



Global Learning Term: Some Keys to Academic Success



Any number of factors enables some GLT students to stay focused, organized, and self-regulated throughout their GLT, while others get stuck or take early “exits” from their intended course. But *all* can be biased towards academic and intercultural success by following some basic guidelines.

1. Talk to your host family and new friends about your study and writing requirements.

They need to know why you sometimes need “alone time” or have to say “no” to social invitations. Once you introduce yourself as an explorer-investigator-writer, they will make allowances for your “cave” time. Help them to become your academic cheerleaders. Some students even ask their host families to hold them accountable to their academic work (e.g., “How much progress have you made in your Family Organization report?”).

2. Determine from the start what value your written work will have.

A unique temptation for students in education abroad programs is to pit “experiencing the culture” against “writing the journey.” Analytic writing, at its best, is a mode of being, a way of responding to experience. If, from the outset, you regard your reading and writing as *inseparable* from chance encounters and informal chats, you will position yourself to optimize the educational potential of their interplay. Determine in advance that your academic activities and field experience will have an undivided purpose: to gain fresh perspectives on the wider world.

3. Limit internship hours.

Most of the community organizations that accept us as interns will want *all of us*. They hope to get as much “mileage” from our in-country time and energy as possible. Being unfamiliar with the full range of your academic responsibilities, they may expect you to put in a 40-hour workweek. *Before* “signing on the dotted line” as a volunteer, explain your real time constraints: that you are a student enrolled in a credit-bearing academic program; that the program requires lots of reading, research and writing; and that the internship is just one of several academic processes that you must manage while abroad. Negotiate a work schedule that does not exceed 12-15 hours per week.

4. Create a task timeline of projects and tasks.

Few students have ever completed a semester’s worth of structured learning in a completely *self-directed mode*. “Schooling” has typically involved traditional classrooms, scheduled class times, and instructor-controlled tasks. As dutiful students, we have learned to show up to class, perhaps

take some notes, and then turn in assignments according to a pre-determined schedule. The GLT changes all of this up. Students, not classrooms and instructors, are responsible to establish the study and research schedule. They must learn to be self-regulated, self-motivated, and self-organized. That is why so many swear by a task timeline. The timeline lays out the various *projects* (e.g., language learning, family ethnography, internship, and community research), the *time frames* associated with each project (e.g., July 15 through Aug. 30 for language learning), and the step-by-step *tasks* associated with each project. Although the timeline will likely be revised numerous times, it imposes structure and accountability on a learning process that is essentially autonomous, creative, and self-determined.

5. Identify places for reflection and writing.

“Success” in this type of global learning requires that we find a groove, a rhythm, an optimal balance in the physical, emotional, spiritual, social, and intellectual dimensions of our community life. This is especially true if we are living in low-income settlements, where households lack ample space, quiet, electricity, and Internet connectivity. Academically, this means that we search out special *places* where we can pull away, catch up on reading, complete course tasks within the time frames we establish for ourselves, and communicate with our academic supervisors. Agatha Christie wrote in her bathtub. Ernest Hemingway worked standing up in his at his desk. Truman Capote composed his many novels while lying in bed. If private space isn’t available in the house where you’re staying, look for places in the surrounding community that are conducive to academic labor. For some students that will be in loud, crowded cafes where multiple conversations fuse into a white noise buzz. Others will need a quiet, almost solitary, environment to concentrate for long stretches of time. Ask host family members, neighbors, or local students to suggest air-conditioned and Wi-Fi enabled coffee shops, hotel lobbies, libraries, NGO offices, or retreat centers. Then try out these places to see which works best for you.

6. Find zones of re-creation.

We’re more than intellectual beings, and the GLT is more than a series of academic tasks. Besides searching out places for reflection and writing, we also need zones of refreshment and re-creation. Many of us will be living and working in places that test our physical and emotional limits. What we see constantly pulls us into deprivation and pain. The enormity of it all can be overwhelming, leaving us feeling despondent and a bit jaded. We need places where we can step away from the hardship, find refreshment, celebrate the beauty of the world, and renew our hope. Our “zone” might be found through sessions of mindful yoga, a periodic jaunt to a pollution-free village, a quiet, riverside café with great food and music, or a weekly prayer service with vibrant, socially conscious believers. In I Kings 19, God deals with the stressed out prophet Elijah who is running away from Jezebel frightened and depressed. Elijah wants to lie down and die, but God sees his condition and allows him to receive much-needed rest, food, and water. Only then is he led into his life tasks. The lesson for us is that we need to look after ourselves, making sure we get the rest, exercise, and celebration we need to re-create and serve. How will you care for yourself within your host community?

7. Develop a sustainable rhythm of work, rest, and reflection.

We’ve identified the *spaces* for reflection and writing, stability and refreshment. But we will also need a regular *rhythm* that optimizes those spaces on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis. This may prove to be harder than it sounds. In many resource-poor and over-crowded cities, everything seems to take two or three times as long as they do back home. In sub-Saharan Africa, the “slowly-slowly” approach to life seems to pervade all aspects of life—arrival and departure, work and leisure, construction and study. We can try to overcome this slowness by adopting a ridiculous Day-timer task schedule, effectively subordinating ‘being’ and ‘relating’ to ‘work.’ But instead of focusing on

how much, think more about *how*. Yes, there is work to do. But the balance between work, rest, and reflection/study will be discovered through contemplation and not compulsion.

- On a *daily* basis, arrange a place and time to fix a cup of tea or coffee, sit quietly and gratefully before God, do some inspirational reading, and recharge the batteries. Also, perhaps at day's end, harvest course-related insights in a notebook or electronic journal of some kind. One GLT student living in the middle of Kolkata (India), one of the toughest places on earth, wrote one of the most insightful GLT reports ever. Her strategy? Before going to bed, she took 30 minutes to write rough "jotted notes" (hand-written or word-processed) from the day that captured insights for one or more GLT courses she was working on.
- Each week, take one full "study day" in the five-star environment of your choosing. Convert jotted notes into more refined word-processed docs. Do intensive, course-related reading. Plan the next week's academic and service tasks.
- Also each week, take one day completely "off" with friends (preferably foreign) to do what refreshes you. Go to a gym or favorite restaurant. Take in a movie. Stroll through a park. Okay, you might even go to an air-conditioned mall.
- Once each month, take two or three days *out of the city*. With local friends in the region, travel to a clean, quiet, and inspiring place (e.g. hill station or beach) to catch up on rest, take nature walks, view starry skies, contemplate ultimate meanings, do some personal writing, and get re-energized for your regular study and service regimen.

Note: Although most GLT students 'rough it' in disadvantaged sections of world cities, there are some who arrange homestays and internships where they have to struggle, not against daily deprivations, but against living as one of the few elites in an otherwise poverty-stricken city. If you are one of those residing in an upscale neighborhood, having 24/7 wireless access in your home (and all the temptations that come with that; see below), and spending way too much 'down' time in malls and trendy cafes, the rhythm outlined above may need to be adjusted in the opposite direction.

8. Replace procrastination with discipline.

Procrastination is the most common obstacle to any artistic process, including culture and language learning. Neglecting to take notes on a significant incident soon after it occurs robs your entries of clarity, detail, immediacy, and vibrancy. Prose becomes homogenized and generalized. Yes, writing about memorable events days, even weeks, after the fact is better than never. But the end result often reads like a dim and lifeless news report. Stop telling yourself that you don't have enough time, or that you can afford to postpone to some later date. Adhere to the "24-hour rule": Type up any relevant field notes within 24 hours of the observational or interviewing event. This will encourage you to recall and report the facts accurately without "cooking" (contriving detail for) them.

9. Exercise restraint in the time spent managing your "online presence."

Social and entertainment media tools like Facebook, Twitter, Skype, blogs, LinkedIn, and YouTube make possible long-distance communication and personal enjoyment. They can also have important educational benefits—for one's self and others. The problem is they tend to *create a buffer* against taking risks and enjoying (or suffering) the consequences of direct, physical involvement in the life of the host community. Spending hours on Skype calls or browsing hundreds of friends' and acquaintances' profiles does provide a sense of temporary connection and wellbeing. But that is precisely the problem. Social media are safe—too safe. They harbor us from the threat of what is

unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable in the calm waters of being liked. Especially in cross-cultural settings, with abundant opportunities to be stretched and changed, being 'liked' is a cheap substitute for learning to love. For that we must regularly unplug, venture outdoors, and put ourselves in real relation to real people.



We are oftentimes reluctant to do this because of two real dangers. The strangers we encounter may begin to shatter our online image of being a cool, kind, attractive, in-control, and eminently likable person. Then there is the possibility that we might actually begin to love some of those we encounter. And who knows what might happen to us then. If you, like most, are spending too much time online, here's what you can do:

1. Reflect on some of the hazards of exporting online habits from home to foreign worlds:
 - Read (and contest, if you can) Neal Graber's *New York Times* article, "The Elusive Big Idea." http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/14/opinion/sunday/the-elusive-big-idea.html?_r=1
 - Read: Robert Kaplan, "Being There": <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/11/being-there/309108/>
 - Read: "How Facebook can Ruin Study Abroad": <http://chronicle.com/article/How-Facebook-Can-Ruin-Study/136633/>
2. Begin to replace wall-to-wall exchanges with face-to-face conversations.
3. Join your host family and national co-workers in regular and special events (religious services, weddings, visits with extended family members, parades, etc.).
4. Join a local group that does what you love—sports, music, dances, art, etc. Discover how *they* approach it, and learn it well.
5. Prepare a Weekly Progress Report for your academic supervisor that responds to two self-auditing questions:
 - How many hours this week did you spend in non-coursework related communication and entertainment—Facebook, instant messaging, Skype calls, Netflix or YouTube movies, television re-runs, and the like?
 - How do you feel about your media use (benefits vs. costs)?

So what does it mean, spiritually, to be constantly engaged with the social media tool in one's hand and thus in some ways only tangentially connected to the living, breathing social (and natural) network all around? To practice mindful spirituality means to watch one's breath, to quiet oneself in order to be able to hear the still, small voice of the Spirit. Is that voice squelched by the twittering chatter of digital media? (Jim Rice, editor of *Sojourners*, <http://blog.sojo.net/2011/06/08/can-mindfulness-be-tweeted/>)

Abandon your mobile phone, laptop, iPod and all such links to family, friends and work colleagues. Concentrate on where you are, deriving your entertainment from immediate stimuli, the tangible world around you. Increasingly, in hostels and guesthouses, one sees 'independent' travelers eagerly settling down in front of computers instead of conversing with fellow travelers. They seem only partially 'abroad,' unable to cut their links with home. Evidently the nanny state—and the concomitant trend among parents to over-protect offspring—has alarmingly diminished the younger generation's self-reliance. And who is to blame for this entrapment in cyberspace? Who but the fussy folk back at base, awaiting the daily (even twice daily) email of reassurance. (Derva Murphy <http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2009/jan/03/dervla-murphy-travel-tips?page=all>)