheese, vegetables, sauce, and bread I wanted. I felt humiliated as I realized how much I delayed the waiter and other customers. It was at that moment that I realized how far away I was from home. I grew up in a family and country where most people are not exposed to many choices. All my life, I had known to eat whatever we had on the table. Even if the portion was not fulfilling or if it was my least favorite dish, I was taught to be thankful for it and to be satisfied with whatever we had.

Penny, the shy family member

I will never forget my experience with a very kind and warm American family I visited during my first weeks. When I got to their house, they passionately told me about one of the family members who was very shy with visitors at first, was quiet and that her name was Penny. I was quite excited and could hardly wait to meet the dearly beloved girl. When Penny finally appeared at the dining table during dinner, just imagine the shock I had when I realized that Penny was a Rottweiler! A dog? Inside the house? Its family members saying ‘I love you,’ to a dog?! That would NEVER happen in Zimbabwe.

Stereotypes about my homeland

Ty: Hey Chichie, Can I ask you something?
Me: Sure, ask away! (Boy, I regretted it as soon as she asked me her ‘burning question’)
Ty: Do people get sick in Africa?
Me: Do they here?
The way the media portrays third world countries in developed nations which in turn creates stereotypes especially about Africa disappointed me. Coming to the USA as a graduate from Africa University which is in Zimbabwe, some of the questions I got were, “Is Africa University the only university in Africa?” I was surprised to know that in this age, some people are not aware that Africa is a continent made up of various and very different countries. At first it frustrated me but later on I also thought of how the media portrays the US in Africa. It sure is a powerful nation and full of opportunities but it has its flaws too. It is not milk and honey as the media made me think before I came. After that realization, I learned to smile, to accommodate some of the stereotypes, to laugh and talk about my experiences. Studying at MSU has allowed me to have an even greater appreciation of the world’s cultural diversity and it has given me the platform to be an ambassador of my mother land.
Guacamole

An American friend took me to Qdoba so that I could taste one of her favorite dishes. She had said, “Oh, you poor thing. 22 years old and never tasted guacamole?” The name of the dish was foreign to me. When the waiter came with our food, I was surprised that guacamole was just mashed avocados with a little bit of spices!

My experiences- sour and sweet have taught me to come out of my shell and to become more receptive to other people and their cultures. At home I would NEVER call an elder by their first name but now I have learned how to ‘read and react’. If my professors introduce themselves by their first names and all my classmates address them likewise, I just follow suit. I am not getting frustrated anymore with the thousand bikers on campus and fellows on their skateboards. I am getting better at swiping my debit card on the right side whenever I go shopping! I always thought students here were very rude by packing their backpacks in class when time is up even when the professor is not done talking. Now, I am the first one to finish packing and I am even trying to speak up in class too despite being aware of my thick accent. I was downright casually dressed for my first presentation which I had for one of my classes-something unacceptable at home.

The sweetest part of all my experiences would be the wonderful people I am meeting in the US. It has not been a flowery bed of ease, but I sure do love my new home.

“When Penny finally appeared at the dining table during dinner, just imagine the shock I had when I realized that Penny was a Rottweiler! A dog? Inside the house? Its family members saying ‘I love you,’ to a dog?! That would NEVER happen in Zimbabwe.”
Do you believe in love at the first sight? The bus-ride from Detroit to East Lansing on the arrival at USA was enough picturesque for me to be swayed off my feet. Forgetting every fear, all that I felt at that time was an utter euphoria of landing in a foreign place with sceneries comparable to a snapshot of a postcard and oblivious to all that I have to face in the next few months, I was strongly infatuated with this countryside. I let my senses enjoy the wide stretches of greenery around.

The euphoria died away soon; sooner than I had predicted!

All that followed was chaos and confusion from the very next day. Starting from spelling names of my Chinese fellow students to finding target buildings using maps and guides became strenuous. Referring to Professors as ‘Sir’ or ‘Madam’ made me an outcaste in a group where people were comfortable in addressing each other by their names. Attending classes wearing informal sweatpants with a cup of coffee in hand is a rare scene in Indian colleges. The number of students owning and driving cars on campus is unbelievable too and “skates” being one of the modes of transportation was something that I had no idea of before I landed here. Even nature seemed to remind me that I was almost in a different world where the Sun did not set before 8:30 at night and where you need to check through the weather forecasts daily, this being quite unlikely in my hometown.

Who would know about so many varieties of eggs, milk and even bread in the grocery stores? The first time I went for shopping was the most embarrassing day for me. Reading through the names and contents of seemingly uncountable packages was no less than scrolling through cryptic research papers. Things that I thought I wanted were camouflaged and the massive variety of a single item dragged me into bewilderment. Another ignominious tale of me during self-checkout can very well be imagined and hence let it be skipped!

“Are you speaking Indian?” asked my Chinese friend hearing me talking to my folks over the phone.

I laughed at his innocence and promptly replied “No, it is Bengali; one of the many languages spoken in India”. I explained to him how India has so many regions each with its own language.

Smartly I continued “Like your entire country speaks only Chinese, Indians have several languages and none of them are called Indian”.

Well, you know what happened next! He answered “Well, precisely, even Chinese people speak two languages and none of them is called only Chinese!”

This hilarious moment has remained captured in my mind for a long time when ignorance about each other led us to false assumptions. It reinforced in me that all that is demanded to enjoy the vast international amalgam at the Michigan State University or in a way, the United States of America is broadness of the heart and not being judgmental.

I have had my own share of happiness and gloom-days when I have felt lonely amidst a crowd, days when I was desperate to run back home in India, days when I have felt excited to meet new folks and days when I have felt proud at small achievements in my daily battles. I have made my own share of mistakes like waiting for bus on a game-day, forgetting about the detours and then walking back home all alone since it was too late. The extremely
deserted streets of the city during the evenings have scared me but only to make me cautious and more responsible as a person. Stuffs like “Craigslist” and “Surplus Store” and phrases like “For here or to go?” and “Trivia nights” have started making sense in this amateur mind. Slowly, if not completely, chaos is giving way to clarity and peace!

The last two months have been an eye-opener to me! Like nature changing its color, I have grown as a person. There were so many misconceptions that I had about so many cultures, like Chinese people do not eat only snakes and cockroaches, they have more famous issues to boast upon other than the Great Wall; Middle-east people do get to go to schools and many of them pursue higher studies; America is not only about junk food and drunken madness, in fact being a student they have loads of assignments to complete and they do not party all the time!!

However, the most important lesson that I have learnt is that it is okay to be stupid at times, to be confused, to be misunderstood because of different linguistic accents, to raise doubts about the system, to lose confidence and be tempted to give up, but like every new relationship, all it needs is some patience! When I had fallen in love at the first sight of East Lansing, I had no intentions of giving up on my love. The system and its people are trying to make me feel at home as much as they can; my advisor, our graduate secretary, the medical assistant at Olin’s and even Sparty in secrecy are all willing to make me a part of their team. I owe to them by reciprocating their gesture with understanding, sincere efforts and lots of care. My experiences may be bitter at instances but like every other relation I am ready to give it time to grow and nurture. No one knows how I may end up surprising myself one day.

Look, here I am, at the end of two months, accompanying my friend to the grocery store to help her out with shopping and probably also with the “self-checkout”!!

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OFFICE OF STUDY ABROAD ESSAY CONTEST

MSU is proud to have one of the nation’s largest study abroad programs – one that spans the world and helps to build international understanding through education.

The annual Study Abroad Essay Contest aims to capture the essence of study abroad by encouraging students to reflect and write creatively about the unique living and learning experiences that study abroad provides.

Studying outside of the U.S.A. produces powerful insights into the differences among the cultures of the world and deeper understanding of our own culture(s). Writing and submitting an essay gives students the opportunity to reflect on, and share, their experiences so we may grow our own understanding of the world and our place in it.
With its multitude of verb tenses, situational changes in language based on level of respect, and scientific grammar construction, Japanese often seems like a logic puzzle to English speakers. For me, this challenge—and, ultimately, mastery of Japanese—was my main motivation for choosing to study abroad at the Japan Center for Michigan Universities (JCMU) this past summer. However, I also discovered beauty in variability and imperfection and saw how the true value of language transcends any grammar rule; this understanding matured through my time in Japan.

JCMU sits on the shore of Japan’s largest lake, Lake Biwa, in Hikone, a tiny castle town. It’s the embodiment of the Japanese word shizuka: harmoniously calm and peaceful, charming but unassuming—quietly aware of its beauty but never flaunting it. Like most of the students in the program, I started out living in the on-campus apartments, and we enjoyed the city through our free time on afternoons and weekends. For some of my classmates, Hikone was monotonously quiet and picture-perfect, and they opted to take the train to nightlife hubs like Osaka, which served a stark contrast to Hikone’s utter lack thereof.

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However, I felt that by staying in our American-student-mindsets, we were only seeing one side of our small lakeside city: something was missing in this daily schedule of waking up, going to class and looking forward to the weekend. We’d been encouraged to use Japanese at all times, but as it happened, the modus operandi in the apartments was English. Occasionally we’d switch to Japanese while studying or grocery runs, but using English was faster and more practical—Japanese became largely confined to the classroom, and we judged our competency through daily quizzes and dialogue checks. Japanese became another class, another grade.

With this in mind, I took a leap of faith and signed up for a homestay as soon as it became available. I was initially apprehensive, especially considering the convenience of living in the dorms in a very comfortable environment (no mortifying grammar mistakes here!), but nevertheless, I found myself moving to the Tanaka family’s small suburban residence.

Hospitality is of the utmost importance in Japan, and my new host family was no exception—despite being extremely busy, they greeted me in their small living room with a table full of yakisoba noodles, various types of skillfully cut sashimi and, to my surprise, warm hugs and genuine smiles, as if I weren’t a temporary resident and they’d known me for years. Worried about using the correct type of respectful language or, worse, mistaking one word for another, our dinner conversation was marked by silences where I’d frantically tap away at my electronic dictionary to find some term or phrase integral to explaining myself in Japanese, my host parents waiting with bemused patience.

As we progressed into the after-dinner lull, my host father motioned for me to wait at the dinner table and disappeared upstairs, returning with a graying guitar.

Something changed when he touched the strings of the guitar, some barrier in communication slipped away as my host father played the opening chords to Bob Dylan’s “To Ramona”. I’d later learn that
he’d been in a jazz band in college (“A good one, too!” he boasted) from yellowing photo albums, and our after-dinner practice sessions became a daily occurrence – even when my host father would come home late at night and food turned cold on the table. I realized that these songs were, in a way, a manifestation of communication as well – a highly personal language that existed only in the Tanaka’s small living room.

I practiced this “personal” language not through assessments but by stepping out of classrooms and apartments and directly into the lives of Hikone residents, seeing past the tourist attractions and discovering the finer idiosyncrasies and simple beauty of life in Japan. I volunteered at a rural school with my host mother, playing tag with schoolchildren on a playground surrounded by undulating verdant rice fields and the unobstructed, brilliant sky. I took a certain pleasure in spending time at tiny family-owned lunch bistros – Hikone’s equivalent to Panera – and became friends with one of the owners, a housewife turned restaurant owner, Mrs. Ichida; we’d chat about our families, the components of a good salmon marinade, and even the flaws of the Japanese local political parties (which Mrs. Ichida took a passionate interest in) as she cooked and I washed the occasional tray of small bowls and dishes.

On my host father’s recommendation, I took a day trip by myself to Kyoto, one of Japan’s oldest cities, and struck up conversations with fellow tourists. I met a bright-eyed young couple from Malaysia on their honeymoon; in a convenience store, I discussed the best flavors of Japanese energy drinks with a Singaporean cardiac surgeon doing some soul-searching in this unfamiliar culture; I even got lost hiking with a fellow exchange student from China I met halfway up the climb to a Fushimi Inari, the shrine of trickster deity who, coincidentally, is said to lead travelers astray.

In all of these exchanges, my language use was by no means perfect – maybe would’ve gotten me a passing grade at best in a dialogue evaluation. But by setting aside my apprehensions about making mistakes and sticking to rules and embracing the inconsistencies, subtleties, and communication of the human spirit in every meeting, I could truly learn more deeply the unique culture and background of every individual I spoke to in Japan.

My experience with conversational speaking became useful even after the conclusion of my study abroad experience. After my time in Hikone, I spent the rest of the summer on my maternal grandmother’s tiny farmhouse in Taiwan. Try as I might, I’d never been able to speak with my grandmother on past visits, since we shared no common language – I couldn’t speak the rural dialect of Taiwanese – but this time was different. After hearing I’d spent the summer in Japan, my grandmother revealed that – not a bright moment in Taiwanese history, but resulting in many bilingual capacity of many Taiwanese citizens who'd lived through the time. Buoyed by this revelation, I’d sit in the sunlight slanting lazily through the fraying screen door during precious late-afternoon hours as my grandmother told me in broken Japanese about my grandfather, who has passed on. She spoke of how he worked from sunrise long into the night to support their family of seven without a complaint, and the network of delicate wrinkles

“At JCMU’s commencement ceremony, my host father and I performed the song we’d been practicing every night – a melancholy, nostalgic 60’s tune by Skeeter Davis. I sang the Japanese translated lyrics and he the original English, and although we both stumbled a little over these unfamiliar languages, I hope everyone in the commencement hall heard my message to friendships, to optimism in making mistakes, and to the mysterious, wonderful existence of human connection.”
around her eyes crinkled into a smile as she spoke of the one extended vacation – to Paris, of all places! – they took during their marriage. Our voices echoed through the cement walls of the farmhouse foyer as I tried to make up eighteen lost years of conversations, occasionally speaking too quickly in an attempt to tell her everything about growing up in America, the way Michigan leaves turned yellow in the fall and how much I’d miss the steaming pork buns she’d make every weekend when I inevitably had to return to college... everything that I hadn’t been able to say to her. Through this unexpected gift of common language, hers from the past and mine the present, we pieced together a long overdue understanding.

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I found that although grammar and structure may govern language, it is by no means bounded by these rules. Language exists in the disparate harmony of ice cubes clinking in glasses of barley tea and the music of cicada humming, complementing the soft strains of the Beatles’ “Yesterday” strummed on a slightly untuned acoustic guitar and the altruistic silence shared between strangers.

I learned to appreciate these things by being a little less of a perfectionist, a little more of an adventurer, and realizing that words and sentences weren’t the only thing that mattered while learning a language. Rather, an open heart and acceptance of flaws facilitated my eventual true appreciation of Japanese. My journey from America to Hikone and back again showed me that understanding goes beyond anything that can be conveyed in words, and I doubt I’ll ever be done learning this personal side of language. This is more than a logic puzzle – it’s a lifelong process, and I have every determination to continue with it, mistakes or not!
I huddled in the corner, shivering as I attempted to figure out my adversary: the shower. This seemingly insurmountable obstacle had the potential to ruin the next two months of my life. I grimaced as the freezing cold water sprayed over my body. When I couldn't take any more, I hopped out of the bath and put warm clothes on as quickly as possible. From the window, I watched French life carry on in the streets below. It was day one, and I was at a breaking point.

There's this idea about other cultures that we can place them all on a spectrum of similarity. I know I certainly espoused this. When I chose to study abroad in Tours, France, I figured the language would be different, but that would be my main challenge in navigating French culture. After all, this was a developed country in the western world not a remote island in the South Pacific. Yet any time you step out of your own culture, every aspect of life is a potential variable from manners to water pressure. Upon returning to the United States, someone told me French culture is about as similar to American culture as Chinese culture is. After my two months abroad, I heartily agreed.

Here we were, showdown number two. I had mentally prepared myself this time. Perhaps, it was a one-time fluke. None of my friends had had the same trouble in their homes. Nonetheless, I thought warming thoughts and turned on the tap again. The water that came out could have well as been my tears of frustration as the water pressure was so low. I tried in vain to rinse out the shampoo, but it was hopeless. No more water would come out. I emerged from the bathroom an even bigger mess.

It is a truly spectacular phenomenon that you can study a language for eight years, but the second you confront that language in its native form, all you remember is “Oui” “Non” “Merci.” There is so much pride wrapped up in your ability to communicate effectively. When you are stripped of it, it is an incredibly humbling experience. I tried constructing sentences in my head, but by the time I could spit them out the conversation had moved on, so my head became a reservoir of hundreds of unsaid thoughts, unfinished conversations.

This time I had a plan. My first failed strategy was to Google “How do you use a French shower?” After erasing my search history in embarrassment, I got the courage to ask my host sister how to operate the shower. She (a fellow international student) laughed in understanding. Having faced the same problem, she had devised a strategy to bring a large bowl, which she would fill with the scalding hot water that gushed from the faucet whenever the tap was turned to “Chaud.” After waiting for a moment, she would dump the bucket over her head and repeat the process. I appreciated the creativity of her approach.

The beautiful thing about studying a language in a foreign country is that anyone you meet can be your teacher. Learning isn’t reserved for the classroom. Yet, for my first few weeks in Tours, I was terrified to admit when I needed help, instead suffering along in silence. When I finally opened up about my reservations, I found that most people were more than willing to talk to me, to share their own insecurities about their English and at the very least, tell me the French word for which I was searching.

I waited for the clock to switch…5:58…5:59…6:00pm. I rushed up the stairs to the bathroom. I had spent
all day desperately in need of the shower, but because house rules mandated showers could only be taken between 6:00pm-9:00pm this was my first opportunity. I turned the hot water knob five times and rotated the cold water tap only slightly. Aha! Warm water flowed from the tap at an almost normal water pressure. A huge smile spread across my face. I had spent two weeks in France, and this by far was my greatest achievement.

The particularities of French life were difficult for me to navigate. Some of my favorite things about American culture are nowhere to be found in France. I grew up where “Minnesota Nice” is the prevailing ideology. In France, smiling at a stranger on the street is an interruption of their life and is a dead giveaway that you aren’t from here. It took a while before I learned to keep a blank face as I walked through town, and while I missed the random interactions with strangers that punctuated my life at home there was a sense of accomplishment in learning how to blend in.

Regardless of how long you spend somewhere that is not your home, you will be reminded that you aren’t from there. That you haven’t figured it all out. My French had improved drastically during my time in France. I breezed through conversations with my host mother and had mastered the most important part of French (how to order ice cream.) Each day though, something would catch me off guard. Someone would look at me expectantly, and I had no idea what she was talking about. In those moments, every gain you think made feels like it was for nothing. What struck me most about my summer abroad was that learning about language and culture is not a linear process. For every gain you make, oftentimes there is a small defeat. It is hard and frustrating and at times makes you feel incredibly small, but then there are those moments where you respond to a question without even thinking or you watch Bastille Day fireworks alongside French citizens, and you realize you’ve done something.

July 26th had arrived, and as I packed up my stuff I couldn’t help but think of that first night as I stared in confusion at the shower. After two months, I had adjusted to life in Madame Begu’s home, so much so, that I wondered if it would be difficult to transition back into American life. If you asked me then what I missed most about America, I would have said, without hesitation, my shower. At the time this probably seemed superficial, but as I reflect on my time in France, I’ve come to realize that my daily battle with that shower represented so many of the challenges and successes that come with studying abroad. Everyone experiences study abroad differently even in the same city, and that complexity is what makes the experience truly your own.

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THIRD PLACE
“CULTURE SHOCK”
ROSE FOX
STUDY ABROAD LOCATION: IRELAND

At our orientation session on our first full day in Ireland, the internship placement agency explained to us that we would all go through the multi-stage process of “culture shock.” First would be the earnest, shiny-eyed excitement, when everything is new and thrilling because you actually made it halfway around the world. It’s the honeymoon phase, and in my opinion, this is the best phase of culture shock. This is when, fueled by jet-lag and pure adrenaline, you feel compelled to trek miles around the city and give yourself massive, oozing blisters while chasing down every item on your foot-long “Must See” list on the very first day. You spend money like water, most of it on food, like the Nutella milkshakes from the place on College Green that I still dream about sometimes. In this phase, I braved the Dublin bus system, walked up and down O’Connell Street, across the O’Connell Bridge several times, taking photos of the Liffey, down Dame Street toward Christchurch Cathedral and back, up and down Grafton to look at the shops, and around St. Stephen’s Green, where there are always swans on the pond, as though this was my only chance to see these places. It turned out that I walked down O’Connell Street, across the bridge, up Grafton, and along St. Stephen’s Green twice per day on my commute to and from work that summer, and I saw plenty of the city centre, but I still think those first-day blisters were worth it.

The second stage, we were informed, is “frustration with everyday differences.” For many in our group, jet-lagged and cranky, this stage set in about ten minutes after we got to our apartment and discovered there was no toilet paper. This stage encompasses things like irritation at the illogical tap situation (how exactly does it make sense to have one tap for hot water and one for cold? What if you want warm water?), confusion at the fact that coins are actually valuable money here (paired with an inability to tell the different denominations apart at a glance, forcing you to pick over each coin in your open palm while the cashier at the till tries very hard not to roll his eyes at you), and the fear engendered by the inverted traffic flow. Crossing the street was perilous at the best of times, despite helpful labels painted on the street to “LOOK RIGHT” or “LOOK LEFT.” Buses were particularly ruthless, bearing down on pedestrians with the full might of their double-deckered aggression and making it inescapably clear that by electing to not get the hell out of their way, you had relinquished any reasonable claims on being alive. Taxis materialized out of nowhere and busses loomed behind them – I looked both ways dozens of times just in case left and right had somehow switched since the last time I had crossed the street.

We treated the second stage of culture shock like the butt of a long-running joke. Accidentally got on the bus going the wrong direction? Frustrations at everyday differences! Walked the wrong way up the street? Frustrations at everyday differences! Forgot to switch on the electricity at the outlet and waited twenty minutes wondering why the water wasn’t boiling? Frustrations at everyday differences!

Once you got over this grumpy stage, when nearly everything annoyed you (because, why exactly do the light cycles have to be so short? Can’t they give you enough time to cross the street?) you entered the third stage of culture shock, when you feel like the master of your new country, like you had it all figured out. In this stage, when tourists ask you for directions, you can sometimes gesture vaguely in the right general direction. You know the names of
more than the three major streets in the city centre. You pay for things with coins. When people talk to you, you can understand about a third more of their heavily accented mumbling. This stage is also pretty grand, because you’re just bursting with self-confidence. *I’m really doing this*, you think.

Then comes the fourth stage: “Confronting deeper personal issues.” This stage also seemed pretty funny at first blush. *What deeper personal issues do I even have?* you wonder. Like the second stage, it became a joke. When you rage to your flatmates about how there was inexplicably no hot water when you took a shower, they tell you that you are confronting deeper personal issues. When you trip on the stairs to the upper deck of the bus and almost fall and knock all your teeth out, you laugh and say that you’re confronting deep personal issues with gravity. I thought it was more or less a joke, overly serious and dramatic, until I entered this phase and started confronting deeper personal issues of my own.

I entered the fourth phase of culture shock at 11:47 on a Wednesday morning. I interned at a small independent publishing company, and mostly I loved it. I spent most of my days reading: proofing manuscripts to be sent to the printers, evaluating submissions sent in by agents, sifting through the slush pile and sending polite rejection emails. My office also had a lovely tradition called “Cake Thursdays,” which were often supplemented by ice cream. This particular day had been a bit boring – I was updating spreadsheets with author contacts. I shared an office with the firm’s Editorial Director and we usually helped keep each other awake, but he was at a meeting with an agent that morning, so I was making frequent trips to the bathroom to help pass the time.

The bathroom was right around the corner from my office. It was a weird room, with manky greyish-brown carpet and peach-colored walls, a large room for a bathroom, containing nothing but a toilet with a faux-wood seat and a tiny sink with a tap that spurted water at unpredictable intervals while you washed your hands. I closed the door and locked it with an actual skeleton key, because it was an old house with real locks and keyholes. I turned around. And there it was.

Perched on the curve of the toilet’s porcelain belly was an enormous spider. Picking its way along the toilet rim, just out for a nice little spider stroll. And right there, deeper personal issues started to hit me. Questions like *Why is this happening to me? and What am I supposed to do now? and Why is that thing even in the toilet? Spiders don’t belong in toilets!* I think I started to hyperventilate a little bit: there was no way in heaven or hell that I was going to stick my hand in the toilet and squish it. For an insane instant, I thought about smashing it with my shoe. I actually considered calling my mother and asking her what I should do.

I stared at the spider for a long time. *Okay*, I thought. *You can do this. You are an adult. You can figure this out.* Very slowly, in case sudden movement might startle the spider and make it defensive, I reached out and flushed the toilet. Water gushed into the bowl and swirled the spider around and around. But when the water levels had returned to normal, there the spider still was, floating in the toilet with its spiky legs splayed out. *Maybe it’s dead. Maybe it drowned. Spiders can’t swim, right?* This spider must have been made of something super-arachnid, though, because it started to twitch. It began to flail its way out of the water.

Deep personal issues were crashing all over me, profound existential queries like *Why won’t this spider die!?* I took a deep breath to steady myself, and flushed the toilet again.

It took six more flushes to drown the spider and wash it away. I sang “The Itsy Bitsy Spider” in my head the whole time to give myself courage. It was a good thing that I was alone in the office, or the Editorial Director would have thought that I was having major digestive problems in the bathroom. Finally, at 12:08, I returned to my office, having made it out the other side of my trial by bug. I sat down at my desk with a new sense of calm as I entered the fifth and final stage of culture shock: acceptance and assimilation. *I did it,* I thought, smiling to myself. *I killed the spider. I really live here, now.*