

Clemens Wan's Blog entry "My Intermediate Overview of Study Abroad"

It's interesting how I've always saved the overviews of my trips until the trips are finally over when I'm in my pajammy-jams at 3PM while sadly trying to piece my life together for the next phase. I never actually capture the intermediate stages of feelings when I'm truly happy or sad. Instead, I'm usually writing it in a stage when I know the whole trip is over and I miss the freedom or I'm scared of moving forward. I think the reviews I've given are true, yet just a little biased. I could see myself extenuating the good things and overlooking the bad (or at least being less critical about them) because it's just too sad to combine the two afterwards. Well, now that I'm in the middle of this adventure, I might as well give other students a truthful overview.

Studying abroad in any country is an injection of two fundamental ideas: Freedom and Responsibility. The balance of these two ideas will determine the levels in your fun-o-meter, safety-alarm, and craziness-scale. Okay, so just because the measurement tools are fictional and the scale is relatively arbitrary and distributed for each individual, it doesn't mean what I advise isn't useful. It is important to realize that this is a unique experience with a mix of different cultures, so one should be open-minded to meeting new people and seeing new things. I would take full advantage of being in Europe and embark on random excursions or exciting adventures with strangers (strangers that you know kinda well). But, of course, you already knew this before leaving, so let me be more specific about the program and experiences/activities I've been involved with. I'll separate this into a few major topics: University Responsibilities, Dorm Life, Hamburg Attractions, Nearby Cities, Must-sees in Europe, Useful Resources

University Responsibilities - Project

I am working on a project that involves the application of artificial intelligence algorithms (specifically reinforcement learning) to improving industrial robot movements. The German professors are extremely nice, although very strict about their meeting start times and deadlines. If you can produce results, you shouldn't have a problem. My personal project does not really involve college credit so the work I put in will determine whether or not I can publish a paper on this material. The German style of research is very straight forward and everyone works diligently for the directed times. There will always be the quiet engineering types, but most of them are interested in foreign exchange students, so I'm sure you'll be able to have lunch groups.

I am very happy with the work ethic and helpfulness of the German research project system. Although I am limited with my view with this small scale research project, I can sense a level of transparency and collaboration. It may be premature to stamp this as a German style, but it's definitely slightly different from the way I used to work. My opinions actually matter? Wait, really? You're going to change the way you look at the problem because I mentioned something that you're not taking credit for?

I hope this is a trend of working on more projects where I have somewhat more respect from seniority, rather than a regional discontinuity. Maybe I can get used to working under these conditions... Either way, I definitely understand the importance of management. I feel motivated and excited to continue working even if the subject is new. It could be the topic (practical applications of reinforcement learning), my desire to find a career focus, or a list of many other things, but all that should be important is the feeling of being part of a team.

My part is important because it will help the community succeed. Our smaller community is important because it will help a larger community succeed. The larger community's advancements are valuable because they will help the world improve. One step at a time, and we will change the world.

A short answer to the "what do you study in Germany?" question: I'm applying reinforcement learning algorithms to industrial robots with hard-boundaries and continuous actions, in order to improve overall power and time efficiencies. I was applying it to race cars, but I think it would be better if I

can maintain it for fine-tuning based on a standard, which will slowly improve despite the high dimensionality. Fascinating stuff.

Dorm Life

The International dorms are incredibly fun. Leave the university work for the 9 to 5 weekday and do some socializing and self-exploration at night and on weekends. I haven't met as many Germans as I've wanted to since I've been living in this spawning pool for study abroad students. The interesting thing is that they all want to practice English more than German because they find it more important for their future careers. I would suggest trying to learn some phrases in German (if not study and take a full course). The language isn't easy, but dedicating an hour a day will at least keep you from drinking too often. Now, I'm not condoning drinking, but I personally know enough different groups to get invited out to a different place every night. Europeans drink every night. Although it's not necessarily until their drunk, they use it as a social lubricant in every sense of the word. The other great thing about the dorm is the cooking parties at different apartments. After you host your own cooking party with your roommates and invite a few people, you'll be invited to their cooking parties within the rest of your stay. Every country has their specialty meal and there's always one surprisingly good (or experimental) chef in the dorm room. My roommates are wonderful and we've become a close family with our assigned jobs. I have somehow become the English homework checker for many of them. I'm sure you'll find some interesting shoes to fill.

Hamburg Attractions

I'm a big fan of walking even though we have these free monthly S-/U-bahn tickets provided by the university. From Berliner Tor, you could walk to the main city area by the Hauptbahnhof and the Rathaus around the Alster Lake in 20 minutes. When the weather is nice, there's a huge fountain in the center of the lake and people have the best ice cream in Hamburg at this small Gelato place in Europe Passage. Many of my university friends take longer lunch breaks for some time away from work. The port area near Landungsbrücken can also offer some great views. You can take the ferry for free to a few beaches and scenic areas (it's included in the monthly ticket). Another great place to visit is this park by Dammtor station. The park is huge, but was much nicer in May when the flowers were blooming. It's still quite nice to have a picnic there over the summer. Unfortunately, this all requires nice weather, which Hamburg is not that famous for in the summer. May had some of the sunniest skies, but now June has these high winds and random rain showers (from some climate influences in the surrounding bodies of water). I think July and August might be better, but we shall see. No matter the season, Friday and Saturday is famous for St Pauli and Reeperbahn. The clubs and bars are open until morning and they really are quite incredible. You haven't had the full experience until you've stayed up for the 6AM Fischmarkt on Sunday.

Nearby Cities

There is a DB ticket for weekends called a "Happy Weekend ticket" that costs 37EUR for up to 5 people. You can use this to take any of the local trains starting from 3AM until midnight. Since the railway system is relatively fast, I would suggest gathering some friends and taking a weekend day-trip to a close city. The closest popular city is Berlin (which will take around 3 hours by local transportation). However, there are other cities like Schwerin, Lubeck, Bremen, Rostock, Hannover, Luneburg, and Harburg, which has some pretty interesting sights. Each of them has their own little day-trip attraction, but I've mostly gone as an escape to a different part of Germany.

Traveling in Europe

I would highly suggest buying a 10-day select-country eurailpass. For 310EUR, you can travel 10 days within a 2 month period to any 3 countries by the express trains in the DB network. Berlin takes 2 hours, Dresden takes about 6 hours, Munich about 7 hours, Amsterdam about 7 hours, and Prague about 8 hours. The cost of each a single one-way ticket from Hamburg to Berlin by ICE train costs about 68EUR. Discounted tickets can be purchased about 4 or 5 days in advance for about 40EUR. If you're an amazing planner, I'm sure you could get tickets a month in advance for another 10EUR discount.

However, if you're spontaneous and always filled with conflicting plans, I would suggest the pass for flexibility. I just wake up for the schedule and sit down anywhere. Other methods of transportation include cheap flights or a carpooling website called mitfahrzentrale.de.

Useful Resources

The German railway system is always on time and follows the schedules perfectly. If you're planning a trip, you can check www.bahn.de for any of the public transportation time tables (including BUS, S-Bahn, and U-bahn). Germany is famous for the delicious wurst. One of my favorite places to go is called MoGriller near the Mönckebergstrasse station on the U3. They somehow have the crunchiest casings - so much better than hotdogs.

Why Study Abroad?

From my social psychology class, I learned about a few of the major differences between cultures, and I found Germany to be one of the most interesting. Their attention to detail and punctuality made me wonder how a research position would compare. My conclusions will be more concrete after I finish my time here, but it has definitely been different. There is a level of freedom, respect, and trust between the teams and it's a wonderful mixture that allows for achieved deliverables and actual results. Excuses are ignored and what matters is the product. The separation between work and social life is very clearly defined and I feel an overall reduced pressure in this environment. I seem to have a good time completing the project, while eventually reaching the same amount forward.

So, that's what I found to be quite obvious about research and actual work (yes, obvious). What's not so obvious is the method of fully utilizing the study abroad experience to broaden your views of the world. For third year college students, a summer abroad studying experience is never about the material you create in this new environment. There is no way that a single summer course or 10 weeks of research can change the world. What's important to realize is that, although the world has not changed, this experience can change the world you see. Whether it's the comparison of lifestyle or different types of people, each person has a different aspect of life that becomes clarified by their abroad experience. I can't say which one yours will be, but I'm sure that an open-mind and the willingness to openly socialize with everyone will provide enough fuel to find your answer.

I have never met someone who has been to a study abroad program that said, "Oh, that study abroad program was horrible. I had a terrible time." And even if there was an opinion similar to this, at least they know that being away from home and meeting new people is outside of their comfort zone. It's about using this time to learn more about yourself and how you present yourself. It's also about making new friends and growing connections. There's always someone unusually interesting in a group, and their shy nature requires that ice to be broken before they reveal those opinions that could change your life. By immersing yourself away from home in a new language and new customs, you increase the chances of meeting someone with a different attitude and perspective towards life. I think this is the value of learning about other cultures through these first-hand experiences. (Plus, there are no alcohol restrictions).

Germany has been and continues to be an absolutely incredible place to meet new people and absorb the culture and history within Europe. It goes without saying that this is not only about conducting research and finishing a project - this study abroad program is about opening your mind to observing the subtle details that make our views of the world different. The trip is a social psychology class in disguise and your own effort and interest will determine how much you learn and grow from this experience. Without considering any letter grades, percentages, or standard deviation curves, simply try to have a good time and let the experiences alter or support your current perspective of the world. If this last paragraph doesn't make sense, it will when you think read it again after the trip. Best of luck.

-See Lemons Happy with Germany (for more blog entries: <http://seelemonsonline.wordpress.com/tag/hamburg/>)