Save the Last Bath for Me: Conveying Everyday Knowledge to a Colleague

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Author's note: I have given my colleague a pseudonym. I rely on my own observations from the trip for evidence of what Veronica thought, and all the conclusions are my own. I did not interview Veronica for her version of events or her thinking at the time. All mistaken inferences are mine and mine alone.

Everyday knowledge versus specialized knowledge

The Carthage Symposium is a team-taught, interdisciplinary course that is intended to provide students with the experience of approaching a particular problem from different analytic frameworks. Carthage College faculty with an expertise in Asia often choose to offer a Symposium during the January Term (J-Term), when demands for required courses are less pressing and when colleagues are willing to team-teach courses. I have taught two Carthage Symposia that brought students to Asia; one of these was with another Asia area specialist and the other was with a colleague who had taught an Asian art history course but who did not consider herself an area specialist.

For both courses, however, the first choice to be made was the other instructor. My non-Asianist co-instructor, Veronica, was interested in leading a J-Term course to Japan when I proposed the idea. Since she taught art history, we created a course, "Globalization and Artistic Production in Japan," that would explore how Japan's changing place in the global division of labor has affected what works of art are produced, in what volume, and by whom. I cast myself not as a subject matter

specialist (even though I expected to convey what I knew about Japan's economic history) but as a "localization" expert. I have never formally studied Japanese art, and so we divided the labor by giving me the political economy portfolio and Veronica the art history portfolio. In fact, most of the course's content was art history, but that was fine with me, since I was providing "local knowledge." I was in charge of choosing our overall itinerary; making reservations for lodging, transportation, and activities; and operations on the ground like translating, ticket-buying, and communicating with hostel managers.

Our schedule included activities that focused on the theme of the course, such as exploring Nijō Castle, experiencing Hōryūji, and taking a silk-painting class in Kanazawa. Yet our de facto division of labor between expert knowledge of art history and local knowledge of how to travel in Japan led to an unintentional focus on Japan's everyday features. This was not what we had intended, and was an inversion of the expected focus on the expert knowledge that academic training provides.[1] Although leaders of J-Term courses that travel abroad often claim that the quotidian experiences are what students really take away from their courses, faculty go into the project saying that they will introduce students to expert knowledge. The professors are often disappointed at the amount of expert knowledge conveyed, although students usually say that the J-Term abroad courses succeed in conveying the knowledge that the syllabus lists in its statement of learning objectives. Why? In truth, the expert knowledge that is the formal aim of the course and the everyday knowledge that fascinates students run together during the trip. One lesson that "Globalization and Artistic Production in Japan" taught me is that students' natural focus on the everyday can present problems for the faculty member who brings only the expert knowledge of her discipline. Veronica was frustrated when she was unable to explain what students observed and was dependent on me for information, just like the students. This information asymmetry made it harder

for Veronica to take ownership of the course and the trip was not as satisfying for her, or me, as it might have been.

I learned that it was the task of the "Asia hand" to give his or her colleague some of that everyday knowledge in order to reduce the asymmetry and allow both instructors to take ownership of the class. Differences in expert knowledge are part of the Symposium plan, but differences in local knowledge must be considered also. The Asia hand can go a long way toward preventing the problem by discussing the everyday both before and during the trip, and in that way preserve collegiality, equality, and teaching effectiveness. Below I list some of the problems that led me into the information asymmetry trap, followed by some remedies.

Problem #1: My Japan is not for everybody

Everyday Japan, for the participants in the course, was my idiosyncratic version of Japan. I had several reasons, which I fancied to be pedagogical, for doing things my way. I needed to keep costs in bounds, as I had while I had lived in Japan as a graduate student. I wanted to have the students travel like students, which most of them had not done before. I wanted to model environmental consciousness, and I wanted to show students what I consider to be the key legacies of Japan's modern history. I framed Japan as I had wanted to present it, and because I was in charge of "Japan" there were no challenges to that frame.

This framing had a couple of practical consequences. First, the group was going to stay in hostels, not business hotels or *minshuku* (both of which were also possibilities). Hostels require (sex-segregated) communal bathing, for which Japan is famous, but which does not agree with many North Americans, including Veronica. I reassured her that there are "family baths" available, where she could lock the door and have the bath to herself; as it happened, neither the hostel in Kyoto nor the one in Kanazawa had such an option. Bathing privately required either careful timing or posting a guard, and communal bathing was a source of stress for Veronica.

My choice of lodging also dictated participation in the other communal aspect of Japanese hostels: the group had breakfast and dinner each day at the hostel. I chose this route to save money and illustrate a tool of budget travel, but I found that the meals also provided some time for community building and class discussion. The fact that dinner was "required" also ensured that students ate something that was not fast food, especially in Kyoto (this advantage became clearer in Tokyo, where dinner was not included with the hostel). The downsides of my choice were, first, having to ride herd on students to make sure they ate the meals that the hostels served, and second, having an additional 90 minutes of "on" time with the students every day. Here again Veronica wished for a bit more privacy than I had incorporated in the first 10 days of the trip.

The second practical consequence of cost-conscious, student-appropriate travel was our reliance on public transportation. There were a number of pedagogical advantages to public transportation. Students were responsible for their own luggage and so had to travel light, and they had to act like adults. They were responsible for getting from point A to point B. Because I had done all of the logistical planning myself, though, I was the only one in the group with advance knowledge. Until we were at the station and the tickets were distributed, I had to be a task-master. This wore on me and sometimes made the trip unnecessarily arduous. For example, I planned to travel to Nara and Himeji using a five-day Kansai-area rail pass. This saved us some money, but it required us to ride in unreserved cars on local trains. This made the ride from Kyoto to Himeji into a two-hour strap-hang—acceptable for 20-year-old college students but less fun for faculty.

The third consequence of my approach to J-Term travel was encouragement of exploration without a guide. This was fully intended, but it did not work as smoothly as I had imagined. Students loved the home stays in the town for which I once worked on the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program 20 years earlier (although I now owe a great debt of gratitude to my friends and those they recruited as host families). On the flip

side, students complained that Kanazawa was boring. They did not really embrace independent exploration until we got to Tokyo for the final third of the 18-day trip. It was in the encouragement of ever-greater independent exploration that my approach really paid off.

For Veronica, though, my approach was less than ideal, even though I had reassured her many times prior to the trip that everything would be great and that she could leave all the arrangements to me. Veronica felt stressed by the lack of privacy and by the feeling that she was not in control. Trying to find privacy for bathing at the youth hostels, sharing a room with the eight women students at Eiheiji,[2] sharing the homestay room with a student, and relying on me for travel details all made her trip more stressful, less engaging, and more alienating than it needed to be.

Problem #2: My Japan is not necessarily "authentic"

In retrospect, I caused a lot of the discomfort for my colleague in my quest to present an authentic experience in Japan. But there is no such thing as authentic. My control over even the part of the curricular agenda that implicated expert knowledge was almost total. Our itinerary focused on the relatively distant past, on Buddhist art, and on crafts such as pottery and silk. I chose Hōryūji, the Nishijin silk museum, the Kutani porcelain museum, and Kaga yūzen silk painting. Veronica approved these choices, but I did not press her to identify what she felt important about Japanese art, and it was clear that she was more geared toward contemporary art and printmaking. While Kutani porcelain is worthwhile, Veronica's list of interesting art would have added depth to the course. My version of authentic took over the agenda, which affected not just logistics and itinerary but the content of the course as well.

Care and feeding of one's colleagues

My approach to travel and my itinerary were neither "authentic" nor essential to a successful exploration of "Globalization and Artistic Production in Japan." It would have

been smarter to respect Veronica's preferences about travel (at least her own travel) and her expert knowledge. By the time we got to Kanzawa, midway through the J-Term course, I had figured this out (In Tokyo we agreed that Veronica would take charge of the National Museum, and she focused on painting), but I offer the following advice to let other Asia specialists avoid the steep part of the learning curve.

- Be thorough in explaining the ramifications of all your "area specialist" and "cost containment" decisions.
- Incorporate your colleague's expert knowledge into both the curriculum and itinerary planning for the trip.
- Do not let your area expertise turn you into a "trip hog."
- In many ways, the everyday is everything; make your nonspecialist partner a part of the discovery process.
- Make sure that you are a good student of whatever your colleague is teaching (whether it is subject matter expertise, how to be a good traveler, or how to learn a new environment).

My colleague Wenjie Sun (see her accompanying description of a J-Term course in China) did a better job on these tasks than I did, but I suppose I had to learn for myself where the pitfalls lay. I failed to take the privacy issues with regard to bathing and bedrooms seriously enough. How essential, after all, is group bathing to the goals of the course? It would have been fine to get Veronica her own room at Eiheiji or for the home stay, and the quality of the trip would not have suffered in the slightest. Did we all need to stand up on the train? Probably not. This apologia does not mean that the course was a failure. Veronica brought Hōryūji to life for the students in a way that I could not. By the time we were in Tokyo, she no longer felt dependent on me for getting around. Veronica validated the concept and execution of the course in a way that the students could not. The lesson here is that I should have brought her

expertise into the planning, and not just the tour-guiding, for the trip.

Endnotes

[1]The notions of expert and local knowledge here owe much to the discussion by scholar of Southeast Asia and political science James Scott (1998).

[2]A main Sōtō Zen temple that offers overnight accommodation to those wishing to see what zen training is like.

Reference

Scott, James. *Seeing Like State*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.