2012 Learning Cluster Students Bring Service and Compassion to Global Destinations

Under the generous funding support from the Luis and Linda Nieves Family Foundation, 2012 Learning Cluster students researched, studied, and reached out in service and compassion to the people they met in: India, Turkey, Argentina, Guatemala, Indonesia, Cambodia, South Korea, and Panama. Learning Cluster faculty reflect on their transformative academic and travel experiences:

Tibetan Refugees: The Struggle for Identity – Xiaoxing Liu, Associate Professor of Chinese Language and Culture

Our project well reflected the idea of Learning Cluster as a special course at SUA. Students initiated, organized, proposed, and conducted every step of the activities. The faculty member selected by the students also made a great effort to facilitate and support this LC course. Students started to read and think about relevant issues over the winter break. The background and theoretical preparation continued to the end of the first week. Then, we set off to the field—to India—where we met and talked with people of all walks of life, from small babies to elderly including elementary school students, teachers, administrative officials, monks, NGO activists, restaurant workers, stall vendors, ex-political prisoners. We walked on the muddy road for miles after big snow falls, and stayed in a hotel without heat enduring constant coldness. Of thirteen people, ten got sick. We, however, overcame the difficulties and learned a lot.

In the popular tourist town of Dharamsala, our students proudly felt that even though we were foreigners, we were not among the tourists who saw local people as part of the beautiful scenery. Instead, we made the connection with local people, listening to their stories, and trying to understand how they preserved their culture, religion, and fought for their identity in such an environment. Thinking back on this LC project, students said:

“Direct contact with Tibetans in Dharamsala not only broadens my perspectives of the religious and political complexity regarding the Tibetan question, but also motivates me to
be strong, determined, persistent, patient, and hopeful when pursuing the justice and morals despite tremendous challenges.”

~Learning Cluster Students with His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet~

“Stories of their struggles made me appreciate my education which I was taking for granted and encouraged me to construct a sense of responsibility to voice justice to the world.“

“It is a life changing experience that you will never forget and an eye opener that made me question my own identity and mission and appreciate everything I have so much more.”

We want to extend our gratitude to the Luis and Linda Nieves Family Foundation and to all of the support crew for this invaluable educational opportunity.

Cosmopolitan Turkey: Sources of Inter-Ethnic and Inter-Religious Peace, Conflict, and Co-Existence - Jay Heffron, Dean of Students and Professor of History

Twelve students and one instructor, Jay Heffron, spent nearly two weeks in Istanbul, Turkey, visiting historical sites, some dating from the 5th century AD, art museums, and meeting with a variety of university scholars and educators as well as local NGOs and non-profit humanitarian agencies. The purpose of the Learning Cluster was to gain a deeper understanding not only of Turkey’s rich cultural history as a bridge between East and West, Europe and West Asia, but its contemporary role as a center of social, economic, and political influence in an emerging Afro-Eurasian continent. Turkey is an overwhelmingly Islamic society and yet enjoys cultural and political freedoms not often found in traditional Muslim societies. Why? Students sought the answer to this question in meetings with legal scholars, political scientists, Islamic activists, secular organizations such as Morcati, a
leading woman’s rights organization in the city, and specialists on EU accession, a long-time goal of Turkey. They sought the answer in Kemalism, the country’s commitment to secularization dating back to the end of the Ottoman Caliphate and founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, and its challenges in the face of a growing Islamicism. Their meetings and discussions with leading scholars and activists gave them deeper insight into the complex ambiguities of both secularism and Islam as they find expression in contemporary Turkey.

Students walked away from the whole experience with a much deeper understanding and appreciation of the complex reality within Turkey today relating to ethnic tensions and divides. This is in the context of Turkey as a European and/or Asian nation and the unique East/West bridge that exists both geographically and in the national psyche.

~Jay Heffron and Guide with Learning Cluster Students overlooking Japanese-Built Bridge in Istanbul~

[The bridge, built in 1973 by the Japanese, is famous as the first bridge to connect the European and Anatolian sides of Istanbul, separated by the Bosphorus.]

Students’ daily exposure to the kaleidoscopic sights and sounds, people and culture of Istanbul gave them insight not only into what an Islamic country noted for its cultural pluralism actually looks and feels like, but also an understanding of how this pluralism is achieved, preserved and protected, and in potential cases threatened.

Historic sites visited included the famous Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque, the former converted in the 15th century by conquering Ottomans from what was once the largest church in Christiandom into a magnificent mosque. Here they could see the remnants of Christian frescos gracing the walls of a grand Islamic hall of worship. They visited Topkapi Palace, home to the Ottoman ruling class for five centuries, and a testament to the wealth and splendor of the Caliphate at the height of its power and influence in the Mediterranean region and beyond. In contrast to these historic expressions of Turkey’s past, including its former existence as the Byzantine Empire, students also had the opportunity to visit Istanbul’s Museum of Modern Art which traces Turkey’s contribution to a cosmopolitan East-West, secular/Islamic worldview from the 1930s to the present.

Students met with scholars, many of whom prepared elaborate power-point presentations for students on such topics as Turkey and Foreign Affairs, the Turkish Constitution, and Turkish Globalization, at Yildiz Technical University, Sehir University, and on the Anatolian side of Istanbul, the famous Marmara University.
By studying inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations within Turkey, students were able to become better attuned to its particularities, hear from the affected people themselves, and thereby become more informed global citizens, seeing beyond their own context, ideals and experiences. Istanbul was an extraordinary visual, audio, tactile and cerebral experience rich in the cognitive dissonances of a city caught between past and present, tradition and modernity. Students returned from the experience to write research and field-based reflection pieces on such topics as EU Accession, Women’s Rights and Gender Equality, the Cypriot Crisis, Islamic Architecture, Turkish-Chinese Relations, Sex Trafficking, and the Dilemmas of Modern Kemalism.

Children’s Rights in Argentina - Tomas Crowder-Taraborrelli, Visiting Assistant Professor of Latin American Studies

Our academic goals for our Learning Cluster to Argentina were to review the controversies around children’s rights in Argentina since the end of the last Dictatorship and the economic crisis of 2001. We examined the legal and social implications of the American Convention of Human Rights, interviewed human rights activists who are dedicated to protecting the rights of children, and read testimonials of victims of State repression who were born in detention centers and taken away from their biological families.
One of the most meaningful moments of our trip to Argentina was our visit to Parque de la Memoria (The Park of Memory). We first started off at ESMA, the detention and extermination center in Buenos Aires, and then we walked to River Plate Stadium where Argentina played, and won, the World Cup in 1978. The thing that shocked all of the students was the proximity between the two locations; they were only a short walk apart. Our guide at ESMA explained that torture victims could hear the shouts of the crowd as Argentina won the World Cup. Only a short distance farther along is where Parque de la Memoria is located. The magnitude of the brutality of the State repression became tangible as the students stared at a wall inscribed with the names of disappeared people. One of the most impactful experiences for students was the staggering number of young people who were disappeared and whose names appeared on that wall.

Click on the Argentina Learning Cluster Website link below for more information, student blogs, and pictures ~ [http://learningcluster-argentina.blogspot.com/](http://learningcluster-argentina.blogspot.com/)

**Environmental Rights in Guatemala - Sarah England, Associate Professor of Anthropology**

The main objectives of this Learning Cluster were to understand how environmental rights have been defined by the international community, what the situation of those rights are in Guatemala, and how they are being violated and/or protected. We studied these larger questions through two case studies: gold/silver mining and deforestation. The first case
A study involved two gold and silver mines located in the Eastern part of Guatemala. Though neither mine has actually begun production, people in the local community, the Catholic Church, and various environmental NGOs have organized to try to stop the mines due to their fears of irreversible environmental damage, human rights abuses, and socio-economic effects that come with such megaprojects. We spoke with members of the local community and toured the mine in order to understand the concerns, plans, and points of view of both parties.

The second case study involves the Montana las Granadillas, a mountain in the departments of Zacapa and Chiquimula that is rapidly being deforested, threatening not only the biodiversity of the mountain, but also the water supply of the local communities which comes directly from the mountain. We spoke with an organization that is trying to have the mountain declared as a National Protected Area, hiked to the source of the water, and spoke with local farmers who live on the mountain about their ideas about how the forests should be most sustainably utilized.

In Guatemala City we also spoke with several government and non-governmental organizations concerned with environmental issues. From these visits and interviews we learned that environmental rights are intimately connected with other human rights and violation of one often leads to the violation of others. We also learned that the protection of these rights is very complex involving local, national, and transnational actors, each with different worldviews and perspectives and with different levels of influence and power. We
concluded that one of the main ways to protect both human and environmental rights is through a true dialogue and respect between the different parties. This is difficult to achieve, however, due to the history of repression, inequality, and government corruption regarding forms of resource extraction and other economic projects.

Growing Up Tough in Sumatra - Shane Barter, Assistant Professor of Comparative Politics

Our Learning Cluster, Growing Up Tough in Sumatra, was initiated by Soka students interested in child rights and primary education. Having studied these themes in other parts of the world, they were curious how they play out in Southeast Asia. Because this is my first semester at Soka, I was hesitant to take a class abroad, but the students persisted. And this sort of project is why I came to Soka, and I did happen to know several organizations which concentrate on child rights in Sumatra. So we assembled our team, and after we were fortunate enough to receive funding from the Nieves family, we were ready to go.

We based the Learning Cluster around several core questions: What are the challenges faced by children in Sumatra? How do at-risk children navigate local threats? What is / can be done to improve the situation, and what can foreigners do to help? Before we departed, the students were assigned a long list of articles for four very long seminar classes, in which we began to assess these questions.

Before we left, the students were as excited as they were nervous. One student related in a blog entry, many felt “a mixture of anxiety and hesitation.” Well, their professor felt the same way. But as I write these reflections, jet-lagged but back safe at home in Aliso Viejo, I am proud to say that the trip was a great success. Much of this was due to the hard work planning the trip by a local friend of mine, Ines, who served as our guide. We stayed with her family in North Sumatra and even visited the elementary school where she teaches. Another reason for the trip’s success was the students. They showed toughness, excitement, and maturity. When we visited schools, they were all fun and smiles with local children. When we visited non-governmental organizations, I was surprised how much their questions touched on the class readings. And finally, the trip was a success due to the warm welcome we received from the people we met in North Sumatra. The children were excited to have us there, and the teachers and activists we met really made us feel at home. Looking back, I am deeply satisfied with how well the trip went for us!
The most memorable moment for me was in Kabanjahe, when we visited Ines’ grade five class. The students sang us a song which they had prepared. As they sang to us, some of my students started crying a little bit, and in response, our friend Ines began to cry as well. Shortly afterwards, the children mobbed us with hugs and high fives. Because we were only there for ten days—not nearly enough time to really unravel the complex issues faced by local children—I was surprised with the sincerity and emotional connection we were able to make with local kids. Then later, the night before we left, we said goodbye to Ines, and once again, we were all tears. As my students embraced my friend, I had to walk away to keep my composure. Who would have thought that in ten short days, we would have developed such deep connections?

I would like to thank the Nieves family, Michael Weiner, Soka University, Ines and other Indonesian friends, and the twelve Soka students who made this trip possible and successful. It was hard work—we were not left with much time to relax—but it went off without a hitch. For a new faculty member, this was a memorable introduction to Learning Clusters—a hallmark of Soka University.

Exotic Species in Freshwater Ecosystems of Cambodia - Anthony Mazeroll, Professor of Biology & Director of Environmental Studies

My students and I had the opportunity of travelling to Cambodia to investigate the impact of exotic fishes on the fresh water ecosystem there. We travelled throughout the country sampling lakes, ponds, rivers, and streams to determine if exotic fishes had an impact. Fortunately, we did not find any exotics in our samples. We did visit aquaculture facilities, which are the origins of the exotics.
While in Cambodia, we met with the Minister of Environment and Fisheries which was covered by the national TV networks and the national newspapers.

~Students meet with the Minister of Environment and Fisheries in Cambodia~

Politics of History and Memory in East Asia - Dongyoun Hwang, Associate Professor of Asian Studies

This Learning Cluster (LC), entitled “Politics of History and Memory in East Asia,” required students to explore, among others, the question as to how and why the same past has been remembered (or forgotten) and represented differently in East Asian countries. The students considered the meanings of our memories of the past, both as precarious memories that could continue to generate new conflicts and as memories that could serve as a guide for a peaceful future. To investigate the meanings the LC students went to South Korea for a field trip, where they visited many NGO’s and research institutes, and met with many scholars. In particular, they participated in a forum organized by the Asian Cultural Studies Research Institute at Gachon University to engage with Korean students in a discussion of how to understand the current conflicts over the past among East Asian countries. They also participated in an international conference organized by the same institute. They met also with four former Korean “comfort women” and many Korean hibakusha (surviving victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki Atomic Bombing). Through the visits and meetings the students came to a conclusion that it is important to include in the construction of history those suppressed, marginalized, silenced, and erased memories in order to make a ground for reconciliation among East Asian countries. They have also agreed that, if the memories of the past are being constructed today to serve various purposes, they can also construct it in such a way to fulfill one of the SUA’s missions: peace.
Environmental issues are and will continue to be critical in the sustainable development and the well-being of human society. Governments of developing countries, international organizations, and non-government/profit organizations (NGO/NPOs) have implemented many programs in the past decades to solve the problem of environmental destruction. Global Brigades is an example of these NGOs working in Panama, a developing country whose government cannot protect its own environment and continues to rely on NGO/NPOs to assist its citizens. Due to limited education on the natural rainforests of the region, communities in Panama are unaware of the harmful environmental degradation effects caused by improper waste disposal, the slash and burn technique in agriculture and contamination of their rivers, among other practices.

By creating this Learning Cluster and utilizing Panama as an investigative sample, SUA students became more aware of the environmental issues many people in today’s world face, and the systems that have been put in place to help the environment move in a positive direction. Through this Learning Cluster, SUA students were able to work side by side with Global Brigades’ members to learn about ways to create a greater impact by working at an indigenous Panamanian community called Piriati Embera. Participating students had the opportunity to investigate environmental issues through first-hand experiences. They did tough physical work to build two and a half greenhouses for Embera families as an example of implementing sustainable development using their own resources and recycling as much as possible. In addition, the students prepared educational workshops to empower the community members with knowledge about other alternatives that can preserve their natural environments.
The surprise of this great adventure was that none of the students, including myself, expected to also have a cultural exchange with the Embera community. We had the opportunity to work together with the community members and at the same time talk about our respective cultures, customs, languages and concerns. The last day of our stay, SUA students participated in a traditional dance with the Emberas and painted their bodies as a sign of cultural acceptance and camaraderie.

In exchange, SUA students sang “On the Path to Peace,” and some students even sang in Japanese for the Embera community. It was a great feast and exchange of cultures and languages that ended with our departure from the tropical forest of Panama. This Learning Cluster and trip to Panama was an amazing experience for all of us; an experience that will be cherished forever.