

Pointers for the Travel Seminar

The experience of other travel seminar participants and Center for Global Education staff has encouraged us to offer these specific pointers regarding travel seminars. The purpose of a travel seminar is to enable you, the participant, to engage in direct conversation with the people of the country to which you are going about the themes the seminar seeks to explore. We invite you to consider the following pointers on how to make the most of the time you spend with resource people in-country.

Courtesy in Asking Questions

The Center for Global Education requests that you treat all resource persons with courtesy, regardless of whether or not you agree with them. Cultural differences, however, enter into one's understanding of courtesy. For example, a North American who thinks she is being courteous may unwittingly offend a Latin American. Generally, Latin Americans will find an indirect way to raise topics that are "delicate" or potentially offensive. This contrasts with a North American value of directness and frankness. No matter which region of the world you are traveling, we ask that you refrain from putting resource people in a defensive situation; most questions can be asked, though, if you give careful thought to delicate ways of phrasing things. **Although you will usually be communicating with resource people through interpreters, we want you to ask your questions directly to the resource person, making eye contact with him or her, rather than looking at the interpreter.**

Connective Thinking

Connective thinking describes one method of critical listening. A productive exercise when listening to a speaker is to develop an eagle eye for the best elements in the other's viewpoint. In order to build a web of shared wisdom it is useful to spend time finding the points of connection – the gems of wisdom that can truly connect what a speaker is saying to the listener's perception of truth. This is the opposite of listening for the weaknesses in what a speaker has to say. Building a global community requires building a web of shared knowledge woven from the threads of truth contributed by each participant in a conversation. Connective thinking fosters the building of constructive relationships and the development of community. It ties together the best that each one brings to a conversation.

The Importance of Storytelling

There are several reasons to ask resource people to share experiences. Stories touch the affective aspects of human nature. Hearing another person share their life's journey is a way of humanizing a person, rather than focusing on their political "positions." Ideas and positions are abstract, but life experiences are concrete. It is harder to argue with a person's experiences than to argue with a person's ideas.

Storytelling methods and the importance of storytelling may vary from culture to culture. Storytelling holds particular importance to Indigenous cultures. For Indigenous peoples, storytelling is not only an important method of teaching but also for relationship building. Stories are often told in a circular manner rather than linear. Some storytellers are very animated, others will not make direct eye contact out of respect for the listener. Thoughtful questions are welcomed, but personal, probing questions may be seen as invasive. A story is viewed as a gift to the listener so a gentle handshake and thank you at the end of the story is always appreciated.

A good opener for dialogue is asking people who inspired them. When the speaker holds a known political position on some issue, a way to lead into understanding and dialogue is to pose a question such as: "What personal experiences have brought you toward the position you hold?" or "What life experiences or teachings have shaped the political position you now hold?" This is especially useful when you have speakers on the same panel who hold distinctly different positions. It can help speakers to grow in understanding one another and lessen confrontation.

The Role of Responsive Listening

Being a responsive listener can lead to a deeper level of conversation. When a speaker shares ideas and experiences, there can often be tentativeness, because people ordinarily do not want to set off a negative reaction in the listeners. By contrast it is pleasurable to have others listen attentively and show that they have really understood what has been expressed. When listeners work to truly understand the heart of the message of a speaker, this affirms and demonstrates respect for the speaker.

When we do responsive listening we have only two goals in mind: to make sure we have accurately captured the heart of what a speaker is intending to say, and to give the speaker the assurance that she/he has been accurately and respectfully understood. Responsive listening is not listening with the intent of correcting or judging what has been said. It is neither agreement nor disagreement. It is the ability to let go of one's own reactions to what is said. It focuses attention away from oneself onto the other. When listeners tune into speakers in this way, the speakers' fears of rebuff and ridicule are lessened; therefore they speak from a less guarded center of truth.



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Provocative Questions

Provocative questions are not genuine questions, because they are not questions for which the asker is genuinely seeking an answer. Sometimes they are questions that the asker already has answered in his/her own mind. They are addressed to a speaker to test the rightness or wrongness of the speaker by measuring the speaker's answer with the asker's own perception of the truth.

Another type of provocative question is one that is unanswerable, often really a statement in disguise. Such a question would be something like: "If you don't like this country the way it is, why don't you just leave?" The speaker is really making a statement. Maybe the statement is: "I do not believe immigrants to The United States have a right to criticize how we do things here." When questions such as this are asked of a speaker, it is useful for the facilitator of the group to let the speaker know that this is not an answerable question, then give the asker an opportunity to do one of two things, either rephrase the question into an answerable one, or make a statement that is reflective of what the asker wants to communicate to the speaker and/or to the group.

Thanking Resource Persons

Someone from your group should formally thank each resource person for meeting with you. Here again, many North Americans feel that a succinct but sincere word of gratitude accomplishes the task, not realizing that this may actually sound rather terse. Though you may be uncomfortable at first, use a few embellishments and don't be afraid to repeat the basic "thank you" in several ways. Keep this in mind, also, when interacting with someone at the hotel desk or in a market, or anyone who offers you assistance.

As you detect that a resource person is drawing a session to an end, or during the word of thanks from someone in your group, refrain from packing up your things. This can be interpreted as a signal that you are in a hurry to leave and that the person you have been meeting with is not very important. Also, when your group has finished meeting with an individual or group, it is common courtesy for everyone to shake hands, i.e., each person from your group should shake hands with each resource person, complemented by a smile and thank you.



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Travel Seminar Pedagogy

As you read in “Education for Life,” we are committed to a pedagogy that integrates experience, analysis/reflection, action, and evaluation/celebration. In the context of a travel seminar, meetings with resource persons, organizations and communities in their places of work, worship and play, constitute the “experience” aspect of the Circle of Praxis. Different people will react to these experiences in different ways, as we all have a particular “lens” through which we see the world. At times, the experiences of your travel seminar may feel contradictory. For example, if the theme of your seminar is socio-economic inequality, you will find that various sectors (government officials, peasant cooperatives, religious organizations, etc.) understand the problem of inequality in dramatically different ways.

The next stage in the Circle of Praxis asks learners to engage in critical analysis of the different perspectives you heard from resource persons, and reflect upon their meaning in relation to your previously held assumptions about the issue at hand. Every two or three days, your trip leader will facilitate a debriefing session. This is a time for you to give voice your thoughts as well as listen other participants articulate what they have seen and heard. By dialoguing with other travel seminar participants, participants are often able to draw connections from their own lives to the experiences of others. Understanding the nature of our relationships with people in other parts of the world, and the larger historical and global context of which we are a part, is necessary for critical social analysis.

Keeping a journal during the travel seminar can help you reflect upon your experiences on a day-to-day basis, and serve as your “long-term memory” after returning home. Consider beginning your journal before the seminar begins. Reflect on how you are feeling about your upcoming journey, your expectations for the seminar, and the questions which you hope to have answered. During the trip, your journal is a great place to record facts and feelings. After you return home, revisit your journal and allow a pattern of meaning to emerge. Your journal is a powerful tool in creating the story you will share with others upon your return.

As for the next stages of the Circle of Praxis, action and evaluation/celebration, we intentionally leave those up to you. While the time you spend engaged in analysis and reflection during the travel seminar may challenge your way of thinking or open you up to new ways of seeing the world, the final responsibility for making sense of your experience is yours. You may find that upon your return home what you have learned inspires you to make different choices about what you consume or advocate for a more just and sustainable world. We provide a number of ideas and organizations on our website that you may find useful. The Circle of Praxis is an ongoing process, and with each new experience the process of analysis/reflection, action and evaluation/celebration continues.

Responsible Photography

Most participants on a travel seminar come with camera in hand, eager to photograph their experience for their own memories and to share with friends and family. Photos are a great way to document a travel seminar, but a camera can be a tricky tool to use well. How you use your camera reflects your level of respect for the local people and your long-term commitment to mutual understanding and responsible travel. Here are a few guidelines for taking photos on a travel seminar¹:

- **Ask Permission** before you take a photo, even if it is just with a smile and a nod toward your camera.
- **Avoid Telephoto Lenses:** it is best to use them only when shooting landscapes, animals or during performances or festivals, when it is difficult to get close to people. Even then, try to seek your subject out afterward to tell them you've taken a photo and explain who you are.
- **Send Copies:** If possible, offer to send a copy if it turns out well and be sure to follow-up.
- **Make Connections:** On your travel seminar, you will have the opportunity to meet and talk with many local people. Take pictures of the people you meet instead of trying to grab images from strangers on the street.

If you have questions about whether or not it is appropriate to take a picture, or if you need assistance asking your subject, please ask the trip leader.

Using the Term "American"

When traveling in Latin America, remember that people throughout the Americas are Americans. Some people from the U.S. are in the habit of using "Americans" to refer specifically to U.S. citizens. You will find that in some places the term "North American" or "Norteamericano" is used instead, although keep in mind that Canadians and Mexicans are also North Americans. Sometimes the term, "Estadounidense," or literally "United States-an" is used. Other alternatives are "U.S. citizens" or "U.S. Americans."

Remember

As you prepare to cross cultural borders, remember that no matter how well you prepare, at some point you will be caught off guard and confused. So your best preparation is to cultivate an openness to learning and a sense of humor. The more flexible your attitude, the better prepared you will be to understand and learn from other cultures.



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¹ Guidelines modified from an article by Chris Welch, [Tips for Making Better Travel Photos](#). Minneapolis Star Tribune, Sunday July 16, 2000, p G9.