Case Studies
Embracing the contrast between the expected and the real: Seeking authenticity in
global contexts
AAC&U Global Learning in College – Ft. Lauderdale, Fl. - Oct. 2015
Steve Grande, Bethany Zaiman - Mary Baldwin College
Renee Staton – James Madison University

Authentic Souvenirs?
Annie and Kyle are part of a group of faculty and students attending an academic
conference held in Cherokee, North Carolina. During a break in the conference
sessions they decide to explore the area including the local museums and shops that
are part of the Cherokee Reservation. While exploring they see many different
representations of the Cherokee Nation and Native Americans, including regalia that
is historically associated with the Plains Indians instead of the Cherokee Nation.
Kyle buys multiple gifts, excited to return home with “authentic” Cherokee
souvenirs. Annie, on the other hand, recognizes that the things she saw were
historically associated with other Indian Nations and is critical of this dissonance.
She ends the trip feeling disappointed in her experience with the Cherokee Nation
and aggrevated by the mixed representation she witnessed.

Tornado Relief
As part of a professional development program a group of faculty and staff from a
university traveled to a community several hundreds of miles away to perform
disaster relief after the community was ravaged by a series of tornados a year
earlier. The group was somewhat “leaderless” and had no expectations for “pre-
reflection” prior to the project or reflection during the week-long program. Members
of the group expressed to each other that they expected to see jaw-dropping
destruction, but in reality the indications of tornado damage were mainly an
occasional boarded up business, a closed school, or parks littered with waste. On
occasion the group would see more overt signs of unequivocal damage. In those
instances a group member would alert the others, point out the example that
reinforced the expectations, and the group would instantly grab their cameras.

Before the group returned home they discovered a book that had been published
locally that detailed the destruction of the tornados through stunning before and
after photos. On the last night of the trip the group gathered at an area bar with a
couple of local individuals who were helping direct volunteers. After the locals left,
the group began talking about whether they “made a difference.” One individual
described how emotional it was seeing the before and after photos in the book, but wondered whether they really did anything to improve things. Another commented that perhaps if they had been doing more rebuilding work, as opposed to going to schools to tutor and senior centers to spend time with older adults, they may have made a more long term contribution.

A Life Changing Homestay
After two years of hard work in college, Robert took the summer between his sophomore and junior year to study in East Africa. Robert was excited about the applied and practical elements in this program and having a chance to hang out with 23 other students. Robert, though, was quietly concerned about the homestay component of the program. He decided to go in with an “open mind” and just not have any expectations whatsoever. He did wonder about all sorts of potential conflicts and concerns: What if he did not like his host family’s food? What if he needed more privacy? What if they expected him to attend religious observances? What if he wanted more electricity than was available?

The first night after Robert’s arrival at his new family’s house, he was lying in bed wondering how this arrangement was going to work for nearly 8 weeks. The family seemed nice and the food was surprisingly good. Conversation seemed difficult though. He felt like they didn’t understand him and at times he felt like he barely understood the family. Clearly this was an impoverished family and he thought that “they are only being nice to me, because they have to.”

After three weeks, it surprised Robert to discover that he cared deeply about his family and they clearly cared about him. From making him great food, to walking him to his internship site, they showered him with love. He thought that even though they were living in poverty they were still remarkably sweet and clearly had a special connection with him. Challenges like limited electricity, communication gaps, and the restrooms had faded into the background. Robert instead started wondering how he could help his family that had been so kind and dedicated to him. One issue that plagued Robert was seeing the father have to walk several miles to work daily. Several weeks later, while working at his internship site, Robert learned about a motorcycle that was available for purchase. Without hesitation Robert purchased the motorcycle and on his last night he made a brief presentation to his host family explaining what a unique relationship they had established. Robert noted that as he imagined returning home and thinking about his host family he needed to thank them, by also making their lives better. He took a photo of the family and then presented the motorcycle. He could not wait to see the reaction on their faces.
Misrepresenting Mexico

Cecilia works in her university’s international office. She and her peers frequently work with students who are looking for study abroad programs. One part of her job is to talk with students about different countries and regions where they can study and to give the students a brief overview of that country’s beliefs and customs. One day Cecilia overheard her coworker describing Mexico to a new student. Her coworker, who had a negative experience when she studied abroad last semester, spent a long time talking about the various dangers that exist in Mexico, focusing on drug cartels and government corruption. Before the new student left Cecilia heard the new student remark on what a scary place Mexico seemed to be.