



Study Abroad Perspectives: An Interview with Prof. Jane Jackson by Allan Goodwin

Jane Jackson is a Professor in the English Department at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She received her PhD in applied linguistics from the University of Toronto and a Masters in Education from the University of Calgary. Prof. Jackson has authored numerous articles, book chapters and books on intercultural communication, pragmatics, internationalization, education abroad, English for specific purposes, and identity transformation. Her publications include *Language, Identity, and Study Abroad: Socio-Cultural Perspectives* (2008) and in 2012 she edited the *Routledge Handbook of Intercultural Communication*. In addition to teaching in Hong Kong, she has held academic positions in Canada, Egypt, Oman, and the United States. She is on the editorial board of numerous journals and is a fellow and board member of the International Academy for Intercultural Research. This interview was conducted by email in April 2015.



Perhaps a good way to start off this interview would be to mention how you became interested in cross-cultural issues and study abroad.

Looking back, I guess my interest in study abroad and intercultural communication started in secondary school. Near the end of my secondary schooling in Canada, I joined a French immersion program, and, as an undergraduate, I also participated in a 'Junior Year Abroad' program in Québec that was designed for second-language speakers of French. All of my courses were in French, including some that focused on the local culture and it was a really good experience. Also, my roommates were French-Canadian university students and this gave me a taste of homestay life. As this sojourn happened long before the Internet, I had a real immersion experience and largely lived in French. I've always been interested in learning additional languages, and cultural elements are intertwined with language learning. As an undergraduate, I majored in bilingual education (French-English) and cultural elements were also naturally embedded in many of my courses.

I love to travel and have worked in many countries/regions, and this has also enhanced my interest in cross-cultural issues and study abroad. After teaching at the American University in Cairo, Egypt, I went to the University of Toronto (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) to do my Ph.D. in applied linguistics/cross-cultural communication. As part of that coursework, I studied cross-cultural communication and my research centered on communication in cross-cultural/second language medical interviews. Basically, in a hospital setting, I looked at interactions between ethnic Chinese patients (second language speakers of English) and their physicians who were white, first-language speakers of English. Since then, I have spent a lot of time outside my home country, Canada. As well as Egypt, I have worked in the United States, the Sultanate of Oman, Mainland China, the United Kingdom, and Hong Kong.

I have been in the English Department at the Chinese University of Hong Kong for nearly twenty years and have created intercultural communication courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The first course I designed was an introductory language and intercultural communication course for undergraduates. In 2001, my Department began to offer the Special English Stream (SES) (a study abroad program for our top English majors), and due, in part, to my background in cross-cultural communication I was asked to develop the curriculum and supervise the students' research projects in the U.K.

For more than fifteen years, I've been doing research on study abroad learning and this has become my primary focus. I began by investigating the developmental trajectories of SES participants via ethnographic case studies; since 2009, I've been studying the language/intercultural learning and experiences of our outgoing semester-long and yearlong international exchange

students through a series of mixed-method studies. At CUHK, we are now sending more than a thousand students abroad each year (and also receiving a similar number of international students), so I have a lot of interesting data! In the last few years, I've also been looking at the experiences of our incoming international exchange students and ways to promote more meaningful interactions between local and international students.

Years ago, I noticed that many of our students who took part in study abroad programs were returning with less than enthusiastic reports about their experiences. It became apparent that many spent much of their free time with co-nationals and did not have an immersion experience. With the aim of devising sound, research-based interventions (e.g., intercultural communication courses, pre-sojourn orientations), I have been conducting a series of studies to better understand sojourn learning. In Asia, as in many other parts of the world there is an emphasis on increasing participation rates and an assumption that international experience will lead to significant gains in many areas (e.g., second language proficiency, intercultural competence), but this is not always the case. This realization is what drives my research. In Hong Kong, I am very fortunate as I have received generous financial support for my projects through competitive, externally-funded research grants as well as Teaching Development Grants from CUHK to develop courses that stem from my research findings.

Here in Japan some students regard study abroad as essentially a vacation. Do you have any suggestions about how to help such students reframe their overseas ventures?

This is also an issue that has emerged in my study abroad research, as well as the studies that have been carried out by some of my postgraduate students. Some of our students who take part in summer study abroad programs as well as our international exchange students (both incoming and outgoing) do not plan to transfer credits and this can impact their motivation and investment in sojourn learning. Since 2009, I've been surveying and interviewing our international exchange students and have found that many do not set specific goals and some view the period of exchange like a vacation or escape from the pressures of academic studies in Hong Kong. I have also taught and surveyed incoming international exchange students and found the same situation.

In pre-departure orientations, I think it's really important for the facilitators to encourage realistic goal-setting (e.g., personal, social, academic, professional domains). In these sessions, it's also essential to make it very clear that the exchange period is not a gap year. Of course, not all students treat the sojourn as a holiday. For example, some of our returnees who did not transfer credits back to CUHK viewed their stay abroad as an opportunity to take more challenging courses or courses outside their majors without worrying about grades. These highly motivated individuals could be invited to share their stories with outgoing students. In pre-sojourn sessions, their advice and encouragement may be more powerful than the words of an education abroad advisor.

I understand you have developed a course for undergraduates with recent or current international experience called "Intercultural Transitions: Making Sense of Education Abroad." Could you tell us a bit more about that course?

Several years ago, I developed this credit-bearing course to enrich and extend the intercultural learning of our undergraduates with recent or current international experience (e.g., local students who have just completed an international exchange program, and incoming international exchange students). A unique feature of this elective course is that it combines local and international students. While I had offered a general introductory course in intercultural communication for many years, students may not feel that they need a course of this nature until they're abroad. More questions about intercultural communication and second language use in informal, social contexts may arise through firsthand experience in the host environment. Returnees may come back with confusion about their identities and positioning. Interestingly, more studies are now pointing to the need for interventions that can consolidate and extend the learning of education about returnees.

At the heart of this 14-week course is the process of guided, critical reflection and the desire to propel students to higher levels of self-awareness, intercultural competence, and global citizenship. In a supportive environment, following ‘experience-to-theory-to-practice’ pedagogy, a modified version of Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning model, the students critically examine their own (and others’) international, intercultural experience in relation to theories and models of intercultural (communicative) competence, intercultural transitions, culture shock/(re)adjustment, identity reconstruction, and global citizenship. Structured reflection provides a powerful medium through which the local returnees and incoming international exchange students (from diverse disciplines and backgrounds) challenge their assumptions, pose critical questions, and connect their experiences to theoretical concepts. Through readings (e.g., sojourner accounts), discussion (face-to-face and online), and reflective writing tasks (e.g., chat forums, blogs, essays), the course participants analyze and critique their understandings of such complex notions as culture, race, ethnicity, gender, identity, language use, and power in relation to intercultural interaction. They revisit critical intercultural incidents they have experienced and move towards analyzing rather than simply judging unfamiliar cultural behavior from a single perspective. Throughout the course, they are encouraged to consider multiple views of situations as well as how their own attitudes and behavior may have impacted on how encounters unfolded. As the local and international students share experiences and ‘unpack’ their intercultural learning, they are also encouraged to set new goals for intercultural experience, whether at home or abroad.

A unique feature of the course is the mixing of local and international students who are at different stages in the study abroad cycle. In the first offering, except for one Chinese heritage student from Canada, all of the participants were local returnees and they expressed the desire to have more international students in the course to help keep their international experience alive and provide more opportunities for intercultural interactions. In the most recent offering there was a good mix of local and international students and it worked quite well as they were willing to share their views and experiences with each other. It’s a challenging approach but it can work well.

Finally, to conclude this interview, I'd like to ask about the projects you have on the horizon. Could you mention some of the projects you are engaged in now, and hope to be working on over the next five to ten years?

Last year, I was invited by the Director of General Education at CUHK to develop a fully online, credit-bearing course to support the sojourn learning of international exchange students while they are abroad, and provide the students with an opportunity to gain General Education credits while they were at the host institution. I offered *Intercultural Communication and Engagement* for the first time last semester. It was very exhausting, but highly rewarding! Well worth it! As a study abroad researcher, it was great as it provided me with more insight into what was happening while the students were in the host environment.

Drawing on experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1983) and the Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC) (Hammer, 2012), this interactive course is designed to help students develop a deeper understanding of intercultural communication constructs and issues, while promoting constructive intercultural/L2 interactions in the host environment (e.g., diverse social networks, meaningful intercultural experiences). As well as digesting theme-based readings, PowerPoint presentations, and YouTube links, the participants write reflective essays, exchange ideas online, and carry out fieldwork tasks, which they discuss in small groups. The weekly Discussion Board encourages them to examine their own (and others’) international/intercultural experience in relation to theories and models of cross-cultural adjustment, intercultural competence, identity reconstruction, and global citizenship. During the 14-week semester, via structured reflection, my TA (Teaching Assistant) and I prompted the students to share and reflect on their intercultural interactions and sojourn learning online. Throughout this process, they were encouraged to question their assumptions and connect their experiences to theoretical concepts as they broadened their social network.

In the first offering, there were 22 undergraduates from various Faculties who were participating in either a semester or yearlong international exchange program in one of eleven different countries. All of them were studying in a second language while abroad with English the most common medium-of-instruction. I will offer the course for the second time in the fall semester of 2015-16, and in the coming months I'll be writing articles and book chapters related to the course and the participants (e.g., case studies). I'm currently revising the course and will hold a pre-course workshop with the next cohort in May.

Currently, I'm also the principal investigator for a large-scale project that involves four institutions of higher education in the region: CUHK in Hong Kong and Nanjing University, Fudan University, and Tsinghua University in Mainland China. In this project, we're looking at the language and intercultural learning of students who take part in a semester-long international exchange program. At each site, we're surveying the students before and after the sojourn and also a sampling of the participants are interviewed in-depth before and after their stay abroad (15 at each site). In addition, the interviewees respond to regular email prompts while they're at the host institution. This rich data is providing insight into their sojourn experiences and learning. The findings are informing the revision of my intercultural communication and intercultural transition courses. My research informs my practice and vice versa.

A couple of years ago, I also started looking at the experiences of our incoming international exchange students and this has raised my awareness of the need for interventions to stimulate more meaningful interactions between local and international students. In my *Intercultural Transitions* course I actively encourage dialogue between students from diverse backgrounds. This time of interaction should not be limited to intercultural communication courses. I advocate interventions in both formal and informal settings on campus to help achieve the aims of internationalization. Increasing the number of international students on campus is not enough. There are steps that educators in *all* Faculties can take to promote better intercultural relations on campus and I've given several talks about this (e.g., offered suggestions about ways to promote more interactions in class no matter what the subject matter).

For Internationalization at Home (IaH) policies to be effective, we need to move beyond the notion that bringing more international students to our campuses will lead to meaningful intercultural interactions. Similarly, sending a large number of students abroad will not necessarily lead to the development of interculturally sensitive, global-minded citizens who can function appropriately and effectively in a second language in both formal and informal situations. While there have been many advances in study abroad research and practice in the past decade, there is much more work to be done. Most students who participate in study abroad programs are still sent abroad with little or no preparation, and even less attention is paid to returnees. Valuable opportunities for deep learning are then lost.

Finally, I would like to add that internationalization and study abroad are great areas to research. They encompass so many interesting and interrelated elements, e.g., language, identity, intercultural communication, socialization, and transitions, to name a few. I've been very fortunate to have the opportunity to put some of my research findings into practice. It's very rewarding and there are many more aspects to explore!

Works Cited

- Jackson, J. (2008). *Language, Identity, and Study Abroad: Socio-Cultural Perspectives*. London: Equinox.
- Jackson, J. (Ed.) (2012). *Routledge Handbook of Intercultural Communication*. London: Routledge.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984) *Experiential Learning*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.
- Hammer, M. R. (2012). The Intercultural Development Inventory: A new frontier in assessment and development of intercultural competence, in M. Vande Berg, R. M. Paige, & K. H. Lou (Eds.), *Student learning abroad, what our students are learning, what they're not, and what we can do about it* (pp. 115-136). Sterling, VA: Stylus.