

Sharing my volunteering and study abroad experiences with my classmates

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Introduction

My name is Megumi Tokuda and I am a fourth-year student studying English Literature at Kyoto Women's University. When I was a second-year student, I studied abroad in Edmonton, Canada for eight months to improve my English skills through a program at my university. I had a fantastic experience in Canada because the connections I made with many local communities made me a more outgoing, persistent, responsible and positive person. When I returned to Japan, I was required to make a short presentation about my study abroad experience. Instead of doing a typical PowerPoint presentation, I decided to make a digital story about my time in Edmonton. This short reflective article will share some of my overseas memories such as working with homeless people and studying First Nations culture as well as the things I learned creating a digital storytelling project.

Studying and Volunteering in Canada

I was very surprised to learn that there are so many homeless people after I started living in Canada. At the same time, I felt I wanted to know their background stories through doing volunteer work. Therefore, I asked one of my advisors at the University of Alberta, the school where I studied abroad, about volunteering at a homeless shelter. She supported my application for a volunteer position and told me that the interviews are like a “three-legged race.” I did not know what my advisor meant but I felt that interviewing for a volunteer position would be an effective way to develop my speaking skills. To prepare for the interviews, I had to look into the characteristics of a particular homeless shelter and explain why I wanted to volunteer there. In addition, I needed to learn some basic facts about Canadian homeless people. I had interviews with five organisations. My advisor recommended me to try for an interview first with one of the leading legal-support organizations called Edmonton Community Legal Centre. Actually I didn't get beyond the interview stage with them, but the interviewer said since I was very passionate about helping individuals who are homeless, she wanted to suggest some other organizations where I might help out and make a difference in this very important cause. Thanks to her suggestion, two homeless shelters in Edmonton, the Boyle Street Community Services and Hope Mission, interviewed me and allowed me to be a volunteer. As a result, I volunteered at these shelters for a total of 145 hours over 5 months.

These organizations support homeless people in different ways. At the Hope Mission, I mainly cooked and served food to homeless people. Since I could communicate with different volunteers every time I volunteered, I tried to cherish this “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”



I made a good friend there who was studying to be a social worker, and she taught me a lot. Since there were so many homeless people going there, the volunteers had limited time and space so everyone needed to work efficiently. I also joined several events in which Home Mission was a sponsor. For example, in the ‘Cold Hands, Warm Hearts’ campaign, we held a fundraising walk to support hungry men, women and children. It was a very successful event that raised a grand total of \$42,848.55 Canadian dollars.



In the Boyle Street Community Services, my main duty was to assist the work of the organization in different ways. When I first started, I was the only volunteer and the administrators regarded me as a visitor so they did not ask me to do many tasks. Moreover, since all the staff are professionals such as nurses and nursing students, they are busy people who are used to helping homeless people so they know what they need to do. Therefore, I often felt like there was a lack of communication with the staff. I guess we were also feeling a language barrier with each other. Despite such difficulties, I tried to make them welcome me warmly. I greeted

everyone with a smile and asked lots of questions and made notes when I did not understand something. I also kept thinking how to interact with homeless people. They gradually accepted me into their community.



After a tough 4-month orientation period, the other staff placed their trust in me. I was put in charge of the coffee service, which is essential for homeless people, and I also helped train new volunteers. Even though it took four months for them to rely on me, I realized that there is a heavy responsibility to help people in need. I still remember my advisor telling me during the 'Cold Hands, Warm Heart' event, "You're not just volunteering for yourself to meet people and learn English, you are actually helping Edmonton and the community." These words touched me deeply and helped give me confidence about my new life in Canada.

The homeless people I met were really kind to me. This completely changed my perspectives about homeless people. I used to believe stereotypes such as most homeless people are often suffering from mental illnesses. While it may be true that the homeless tend to have a higher rate of mental illness than the non-homeless and have difficulty reintegrating into society again, I had learnt to be afraid of approaching and talking to them. However, since there are so many homeless in Canada, I began to question these stereotypes. I noticed that many of the homeless people who visited the Boyle Street Mission are Indigenous people. They taught me some Cree words and talked to me about their culture. One older Indigenous man remembered my name and the discussions we had. It was a really moving moment for me because every time he saw me he would say "Megumi!" Although this man was really old and suffered from epileptic seizures, he was always cheerful.

Many people who come to the Boyle Street mission have difficult lives and abuse alcohol and drugs. It was impossible for the staff to deal with these serious issues, but they provided people with information about various social services, food, and a warm place to meet. The homeless people I met had colorful backgrounds so I often felt sorry about their situations. I would listen to what they said but never meddle in anyone's life. The First Nations people I volunteered with and met at the shelter made me want to learn more about their history. Therefore, I took a Native Studies course which focused on Aboriginal history in Canada. I enjoyed this class and learned that Indigenous people have faced many challenges such as racism and poverty.

Sharing My Overseas Experiences in Japan

When I returned to Japan, I wanted to share my memories with my family and friends. I also had to make a PowerPoint Presentation for a presentation class about my study abroad experience. I bumped into a former teacher of mine in the campus convenience store, talked about my trip to Canada, and mentioned that I was nervous about the upcoming presentation. He suggested that I make a short video about my time in Canada because “you already know how to do it.”



Before going to Edmonton, I had taken a creative writing course and the final project was a group digital storytelling project. At the time, I had no idea what a digital story was and did not have confidence in my ICT skills to make a short video. According to Nishioka (2016), digital storytelling is the “process of crafting, multimodal narratives using video editing software or Web 2.0-based applications” (p. 39). It involves putting different items such as photos, video clips, music, voice files, written text, and transition effects into one story. By the end of the creative writing course, I could use iMovie to make a creative video about an original group of superheroes.

The more I thought about it, a digital story would be a great way to share my study abroad experiences. My smartphone had lots of photos and short videos and I felt sure that my classmates would rather watch a digital story than a PowerPoint presentation. I ended up making a 6-minute digital story divided into three parts. In the first part, I showed positive images of Canada such as sightseeing spots and my fulfilling life studying abroad. For example, I included photos of the friends I made when I belonged to a local kendo club and dodgeball team. I also talked about what students can expect to experience studying at the University of Alberta. After that, I had the positive sounds of Indigenous music playing in the background as I talked about my volunteering experiences and why there are so many homeless people in Canada. I examined the problems they face, especially those of the Aboriginal women who live on the streets. In the final part of the video, I concluded that we need to face problems shared by the world’s Indigenous peoples and do more to help the homeless in Japan. My classmates really seemed to enjoy my digital story and some of them said they changed their mind about Canada.

Conclusion

Through volunteering at these two homeless shelters I found that many of the homeless were Indigenous people. After meeting many Indigenous people with a wide range of values, I have

come to explore their difficulties and dilemmas and let others know about this too. Digital storytelling could inspire students and provide them with important visual images. I believe that the video I created also helped them learn more about the problems Indigenous people face even now. Thanks to my experiences in Canada, I broadened my horizons and started to see life from different angles. After I finish my undergraduate studies, I now plan on going to graduate school to study anthropology and I would like to focus on Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

Reference

Nishioka, H. (2016). Analysing language development in a collaborative digital storytelling project: Sociocultural perspectives. *System*, 62, 39-52.