

«A nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people,» once noticed Mohandas Gandhi. I believe that this view suggests one of the most effective ways to promote cultural awareness and improve intercultural understanding. Although nowadays there is a wide range of resources available to learn about other cultures vicariously, my personal experiences convince me that the best way to learn about a foreign culture is to experience it first-hand.

First-hand cultural experience is the only way to learn about a culture without being influenced by prejudice. It is also the only way to get a thorough understanding of its people and the unique way they think. First-hand experience of another society's laws, public institutions, education system and other aspects of public life gives a foreigner an insight into its people's values. The foreigner then may discover that he shares the same values or he may find out that some of the society's values differ significantly from his own, but this is not the point. The point is that he gains a deeper understanding of the society. This knowledge empowers him to distinguish between prejudice and facts, and provides him with the context in which he can analyze and understand the nature of cultural differences. Such an understanding of cultural differences, as opposed to prejudice and ignorance, is the first step towards forming a positive and respectful attitude to another culture.

Having had a chance to study abroad for one year, I have come to believe that only by plunging completely into a foreign society and by trying to adapt the lifestyle of its people can we fully understand cultural differences and find many similarities with our own cultures. Even though I do not share some of the host society's beliefs, I respect them. This exchange experience has taught me to always look for an explanation of cultural differences, and to be open to people around me, since it was people from whom I was learning. Besides, it has taught me to focus on similarities rather than differences, and to see differences as the

society's unique characteristics rather than an obstacle to understanding.

In my view, among the most essential qualities required from an individual willing to learn about another culture first-hand are openness to new experiences, patience, curiosity, and an inclination to analyze rather than ignore things that he cannot easily comprehend. I believe that if a person possesses these qualities, then he has a chance to understand another nation's culture «residing in the hearts and in the soul of its people.»

Anna Malinovskaya