



Surviving Re-entry:

A Readjustment Manual for Parents

By Leonore Cavallero

SIT Study Abroad Academic Director
Ecuador: Culture and Development

“You can’t go home again,” wrote author Thomas Wolfe. Could he have been thinking about SIT students? For some young men and women, the transition back to life in the United States seems to be even harder than adjusting to the country they have just left. Readjustment also takes its toll on parents, families, and friends who often do not understand why their loved one is having problems. The goal of this handbook is to look at why return culture shock occurs, look at some of the typical concerns of students going through re-entry, and finally, discuss what parents can do to assist their children during this process. Student quotes have been included in italics to help parents understand re-entry from a student’s perspective.

© 2002 SIT Study Abroad

SIT Study Abroad, Kipling Road, P.O. Box 676, Brattleboro, VT 05302-0676 USA Toll free Tel (888) 272-7881 Fax (802) 258-3296

“The hardest part of re-entry was people seemingly not caring how my life had been transformed.”

“For me, the hardest part was finding myself in the lives of others who have been without me for so long.”

Introduction:

As an Academic Director in Ecuador with SIT Study Abroad, I see students making the adjustment to life in a new country and a new culture. I am also a parent and recently my own daughter participated in an SIT Study Abroad program. When she returned home, I had the opportunity for the first time to see a student adjust back to life in her home country and culture.

It was an eye-opening experience:

Driving back home from the airport, I glanced over at my daughter. I was so happy to see her. Somehow she seemed a little disoriented, though I knew she must be excited to be back, after spending four months in France on an SIT program. “Exhaustion and jet lag,” I thought to myself.

After a few days, the situation at home was becoming difficult. She wanted wine with every meal. She requested cloth napkins. She wanted to listen only to French music and look through her photographs. She kept describing the wonderful places she had been and the food they had eaten. She complained about the quality of our cheese. She didn’t want to call her old friends. She didn’t really seem to be happy to be home. Frankly, I was a little concerned and frustrated, as well. How long was it going to take her to readjust to normal life?

Time went by. After three weeks, I was ready to have a fit. She still continually criticized everything. She moped around the house. She didn’t seem to want to get out and find a job for the summer. I could feel myself running out of patience. I was tired of hearing about her life abroad, and I wanted her to be glad to be home! Even though I knew it was normal to have some difficulties adjusting to being back, it seemed to me that this had been going on long enough. It was time for her to get over it. I wanted my sunny, positive, energetic daughter back again.

My own experience got me thinking and, while on sabbatical for a semester, I researched and wrote this handbook as a resource for other parents. For guidance, I enlisted the assistance of many of my former students from here in Ecuador and other SIT Study Abroad alumni. I am grateful for their assistance. This handbook would not have been possible without them.

What happens to young college students when they go overseas? Why do they come back feeling out of place in the environment in which they were raised?

Most parents are familiar with the features of SIT's programs. They know their children will be living with host families, interacting with the local culture and learning the language and the customs. They are aware of the strong academic focus that provides students with specific requirements to fulfill, including writing papers, participating in discussion groups, and taking exams. They are confident that both intellectually and interculturally, students are being challenged and guided by their Academic Directors.

What parents may not be aware of, however, is the emotional impact of living and studying abroad. When they arrive in their host country most students, on some level, temporarily regress to a more dependent stage of life. They know themselves to be independent young adults with control over their lives. Yet, they find themselves dependent on the graciousness of their hosts. Their language ability is not fluent; their environment is full of unknowns; they are fed unusual foods at family meals; and most of all, they no longer understand the nonverbal cues that are going on around them. This experience can be both disconcerting and stimulating as well as exhausting, exhilarating, and even occasionally frightening!

So what does the student do?

Typically, shortly after arrival, the student begins a process that is essential to his or her psychological survival: to absorb and learn as much as possible about this new world. Since knowledge equals power in this situation, the student focuses on unraveling how the society is structured, understanding cultural priorities, and discovering what is considered appropriate behavior in any given situation. This experience continually requires students to grow. Their dramatic learning curve consists of daily emotional ups and downs. Their senses are heightened, and they find their life is full of challenges and unexpected surprises. Their overall comprehension steadily increases. Eventually, if they are successful in their adaptation process, they feel the thrill of realizing they finally fit in, simultaneously accepting and being accepted by the locals.

Why is there a problem when they come home? Surely they have not forgotten who they really are and how they were raised. Have they really become different people than who they were when they left?

In a way, yes, they have. Culture, after all, is a learned process. People around the world face the same problems. However, they develop very different mechanisms for dealing with them. To genuinely feel a part of the culture, the students have to sincerely be able to accept, believe and participate in the practices of the new culture. What at first appeared strange – whether eating with their hands, or

greeting perfect strangers with a kiss on the cheek – has to become normal everyday behavior. Interestingly enough, this process occurs regardless of which country the student has chosen for his or her study abroad experience. Eventually, in many cases, the new customs become automatic. When the students finally board the plane to come home, these learned responses to social situations and different ways of perceiving their environment come right along with them. Although this newly acquired worldview is no longer necessary back home, it is virtually impossible to drop it overnight. Many students are also not quite sure they want to lose what they have acquired through so much effort and struggle. They do not want to return to being exactly who they were before they left. They feel this would invalidate their experience, and the care and love they received from all the people who helped and supported them through their learning process.

“I definitely felt I had become part Ecuadorian, and had no way to express that new part of myself.”

“It’s so tough to return to your own ‘reality’ (or what it was before leaving) and realize that you don’t necessarily agree with your life or your culture or the values underlying it”.

Superficial changes fade with time, of course. The key word here is time, since the process of readjustment is different for each person. Some students go through months of feeling alienated from their home environment. For others, it may take longer. Some lucky souls seem to slip back into their previous life with little or no difficulties. These individuals often experience a delayed return culture shock that catches them unawares months later.

“I stayed inside for three days before going out.”

“For three weeks after I got home I ended up just trying to recuperate, rarely going out.”

“I was a good wreck for a couple of months.”

“In total, return culture shock lasted about a year.”

Is there a way to tell how long the process of adapting to return culture shock is going to take?

Unfortunately, probably not. Students can also go through different cycles in their readjustment. The first few days of being home can be euphoric. During the subsequent weeks, when the shock of re-entry hits, the student might feel depressed or unsure of him/herself and uncertain about previously made plans. Mood swings are frequent, as are long conversations about goals and priorities. The problem is compounded by the feeling that no one around them can relate to what is happening to them, except

perhaps other newly returned SIT students.

Students who have traveled extensively before enrolling in an SIT program often suffer in the same way as their companions who had never previously left the U.S. Perhaps the only difference is that they remember having gone through the experience before and realize that it will indeed pass. While students are struggling with this process, it is not uncommon for some of them to try desperately to find a way to go back overseas.

There are students who feel out of place from the moment they walk through the door. For them, the readjustment to home actually feels harder than the original culture shock they felt when they left to go abroad. They may take weeks to integrate the new person they have become into the reality they left behind. Usually, the more successful the student was in integrating into the host culture, the more difficult he or she will find the challenge of slipping back into the American way of life. Conversely, students who were less affected by the time they spent abroad will typically have an easier time returning home.

“Re-entry is an emotional roller coaster that no one in the home community is likely to fully understand.”

“I’d say that there isn’t one formula to make your kid’s re-entry smooth. In fact, there may not be, and that’s probably just part of the whole process. It is not easy to go away so it makes sense that it should not be easy to come back.”

What are some of the main difficulties faced by students returning home?

Pace of Life

Although many of us know that other cultures have a far more flexible attitude towards time, it comes as a shock when we realize how well our children have adapted to “Jamaican time” or “Spanish time” or “Indian time.” This particular cultural idiosyncrasy is often treated lightly, even jokingly. However, it actually is indicative of a deeper issue. Much of the rest of the world is amazed at how Americans allow their lives to be ruled by the clock, ignoring mitigating factors and circumstances beyond one’s control. Although students can re-learn to check the watch, it might be hard for them to give time the same importance it once had. They often continue to feel that people and situations should take priority over schedules and deadlines.

“People in the US are far too tense, selfish and in a hurry.”

“It was difficult to adjust to the pace of life back home -- the dependence upon time and scheduling.”

Consumerism

Most SIT students choose to study in countries that are not as wealthy as the United States. They often are amazed at the quality of life of people abroad who lack what the US culture has taught them to consider as basic possessions. They are taken by surprise at the closeness of the families, the warmth and friendliness, the willingness to share. Coming home, it is not unusual for students to feel vaguely guilty for all they and their real families own.

Christmas is frequently mentioned as a particularly difficult time of year. The commercialization of the holidays in the United States, and the emphasis on buying presents contrasts painfully with their memories of the generosity of the people who had so little and yet gave them so much.

“The hardest part of re-entry for me was Christmas and the extraordinary amounts of money that Americans spend at Christmas time and in general”.

“Then Christmas hit. The extravagance was overwhelming and depressing to me – the waste, the excess.”

“I found myself many times completely unable to cope with the fact that I live in a society that glorifies material wealth and in a country that dominates the world economy.”

Personal Communication

How can one describe the adventures, learning experiences, growth, expansion, realizations that one has had during the months overseas? Is it possible to share the importance of the relationships made, the poignancy of leaving, the joys and sadness made even more intense by the awareness that the stay abroad was temporary? Most students are bursting with stories to tell, yet also apprehensive that they will not be able to adequately communicate their feelings. They then realize, though it comes as a shock, that life has gone on for everyone at home as well, and that their friends have also experienced changes in their worlds.

When the student is returning to a boyfriend or girlfriend, there is often an additional strain since the person who left may be quite different from the person who has returned. Although some couples do remain together, for others the added pressure can lead to separation. The frustration with personal communication frequently leaves students with a sense of alienation both within the family circle and among their broader group of friends. This, in turn, can lead to withdrawal and depression. Often it is easier for returning students to relate to new friends who are also home from study abroad programs and experiencing the same difficulties in readjusting.

“The hardest part for me was reconciling how much I had experienced and therefore changed with people and things that had remained the same at home.”

“I felt like I was unable to really communicate to people what my semester abroad meant. Few people want to take the time to hear about what really touched your heart and changed your perspective.”

“My biggest desire was just to be around people who understand, who would listen to me, validate my feelings and not expect me to ‘get over’ my depression or confusion or anger or frustration too quickly.”

Returning to School

They have just completed four months of experiential learning where their education reached beyond the four walls of the classroom into the sphere of everyday life. They were able to observe, almost on a daily basis, their progress in language ability, interpersonal skills, cross-cultural awareness, and self-confidence. Every moment held the potential to learn and grow. As an added benefit, each program provided a built-in support group, with other students going through similar experiences. The friendships formed during an SIT semester abroad are often very deep and profound. No wonder students feel anxious about returning to a traditional learning system, with regular classes that seem to have little or no relevance to their lives, and classmates who will have no way of relating to their overseas experience.

“School was really hard to get back into. I just didn’t want to be there... didn’t want to be reading about other people doing things, I wanted to be doing them.”

“When I went back to school I was hit with the reality that the lives of my friends had changed and I was no longer a part of the close knit circle I had had before.”

“It is crazy to think it was two years ago and is still so important and the source of most of my best friendships.”

World View

Many students also feel their world view has expanded immeasurably. They have a deeper awareness of global issues and a broader perspective regarding globalization, IMF policies, ecological challenges, health concerns, international income disparity, and so on. They feel the richness, the weight, and the responsibility of first-hand experience. They are understandably frustrated with the seemingly superficial priorities and the general lack of international awareness in the lives of their friends and family. Some returning students realize that they themselves were as unaware as their friends before they left to study overseas. Most, however, conveniently forget this fact. If they are not careful, their attitude of moral superiority alienates the very individuals they are trying to reach. The challenge here is for them to not forget what they have learned, and at the same time, not allow their indignation and self-righteousness to get in the way of productive dialogue with others.

“My views were so changed, my eyes awakened, and I could not continue as I had before leaving.”

“I was listening to my two closest friends talk during my first week back, and I was shocked and appalled. I assumed that they had grown and matured as much as I had. Boy, was I wrong.”

“One hard thing for me was finding myself among peers who don’t share the same global consciousness that I had acquired while I was away. I wanted to smack a lot of people and tell them to wake up and look around them, even though I could easily have been one of them four months before.”

Self Image

One of the final issues faced by returning students is confronting their self image. Many students go to countries where they look different from most of the local population. Both men and women often find themselves receiving far more attention from the opposite sex than they were accustomed to, simply because of their American appearance. Although this constant fishbowl effect is exhausting, it is also flattering. Plump women are frequently considered desirable in other countries. Occasionally, female students are actively encouraged by their host families to gain weight and thus be even more attractive. This can be quite a pleasant surprise for some US college women accustomed to the American obsession with weight loss and physical fitness. It is a powerful experience to be considered “special” and beautiful, simply because you are different: a foreigner, an American. Understandably, to return home and once again become “just one of the crowd” is often quite a let down and, indirectly, a blow to one’s self esteem.

“I definitely felt the shock of ‘being normal.’”

“White girls are viewed as being beautiful overseas simply because of their blue eyes and pale skin – but when they come home, they are back to being average looking with about 10 unwanted pounds.”

“Don’t say ‘you’ve gained weight’ – we feel bad enough about it without someone having to remind us”

**What can we do, as parents?
What do our children need from us to help them
through this unexpectedly difficult time?**

Patience

Readjustment is a very individual process, and no one pattern holds true for everyone. Your child might not feel ready to meet lots of family members or friends – even a visit to the supermarket can seem overwhelming. For the first few days, a light schedule is probably better than a heavily packed one. Even though physically they are there with you, emotionally and psychologically they have not completely arrived home yet. They need time to reacquaint themselves with what they previously accepted as “normal” life.

It is not uncommon for children to go through a stage of being critical of what is around them, including what they see at home. Complaints range from wasting food, producing too much garbage, driving instead of walking or taking the bus, over-spending, unawareness of what is going on overseas, and so on. Patience. Their indignation will settle down and hopefully transform itself into the willingness to work towards productive goals. Some students feel the need to make specific -- occasionally radical -- changes in their lives. Some have sold or given away their possessions, found fellowships to go back overseas, switched majors, chosen new careers, even changed schools. Although this can be quite upsetting for parents, patience and dialogue can go a long way in allowing a deeper understanding of just what changes each son or daughter has experienced. Students sincerely appreciate the effort their parents make in trying to comprehend how the world of their children has broadened. This attention allows them to feel that the results of their study abroad experience are both valued and respected.

“My parents realized that I was going to be changed by my experience and they saw that as positive.”

“Be proud of me and all that I’ve accomplished in a few months!”

“Accept that I have changed, don’t put pressure on me to act the same as I had before. Be accommodating in my changes in habits and help me incorporate this amazing experience into my life.”

Listen

The other request most often heard from students going through the process of readjustment is for their parents to be open and willing to listen to them. Since most parents are already curious and eager to hear what their children have to tell them, why is this an issue? The problem seems to be that each situation is different. Some returning students want to talk non-stop from the moment they arrive, others need a little time before they can share their stories. Some find it difficult to put their experience into words. They need to process within themselves before they can talk to others. In these cases, parents can give their children an empty photo album or a scrapbook. This can serve as an excellent tool to open the way for communication, while allowing the student to create a visual display of their semester. Occasionally, students will find it easier to talk about activities or experiences later, as events trigger

memories during the course of days and weeks instead of immediately sitting down and answering questions from curious family members. (A balance of interest and, again, of patience). Many students know they are going through a difficult time. They need to hear about what has been happening in the lives of those at home to help them relate to the fact that life has not stood still while they were gone. If parents have had occasion to travel and have themselves also experienced return culture shock after living or working overseas, they can share their own stories with their children. Not only will this help create a mutual bond of experience, it will also serve to reassure the disoriented student that this condition is temporary and will indeed pass.

“Ask questions! Show an interest and let me talk when I need to, ask to see my pictures, be positive and sympathize with me, ask who or what I miss the most!”

“Be supportive but not smothering – give your child space and be patient with him/her but be sure you are available and always ready and willing to listen and offer support.”

“Be genuinely interested in the story behind every picture – don’t rush me, let me talk in my own time. Ask specific questions, listen and be excited! Remember the names of my friends from SIT, and ask about them from time to time.”

Support

A final request from students is for their parents to support them in finding ways to keep their experience real and vital in their lives. Although students have concerns about their ability to adequately communicate the impact their SIT semester had on their lives, they are even more apprehensive that they will forget what they have learned, that they will allow themselves to fall back into complacency and unawareness.

Unfortunately, if students do not focus on this issue, there is indeed a very real possibility of having the learning and changes of the previous four months fade into a somewhat hazy dream. Current reality can easily become more important than the past. Although this is necessary at some level, it is also important for the student to not lose the many benefits acquired abroad including language skills, cultural awareness, global understanding. This would be a waste of time and money and a true disservice to the people who accepted the student into their lives. It would also greatly diminish the validity and importance of the overseas experience.

Academic Directors regularly conduct sessions on re-entry before the end of the program, and discuss with their students different ways they can keep their experience alive once they have returned home. To help in this, parents can help their children investigate areas in their communities where they can get involved in working with immigrants and their families. They can arrange for their children to give talks and presentations to local schools or groups of interested individuals. They can provide information on local radio and TV stations that might cater to the language or cultural needs of the people of the student’s host country. They can encourage their children to take classes relevant to their overseas experience and to get involved in campus activities that are important to them, such as tutoring foreign students, living in an International House, volunteering on ecological projects, presenting a radio program with host country music, increasing political awareness, organizing fundraisers. Simply encouraging your child to cook a meal for the family using the ingredients of their host country can

provide an enjoyable and positive experience for all involved.

“The toughest part for me was sinking back into the lifestyle – the bubble – and not feeling that I was abandoning something.”

“I needed to find connections to my former host country in my home community, even just a restaurant. This would have helped me relax, given me a taste of the culture that had become so familiar to me.”

“Be educated about your child’s surroundings, in terms of what s/he could be involved in – like different non-profit organizations or ways to organize groups on campus.”

Conclusion

Have patience, be ready to listen, and be willing to support them. It sounds simple, once you know. Looking back, as a parent, I realize that I simply did not have any idea what my daughter really needed from me. I tried to do my best. I ran out of patience. I got tired of listening. I didn’t know how to be supportive. At the same time, I was genuinely delighted my daughter was home, and I did what I could to show her, by surrounding her with love and affection. I realize now, in retrospect, that I never expected her readjustment process to last so long, nor that it would be so hard on all of us. A few days, maybe. Not weeks and weeks. However, we did survive! Her SIT semester abroad truly had a major impact, a positive and long-lasting impact on her and on all of our family.

“It is difficult to describe how my semester abroad totally transformed my life.”

“The worse thing my parents could have done was to fail to realize the importance of that time in my life and how hard/sad it was for me to return.”

“My parents were incredible during this process. Even though they didn’t understand me, they accepted that I had changed. It is such an individual process that one must own and struggle with in order to make the improvements.”