

Culture, Society, and Praxis

Volume 9
Number 2 *Oral Histories: An Ocean Away /*
Historias orales a un mar de distancia

Article 6

January 2016

15 Strategic Tips for those Interested in International Service Learning

Noemi Chico
California State University, Monterey Bay

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Recommended Citation

Chico, Noemi (2016) "15 Strategic Tips for those Interested in International Service Learning," *Culture, Society, and Praxis*: Vol. 9 : No. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/csp/vol9/iss2/6>

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15 Strategic Tips for those Interested in International Service Learning

By Noemi Chico

Summary. Traveling abroad is always a challenge that adds to the excitement for the unknown, the enthusiasm to engage in a new venture. In this brief piece, Chico shares with present and future students some of the things she wish she had heard before traveling. In an experience like the CSUMB Spain Ethnographic and Service Learning the normal challenges of traveling are only an aspect of other academic and personal challenges, and an opportunity to learn and attain new professional abilities and competencies.

Resumen: Cuando viajamos al exterior enfrentamos nuevos retos que se suman a los nervios ante lo desconocido y al entusiasmo de meternos en una nueva aventura. En este ensayo Chico comparte con sus compañeros universitarios del presente y del futuro alguna de los consejos que le hubiese gustado leer antes de salir de viaje. En una experiencia como la que ofrece el Programa España de Etnografía y Servicio Aprendizaje de CSUMB, a los retos normales de viaje se le suman demandas personales y académicas en una oportunidad para aprender y desarrollar nuevas habilidades y competencias profesionales.

A Student's Experience in Ethnographic Research and Service Learning in North of Spain

This is my personal experience, of mostly day by day research and service learning, collaborating with the Red Cross of Boñar and León, as part of my study abroad experience during the summer of 2016. I was the only one of eight female students who is a married student with two children. With daily observations of the people, and the culture shock I experienced, there is no question that being a wife and mother contributes to the stress studying abroad. These are 15 tips that I want to share as valuable for a student interested in studying abroad --whether they have children or not-- to manage and maximize their stay.

Before I came here I was preparing my 7-year-old daughter and my 11-year-old son for my travel to Spain for 30-plus days of study and travel. I was also occupied during the Spring semester of 2016 with my part-time job and my 10 unit classes. I was busy being



a wife and mother, trying to get my homework done and paperwork in order. If you have a similarly complicated life, or not, here is my word of advice to you:

Tip number one, *the first thing you should do when traveling abroad is to inform yourself about what the program consists of, the paperwork you need, as well as getting to know the students that will study abroad with you in the program.*

Don't hesitate to work with your universities international office. They are busy but they are very helpful. Be sure to have your passport as soon as possible and inform your professor and international office of your roundtrip flight information and attend the mandatory orientation. Leave all contact and emergency numbers to your family.

Tip number 2, *prepare yourself to be homesick and rely on your family for support.*

Let me disclose something, I was busy preparing my children for them to be without me, but I did not prepare myself to be without them for 30 days, as I have never been apart from them for more than a day. My family and husband were taking turns taking care of them so they were good, and I wasn't. Seeing children play and their parents parenting, makes you think of your children and miss them. You need to be prepared to be in another country away from your culture and family.

Tip number 3, *be prepared for having arrangements for your bills to be paid and having problems at home when you are away, but don't stress because of it.*

Remember no matter how much you prepare for, things happen. For my case, I set up my mother to take my son to his 5th grade promotion ceremony and she had to go to work early that day, he was alone. For his karate exam, my husband was not able to take him because he got off from work late. I worried about my son once I knew it had happened, but things come up, and I had a talk with him and he understood it was out of our control. Sometimes you're plans don't come out perfect. One of my friends that I asked to be with my children was able to be there. Almost everything worked out, my son was able to take his karate exam on a later date. For my bills, I set up automatic payments and or left my sister in charge of them. I left index card notes for each day I was going to be away from my children telling them to have a great day, to get along, brush their teeth, take a shower, telling them I missed them and so on. Even though you try to tie lose ends, personal problems in your relationship will surface. For instance, differences from the past you had with your partner will come up. Just try not to be sad, anxious, or even angry because you can't do anything about it. The past is the past, and you will only stress here and not be able to concentrate on your work. Once you get back to your country you will resolve things. Being away can make your bond be stronger.

Tip number 4 *expect to be culture shocked.*

Spain has many beautiful places, like towns, country side and the cities along with the people. Speaking Spanish in Mexico and the United States is not the same as speaking Spanish in Spain. Food choices can also be an issue. Euros instead of dollars can make you confused, especially if you know the Mexican pesos, as sometimes I would revert to thinking that 20 euros was cheap

but it is not, (which is more than 20 US dollars), because my mind would go to 20 pesos which is less than 2 US dollars.

Tip number 5, *be prepared to not really understand or like the food or how the people choose the way they eat.*

If you are a picky eater as I am, and are used to the hormones of the US meat, Spain animal products have no hormones added as they are free roaming in the country side, which is good, but it confused my taste buds. I also don't like vegetables, so I was not able to have much food choices. That's just me, my family have struggled with my pickiness. People here do accommodate you, whether if you are a picky eater, vegan or vegetarian. They don't hassle you for your food choices. They do ask why you choose to live as a vegetarian or vegan, as you need meat in order to survive the long winters here and they think being a vegetarian permits you to eat ham. They eat at about 2pm, and have a first entry food choice, such as vegetables, a second main course, such as meat and French fries, a dessert like a piece of cake and after you finish eating your dessert, they offer you coffee, or "café con leche." They usually wait until everyone has finished each course in order to bring you the next course. This takes up to two hours to eat lunch. We, as Americans are not used to it, as we are always worried about time. We only have 30 minutes for lunch. This could be one of the perks of eating in such a long fashion because it brings people closer as they converse about their day.

Tip number 6, *have an international phone service added to your cell phone or buy a cheap cell phone once you get there to communicate with your loved ones.*

I was not able to buy a cell phone at the airport since I got there at midnight and everything was closed. I tried to buy one in Leon, but I needed my passport to buy one, and even though if I would of have it on me on that day we visited Leon for a Red Cross meeting, there were only two left in the store. An alternative that you may have is using your current phone with the whatsapp application. You can only use it with WI fi, but you can text or even call. This helped me to reach my loved ones.

Tip number 7, *have a topic and some sample questions for your ethnographic research before coming to your place of study and be prepared to take notes anytime, or place.*

When I came to Spain, I had already mentioned to one of the other students that was coming to the program that I wanted to research machismo. I did not have questions in mind by then, I did once I got here. You need at least a small notebook, a pen, and or rely on your notepad on your cell phone. Have in handy where to store your notes when you are out because at any moment or place you may find pertinent information or even people that you may want to interview. Take lots of photos with your cell phone, this will help you with visuals and with the date it was taken. This happened to me all the time, having so many information to write, even when I was collaborating with the Red Cross. When we visited the elderly to check on their "Teleasistencia," they would start talking about their past and one of the



recurring themes that would come up was machismo, even though they would describe machismo, but they didn't straight out say it.

Tip number 8, *be prepared to live with students and forming bonds with them at the beginning but don't be surprised if by the end of the study abroad program, that closeness begins to fade with some of them.*

Be prepared to be with students who have different personalities than your own. Make the best of it, be part of the team, but feel free to work alone if there is too much going on. This can be a possibility. Don't worry about not being liked or even being excluded, that is real life. You need to know how to handle situations like this because in life you encounter things like that. Take a deep breath and rely on people that are mature and keep on working and studying. Remember that you came here to learn. Having many people that are from different ages, and are more worried about other things than what you come here to learn, will not hinder your spirit. Being in an enclosed space can get loud and you may not be able to do your work. Go to a café, drink a cup of coffee and work, or go to your classroom. If living with girls doesn't prepare you for the real world, then you are not ready for it.

Tip number 9, *be prepared to be close to your host family and forming bonds with them.*

One of the best things you get to experience is being at the home stays. A family in Spain welcomes you in their home as well as in their family. You get to see first-hand how a family is. Each family is different, but to be able to have the privilege to be sharing your life with a host family is great. My "Home stay mother," as we lovingly named our host family matriarch, is Sandra Martins Suarez. Our "Home stay father" is Sandra's husband Jesus "Chuchi" along with their three sons, Oscar who is 18, Yoel is 10, and Evan 6 years old. They have three dogs Kity, Ethan, and Laila who is a Labrador.

Tip number 10, *be prepared for long days and manage your time efficiently.*

I would have liked to have spent more time with our home stay family because if we as a group, stay in a rural house we form bonds with each other who come from our university, but when we go to our homestays, we form bonds with them also. There is not much time to really get to know each other because of lack of time. People here wake up at a later time, like ten or eleven a.m. is when you start to see the town to be lively. After lunch, they have a "Siesta," time, (sleeping/napping), and then at about six you start to see people coming out to town and later at night going to a bar to drink and have a conversation. We had so many sleepless nights because we would stay up late in order to write our daily observations, or our research data. Forming bonds with our university peers is a good thing but we as students also form bonds with our homestay family. When one of the students from my University, Nicolasa, and I came to our home stay, we had to wait two extra days in order to stay there. Once we were there, we only would have breakfast and dinner and sleep there. We felt that we needed to make time to be with our home stay family but at the same time, we did not have time to really work in our research. We felt we were going to be rude if we were only working and not bonding with them. The benefits of staying at home stays is that of also knowing the other student's family. If there is

time, the family would get to know the group by inviting us to their place. For instance, a home stay family from “El Barrio de Las Ollas,” along with Ceferino Gil from the Red Cross invited the group to their “paella,” and their celebration of the saint San Juan.

Tip number 11, *don't stress and make time for your enjoyment while abroad.*

Even though you may think there is so much to do and you don't have time to do so, take a stroll down the town you are in like “El Negrillon Plaza” on Mondays in the market, or go to a bar restaurant like “Bar Central,” or “El Viejo,” to drink a coffee, or why not a glass of wine? You sometimes need to destress from your daily activities, go out, and gather yourself and gain strength for another work day or night. Going to the restaurants like “Bar Central,” or “El Viejo,” gives you the opportunity not only to taste the food of Spain and have a typical lunch that they have here, but also it makes you to get to know the people from the establishments and the community. This way you get to kill two birds with one stone, you have a good time, and you gather information for your observational research. Studying abroad brings you many destressing opportunities by having many outings with the group of student's to places like Leon; visiting the Red Cross and the city, going to Bilbao; visiting the Guggenheim Museum, going to Gijon to the beach and drinking cider, visiting Lois, a historical town, going to Roman ruins in La Olmeda, and so on.

Tip number 12, *observe and take what you learn and implement it in your studies once you are back to your country and your community.*



Being able to study abroad has many enriching experiences, besides the fact that you get to see a culture and country different from your own, you get to learn from your service learning. In this case, the Red Cross. The Red Cross collaborates with 276 companies that give contracted employments to the homeless peoples that the Red Cross help. One of the services that the Red Cross helps with is with the heating for the homes of the people that can't afford it. They also give out credit cards for the people to be able to buy food. For helping the homeless people's, they usually go out at night and hand out coffee and have a conversation with them and asked them to come to the office some time to see what they could help them with. There are also yoga classes for the homeless. When the homeless people get any type of surgery, Red Cross volunteers go and visit them because they usually don't have family around to be with them in their time of need. One collaborative project that the Red Cross has is the well-known artists, Manuel Sierra, that has an excursion of photos with the homeless people in order to show us how the homeless see the city. The Red Cross helps refugees from Syria in which they would have them in a building floor solely for them and they would have men in another place. There is a major need of integration for the people that immigrate. Currently there are 12 projects of employment. The Red Cross has a humanitarian diplomacy with the various companies in order to be able to collaborate with the Red Cross. It is called CEM, it is an emergency center. When there is a situation of violence towards the women they Red Cross has an unmarked vehicle that would remove the women and children, and they would call the police and help the women with the process. Women have a button that they can press and get response from the Red Cross if they feel unsafe. There is also a program that helps the elderly with a button that they can press if they fall down and can't get up or if they have an emergency, sort of like a life alert. The elderly has a geo tag also on them when they are in the first stages of Alzheimer's and they don't want to lose their autonomy. The Red Cross also help place children in foster care. With problems with the youth, when the youth drink in public places it is called "botellon," and they get cited by the police and they will do public service on a stop check point with a breathalyzer. The Red Cross has a garden at a park where the elderly, homeless, and volunteers keep up. They help with global warming information and they pick up trash around the community. ERIE psychosocial is helping people with their traumas with professional psychologists. They have a portable inflatable hospital that will be up and running in 25 minutes. I love the idea of having a well know artist to collaborate with the homeless and be able for them to take photos of how they see the city. I think this would be a great project to bring back to Monterey County. I found it interesting that the Red Cross helps women and children that are in a violent situation. In the US this is a separate form in which the Red Cross does not act on. The government or other organizations do this. But I loved how the Red Cross goes above and beyond to help various types of emergencies and social problems of various types of peoples. I also found interesting how they help women who are not just only in a domestic violence but are separated and or have not worked before. It is interesting to have a button for women that do not feel safe and the Red Cross will respond, this can be applied at the US also. The programs they offer were the phone assistance where the elderly had a red button with a string attached to it and they can press it when they need some assistance. A box with a speaker made of plastic is the way in which the Red Cross can communicate with the elderly in an emergency. In the case of an emergency that the Red Cross needs to get into the elderly's home, a neighbor needs to have a set of keys in order for the Red Cross people to be able to get inside and be able to help the elderly that needs assistance. I took a picture of the device she was talking to us about. Ana was



telling us that the program of having a geotag for the elderly was only available in León. They also provide wheelchairs, beds, and other disability equipment. She explained to us that we would be doing various things such as phone assistance, selling lottery tickets for fundraising called “Soto del Oro” where the prizes would be gold or gold products. While selling tickets we would also be explaining to the people what the Red Cross consists of. We would also be visiting and talking to the elderly, etc.



We would also be doing food inventory in order for us to be able and disperse that food to the needy people. The food is 2,000 kilos. Ceferino Gil spoke to us about the 7 fundamental principles that the Red Cross follow. These seven fundamental

principles are Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Unity, and Universal. He also told us about how children from two schools would do a race fundraiser in which sponsors would donate money for how many times they would complete a race. They would then give children water and a banana for their participation. This is needed in order to raise money for the Red Cross. He also told us how the Red Cross started in a battle of France vs Italy and a doctor saw that there were many wounded and no one would help them. He enlisted the help of women and children to help heal and transport the women. While transporting the wounded, they would have to pass in between the battle and in order for them not to be killed, they used the blood of the wounded and they did a Red Cross for them not to be identified as a soldier. Ceferino was helping students prepare three boxes with rice, milk, pasta, cookies, coffee, sugar, etc.

Tip number 13, *take your time and pay close attention to people and to your surroundings: you will learn from them.*

As I mentioned before, I noticed that the town sleeps in and I think it is because the people stay up late drinking and socializing. Being preoccupied of having to complete assignments has made me stressed and I stay up late to try to complete them. Because of this I haven't been able to really pay attention to what businesses and houses are around the “Plaza El Grillon”. Who even knew that there was a jewelry store here? With the hustle and bustle of people, focusing only for doing assigned homework you easily lose your sense of focus around your surroundings and miss many important information of the town. I found it interesting that there is a mixture of businesses, houses, and what seemed to be abandoned second, third, or even fourth floor buildings. I didn't even notice the first few days that there were many 3 or 4 story buildings because I was so busy thinking of getting things done during the day. This is the first time I get

to map a place and I want to take advantage of the experience that it gave me to really get to appreciate where I am and I my thought is that people from Boñar would feel proud that I took the time to map not only the businesses, but also houses, and or abandoned buildings that probably others would not have thought as important. When I did home visits to the “Teleasistencia” elderly for my service learning with the Red Cross, we visited Agripina who told us she was married at age 17. I noticed that in her wedding photo, her wedding dress was black including her veil. Ceferino told us that there were many deaths, that life expectancy was very short, people died at around age 30 to 40 years old, and that when there were weddings and the bride would wear a black dress was usually because they were in mourning from someone they had lost. I took a photo of one of Agripina’s still life painting of a bowl of fruits. We went to Adrados to visit Domingo Cortes Arquello, one of the Teleasistencia recipient. Domingo is an interesting fellow, he showed us many signed photos of famous soccer players from Real Madrid, like Maradona, and Pelé. He knew them personally because Domingo had a bar restaurant called “Lancaster” in Madrid for fifty years. He retired 10 years ago. He showed us his collection in his personal mini museum. He had various items that many people didn’t want or need like an iron to iron your clothes that you would heat up in the stove or ones that you would have to put hot coals in. He had individualized personalized church recliners, “reclinatorios,” in which the individual attending mass would kneel. He had specialized shoes that would keep your feet warm during the winter time called “Albarcas.” He had hunted boars, deer, and other animals and he displayed their heads at the museum. He has weaved baskets and ceramic baskets. I took various photos and videos of all his collection. I had asked him what was his favorite piece in the collection and he responded that all the items are important to him. When we went to visit Domingo, I told him that most of the young generation don’t seem to care about things in the past. I am really happy to see that he cares. I love things from the past, I told him that I also have an iron from Mexico that was my grandmas. I like hearing stories about the past and being able to see items makes it even more special. I wish I can do something to make his collection available to the world. We need more people like him. At the town of “Felechas,” I felt very privileged to have met Gertrudis, the 100-year-old woman because I have never met someone from that age and I think it is a rarity to get to live to that age.



Tip number 14, *have some souvenirs of your culture and place of residence to give as gifts to people that helped you in Spain.*



I was really moved at how Spaniards welcome you and help you, like your home stay or your interviewees and people you collaborate with for your service learning, such as the Red Cross. I also was grateful for the people that helped us with accommodations and the people that made different plates of food so we could have choices. If I only knew how many people I would get to get to know and appreciate, I would have brought extra souvenirs.

Tip number 15, *feel free to give and ask for contact information while studying abroad.*

You can network and also have contact with the people you became close with. Our host mom asked for our Facebook and we gladly added her as a friend. Whatsapp also is a good way to be in contact as anywhere in the world it is a common way to be in contact with. Make sure to say that you really appreciate them.

I hope these tips and my experiences will help future international service students as well as other students.