2013 Learning Clusters: Opportunities for National & International Research and Contributive Outreach

**Contributed By:** Academic Affairs  
**Date:** Feb 1, 2013

Through the generous funding support from the Luis and Linda Nieves Family Foundation, Soka University of America’s (SUA) 2013 Learning Cluster students ventured internationally to Brazil, Argentina, Belgium, Germany, France, Japan, South Korea, India, and Canada and nationally to San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Portland. Students researched global issues and concerns and carried the Soka spirit of compassion through unique opportunities for contributive outreach, creating value in meaningful ways throughout their travels. Learning Cluster faculty have reported on their memorable academic travel experiences:

**Participatory Photography and Justice in Brazil - Ian Read, Assistant Professor of Latin American Studies**

This January, 12 SUA students visited the Valley of Jequitinhonha, one of Brazil’s poorer regions, to participate in a Participatory Photography program. Olhares em Foco of Childfund Brasil provided the personnel, training and accommodations for the 12 SUA students involved in this Learning Cluster. Students traveled 16 hours by bus into the northern region of Minas Gerais, a large central state of Brazil. They lived in minimal conditions, sleeping on mats, bearing bug bites, hand-washing laundry, and cold showering when water was available. These small discomforts were quickly ignored and forgotten in light of the community’s warm welcome, new friendships that quickly and deeply developed, and the value of the project for the community. Groups of SUA students mixed with local adolescents visiting rural and urban homes, many of them exceedingly poor, to create a vision of social conditions. Students befriended families who lived in precarious conditions, some with food instability and child malnourishment.

The group of students engaged in social action through “Participatory Photography.” This technique of social engagement and justice building has been in practice for several decades, but has become a more usable and effective tool in today’s world of inexpensive cameras and social media. The idea is that by giving or lending cameras and the ability to use them to communities that face deep social injustice, the community members gain the power to author (and thus command) their conception of justice and liberation. The students of the Brazil Learning Cluster used Photovoice, a respected method that “build skills within disadvantaged and marginalized communities using innovative participatory photography and digital storytelling methods so that they have the opportunity to represent themselves and create tools for advocacy and communications to achieve positive social change.” In our case, students worked with a teenagers’ program called Olhares em Foco (“Perspectives in Focus”). The children had been given access to cameras and asked to photograph the world around them, especially in regard to injustice. Children between 14 and 17 years old, an age group who is too often tempted by the false
promises of drugs and crime, can be especially shaped by the power of authoring their own vision of their community’s needs.

The visions created by the photographs were self-authored, since the photographers were from the community photographed. They offered both a sense of what is and what could be. It is the latter that is so crucial for the project, since by recognizing injustice and marginalization, the community can gain an ability to change it from within.

The participation of the SUA students was invaluable largely because of the Soka University of America’s strengths. First, the student group was diverse. It counted six Americans, two Japanese, two Mexicans, one Korean, and one Indian. This allowed for the exchange of ideas, especially and mostly powerfully in discussions over the meanings of photographs and need for social change in a globalizing world. Second, the students brought with them the mission and values of Soka University of America, especially the desire to promote peace, human rights and the sanctity of life. As much as the students prompted change, they themselves were changed by their service. This semester, students are deepening relationship with Olhares em Foco through a co-created website, a documentary film project, and an independent study class. Their hope is that future groups of SUA students will build upon the foundation already laid through the hard work of the 2013 group.

Ian Read’s Learning Cluster students in Brazil

**Sustainable Housing and Urban Development in Argentina (Sustainable Housing in Argentina) - Tomas Crowder-Taraborrelli, Visiting Assistant Professor of Latin American Studies**

Why have homes become unaffordable for most people in the world? Is it due to the cost of land, the price of construction, property taxes, and/or public services? Why must one hire an architect or an engineer when, with limited training, one can build a home by hiring just a few workers? This Learning Cluster explored the ways in
which many people in the developing world have built houses with reclaimed, environmentally-sound and aesthetically-pleasing materials.

While earthship style sustainable adobe homes are fast becoming trendy in many parts of the developed world, this type of construction has long been practiced in Argentina. Indigenous communities built their homes with adobe; many of them are still standing in the Northern part of the country.

Our Learning Cluster examined the social, economic, and environmental problems of housing and urban development in Buenos Aires, one of Latin America's most populous cities, and ways in which sustainable adobe construction is being positioned by many as a possible solution to the current housing crisis. Since the 1970s, metropolitan areas in Latin America have grown dramatically, as has the income inequality between the wealthy and the poor.

During the first part of this travel course, we studied the rich architectural history of Buenos Aires, once considered to be the Paris of South America because of its neoclassical buildings and wide boulevards. We considered the decisive historical events that have shaped its urban identity. During the second part of the course, we traveled to the Northern part of the city, and participated on an eco-construction team with plastic artist Pablo Salvadó. Students had a hands-on experience in the design and construction of a low-impact natural building that required little training in construction. For more information about this Learning Cluster please visit our website:

http://learningcluster-argentina2013.blogspot.com/

Tomas Crowder-Taraborrelli's Learning Cluster students in Argentina
European Union: Greatest Peace Pact in History? (EU Peace Initiatives) - Jay Heffron, Dean of Students and Professor of History

At the European Parliament building in Strasbourg, France, a magnificent glass and steel structure overlooking the Ill River where it flows into the Rhine, is a large plaque reading in French, German, and English the words: “OUT OF THE ABYSS: HOW EUROPEANS BUILT PEACE TOGETHER.” It was to better understand and appreciate, and to question, this process that eleven students and one professor with funding from the Nieves Family Foundation traveled to Europe for 10 days in January, braving icy winds and blowing snows, to study the European Union and its major institutions, the Court of Justice, the European Commission, the Council of Ministers, the European Parliament, and the Central Bank of Europe. These institutions are spread out across four major cities, Luxembourg, Brussels, Frankfurt am Main, and Strasbourg. Although the group was unable to visit Luxembourg, students met on the last day of the trip with the European Ombudsman, which works closely with the Court of Justice to resolve legal complaints and disputes against the EU.

The question or problem addressed by this Learning Cluster was the success or level of success of the EU in shoring up the peaceful integration of Europe around sound fiscal and political policy that

1.) respects the sovereignty of member states;
2.) protects human rights and the rule of law; and
3.) upholds the federalist goals and aspirations embodied in the original Maastricht Treaty of 1992 and most recently in the Lisbon Treaty on European Union (consolidated January 12, 2009).

The class met with various officials at the ambassadorial and consultative level, with leading civil society organizations developed to support and advise the EU, with representatives from the largest all-European political party, the European Peoples party. It toured the two Parliaments (one in Brussels and one in Strasbourg) and the European Central Bank in Frankfurt, and was able to have a question and answer session with the secretary general of the European Council of Ministers. Before traveling to Europe, students spent a week educating themselves about the EU and its institutions, developing and making presentations to one another on a wide range of controversial issues and questions, especially those surrounding the policy-making process, which is complex and convoluted. At their meetings in Europe they were consequently able to ask informed, sometimes pointed questions and this impressed our hosts. At the end of our last session with a legal officer at the European Ombudsman in Strasbourg, by which time students were well-versed in the issues, we received from him an email saying: “Your students made quite an impression on me for their profound interest in the EU and international relations and their ability to grasp the workings of the European Union institutions and ask excellent questions. They have obviously benefited from excellent teaching and academic guidance. For my part, as a former academic, I could only encourage them to keep up the good work that will empower them “to contribute to and improve society” as the founder of your university encourages them to.”
For their final project, each student prepared a policy brief, examining a particular EU policy, assessing its strengths and weakness, and making recommendations for future improvements. All in all, it was a life-changing experience to witness firsthand the inner-workings of such a complex and intricate process of supranational peace and development.

Jay Heffron's Learning Cluster students in front of the European Parliament in Brussels

Hiroshima, the Victims and the Question of Peace - Dongyoun Hwang, Associate Professor of Asian Studies

This Learning Cluster required students to explore, among others: the relevance of Hiroshima in the question of peace; the sufferings of the hibakusha (A-bombing survivors) during and after the bombing in August 1945; the status of non-Japanese hibakusha (esp. Korean); the meanings of both Japanese and Korean hibakusha’s memories to us in the quest for peace; the relevance of their memories and representations of Hiroshima in achieving a nuclear-free world. To answer these questions, 12 students and 1 faculty facilitator visited various museums and NGO’s in Japan (Hiroshima) and South Korea (Seoul and Hapcheon), and met with many activists and scholars. More importantly, they met and talked directly with both Japanese and Korean hibakusha to get more nuanced accounts of Hiroshima and generate a discussion among them about the issues concerning nuclear abolition.
Dongyoun Hwang's Learning Cluster students in front of Genbaku Dome in Peace Park in Hiroshima, Japan

**Education and Community: Development of "Backward" Communities in India (Education and Community) - Nalini Rao, Associate Professor of World Art**

Nalini Rao asked her student, Takayuki Jo, to report on her Learning Cluster experience in India. Takayuki writes: "My learning Cluster was about education and community development in backward communities in India. We spent most of the time in Auroville, a community, founded in 1968 and located next to Pondicherry, South India.

About the academic objectives of our Learning Cluster: Specifically, we have investigated how education facilitates community development with different approaches and aspects, such as women empowerment, youth empowerment, culture, economy, and environment. We also investigated how education and the activities for community development connect with the philosophy of the Mother and Suri aurobindo, the founders of Auroville.

What I felt meaningful was the time we spent with local people. We could make a strong mental connection with them, and we had deep interaction which I had never made through classes before. I personally felt that even though there are problems or contradictions between philosophy and reality, Auroville as a community is on the right track. I expect Auroville, as well as the communities near Auroville, will improve more and more both economically and socially in the future. I want to visit Auroville again 30 years later to make sure whether 'the experiment for human unity' goes successfully."
Our learning cluster was designed to give students an introductory understanding of social entrepreneurship and change makers. From the variety of social entrepreneurs and change makers that we visited, students learned that, beyond profit, these innovative and visionary leaders are dedicated to creating social value and addressing important social problems. They were passionate and unstoppable about achieving their mission and goals.

From guest speakers within our classrooms to field trips to San Francisco and Los Angeles, students were able to visit with and interview a variety of social entrepreneurs. With the invaluable support and resources that Mary Patrick Kavanaugh (Director of SokaChangemakers) provided, we were able to meet in San Francisco with Matt Flannery, Co-Founder of Kiva; Kirsten Tobey, Co-Founder of Revolution Foods and Marc Spencer, CEO of Juma Ventures.

Kiva is the first on-line lending institution that connects people world-wide through lending to eliminate poverty. Revolution Foods packages and delivers healthy food to schools across the U.S. to encourage healthier eating and life-styles among youth and to reduce childhood and youth obesity. Juma Ventures is an innovative and award-winning youth development program that helps under- resource youth achieve a college education through work and college preparation. Two additional innovative programs that we visited that were geared to support and help ex-offenders and adults and youth with former substance abuse problems were the Delancey Street Foundation, Founded by Mimi Silber in San Francisco and Homeboys in Los Angeles, Founded by Father Gregory Boyle.

A highlight of our Learning Cluster experience was a field visit and interview with Mr. Luis Nieves, President and CEO of AUL and a major donor of Soka University of America and our Learning Cluster travel grant program. Mr. Nieves and all of the leaders and social entrepreneurs that we visited within and outside of our classroom, offered invaluable advice, stories and lessons about the realities of becoming leaders who are determined to make a difference and contribute to society.

In journaling about their experiences during our Learning Cluster, one student commented that, “Visiting all of the venues in San Francisco and Los Angeles, and
listening to the stories and the speakers, social entrepreneurship came to life.” Another student commented that, “Before taking this Learning Cluster, I felt that I was passionate about many things and therefore I would never decide what my concentration would be and what I would do after graduation. Now I know what being passionate means and how we can carry our passion to bring social value to the world.” A third wrote that, “For me, this class might be the best class I took in my SUA life.” “Through meeting many great changemakers, I learned many important lessons.”

![Gail Thomas with her 2013 Learning Cluster students](image)

**Power in Movement: Mass Transit in Comparative Context - Shane Barter, Assistant Professor of Comparative Politics**

For those without any other means to get around, transit systems represent a life-line, an essential social service. For those hoping to get ahead, transit represents an opportunity, foregoing spending money on the automobile in favour of investing in education. For those hoping to do their part to stem global warming, combat sprawl, and avoid traffic, transit can be similarly transformative. How can mass transit slow environmental degradation? How does transit empower the poor, women, and ethnic minorities? In what ways can mass transit shape the communities we live in? How are transit authorities organized, how do they plan service, and how do they perceive their roles in shaping a healthy community? Why are many communities reluctant to embrace transit options?

This multidisciplinary Learning Cluster worked to understand mass transit systems better by experiencing them, comparing how transit plays out in a variety of west coast cities. Starting in Vancouver Canada, we continued to Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Orange County, with stops in Victoria, Tacoma, Vancouver Washington, Oakland, and Berkeley. In each city, we met with transit
officials, non-governmental organizations, activists, and academics. We also conducted participant observation—we took transit every day, experiencing the different systems and exploring the far-flung reaches of urban transit during rush hour. We took every type of transit you could imagine: buses, double-decker buses, articulated buses, alternative fuel buses, trolley buses, light rail, streetcars, cable cars, subways, trains, airplanes, ferries, and even an aerial tram. No zeppelins though. Along the way, the University of British Columbia and Portland State University graciously offered us classroom space to explore the academic component of our course.

The class—professor and students—learning an incredibly range of things. What was most notable for me was how much fun we had, despite keeping an insane schedule and maintaining academic rigor. The students were amazing, contributing an energy and passion that made the trip one of the best teaching experiences I have ever had.

What was most memorable? Probably the people we met en route. Every time we took the bus, people talked to us. They wanted to know who we were (we are Soka!), what we were doing, and then they wanted to tell us what they think about transit. We met doctoral students, retirees, immigrants, housewives, teenagers, ex-cons, homeless persons, and businesspeople, and all shared a desire to engage with us. The diverse groups that take transit seem united by their connectedness to society, and this is the very point. I would like to thank the students for being so eager to connect to people of all walks, and the Nieves Foundation for allowing us to experience and learn in a way that traditional classrooms would not allow.