

Episode 4: Going Bush

Hello, this is Smart Societies. Today we go bush for a lesson in cross-cultural communications. As people increasingly move around the world, for business, study or leisure, the need for a greater understanding of cultures is not only smart but essential if we're to avoid the kind of conflicts we've seen in the past.

FEMALE STUDENT : Getting off a bus, meeting the host family who are going to look after me for the next three days, pretty nervous, pretty anxious. Running a dance class for 38 prep, one and two children, I'm excited but it's a bit of a challenge. Standing in a milking pit.

MALE STUDENT: Initially everyone expected Swedish exchange student straight off the plane, you know tall, tanned, blonde hair, good looking, and they got me, yeah so I apologise for that.

FEMALE STUDENT: Hey good evening everyone, my name is Jasmine, I came from Malaysia. This is the first trip that I have beside coming to Melbourne to study. Anyway when I come to Melbourne to study and I'm living with my sister so I have never been separated from my family before. This trip is the first time.

CLARKE: Local and international students from Melbourne's RMIT University. Each year, a number of students enrol in the 'Community Engagement' program, which is assessed as part of their degrees.

While Australia hosts growing numbers of overseas students, many would like greater opportunities to interact with Australian families. And it also gives Australian students who live in capital cities, a chance to become acquainted with older rural industries like dairying and pig farming and newer ones like deer production.

The 'Community Engagement' program also includes visits to country schools. We joined them at the end of hectic couple of days when they presented their final reports at a community function at Corop, a couple of hours drive north of Melbourne in rural Victoria.

Yaso Nadarajah devised the RMIT program.

YASO NADARAJAH: Increasingly for me the regions have become a living classroom, and every time I put the students in the bus and I tell them that this is about actually coming out here to learn in an environment that is informal, you're working with people who actually have their hands in the soil, suspend what you know about your theories, trust the community and the learning that you will obtain from this very short two and a half days is phenomenal.

In the last seven or eight years I've taken more than 2,000 students into the regions from more than 45 different countries, and the greatest reward for me is when a student calls me six months later or comes down and says: do you remember that journal which I flung on your table and you gave me an A for, can I have that journal back because what I learned then. it struck me now six months later? I actually had a student who went up to Hamilton eight years ago who's now the director of a very large community development project in India, which is worth about 180 million pounds, and

she tells me today that her grassroots philosophy has come from the work that she has done in our trips coming up to regional Victoria. I think that you deserve all the praise really.

CLARKE: Pat Kennedy is from the rural women's network in Central Victoria. She helped Yaso coordinate the event with the local community.

PAT KENNEDY: We as host families in the country we don't get a lot of opportunity to mix with city kids, kids from Malaysia, kids from Singapore, India, wherever, and we learn as much as you do, and I think the cross-cultural exchange is wonderful for all of us really. So I'd like to invite you to come and have something to eat, there's a great range of international, Aussie, all sorts of foods here, hot, cold and otherwise, so come along and help yourselves, thank you.

CLARKE: After this multicultural banquet, it was over to the students for their presentations.

And first we hear from Gary from Singapore who was attached to St Mary's school at Rushworth.

GARY: Before the trip like many other students we dreaded it, it was stepping out of our comfort zone, our rooms, our friends, our parties, getting on a bus, travelling miles and miles to Rushworth and many other areas. But I always believe that most of us who are in universities come for an education, but we realise over the years education is not exactly just books and the classrooms and lecturers, it's just not that piece of paper that we get at the end of the three-four years that we're at university. So I guess this program gave us a lot of learning, more than any education can buy. So thank you all, not just for hosting us, feeding us, Michael especially, five star service in his place, red wine overlooking the sunset, a barbie and talking till 11 at night, playing babysitter for a while, he's probably sick of me now, that little hospitality, opening up your life, sharing a little bit of what the life in the country is all about, goes a long way, and for that we'll always have a reason to smile and we thank you for that.

PAT KENNEDY: I'd like to now call on the students who were at Stanhope primary school, Joseph and Lieng, thanks boys.

JOSEPH: Thank you everyone, now as you've all heard we've been at Stanhope primary for the last few days. What we wanted to do was answer any questions that the students had. We told them a bit about life in Melbourne, and we told them what some of the differences were, what some of the similarities were, and we saw what questions they had. Some of them had more relevant questions than others, one of my favourites was did I audition for 'Australian Idol'? They also wanted to know things about university and about high school, which we could also help with.

And for the five and sixers the teacher wanted us to let the kids know how much opportunity was out there for them, and they felt that a lot of the students didn't see past sport or farming as a future development, which are really relevant and which are fantastic careers, but they felt that their students didn't really have a huge scope of what was out there and what was available for them to do in the future. So one of my comparisons was in Melbourne if you had a classroom full of students that were nine years old, you'd be hard pressed to find two that wanted to do the same thing when they were older. But when we came out here we found that a lot of the kids wanted to do the same things. So we went around to the classrooms and we sort of tried to give the children some of the opportunities that they could have in the future, and one of the lucky things that I had to learn was I also had Lieng, who was from China and so we also or he taught them a bit about the Chinese community and the Chinese culture.

LIENG: Mr name is Lieng, I'm from China, and my spoken English is not good as all the guys.

PAT KENNEDY: Better than our Chinese.

LIENG: Yeah, certainly. So because I'm an only child in China as many of you know there's one child policy in China, so I never experienced of the brotherhood or sisterhood and now I'm here I'm so glad that is my host family's got four very cute kids, really cute, so I like them very much. And with Joseph, we've found there's a huge difference between the education system here and in China. When I was very young I was forced to study everything and when I started primary school, we stay at least eight hours a day from 8 in the morning to five o'clock in the afternoon. And when I was in high school I would start probably about 7 in the morning till probably 10 in the evening, that's my whole day, that's my life. So I feel the kids here are really relaxed, and they just like playing games in the classroom. I feel the difference very much, so and I'm so glad to be with the friends and families here. I would say I'd come here again, yeah.

PAT KENNEDY: I now call on Colleen Huntington to introduce the dairy project.

COLLEEN HUNTINGTON: Thank you Pat. The three participants - Daniel, Brett and Bianca - they had a very, very hectic day on Wednesday. One more hectic than the others, he was up at 6 o'clock to help milk. We started off the day at the Golden Cow, they were just wonderful there, everybody went out of their way, they opened up early and after that we then went to Breakfast Milk in Kyabrum. From there we then went to Bonlac, and I'm sure that these three students here who I couldn't say enough about have really represented RMIT extremely well and so I'd like them to present what they learnt.

BIANCA: It's been a really great experience, basically we've learnt about it from stages of grass all the way to a consumer product. We visited the Golden Cow, which was really, really informative but some of the displays and stuff were really old and because a lot of it has been, well a lot of the work that's been done has just been community support and not much funding has been placed in it, it hasn't allowed for them to fix their displays probably as quickly as they like. So we thought to help out maybe something could be organised by RMIT, once again maybe with the media students or something like that so they could come together and assist to update all the signs in the area and it would also keep the costs down because they could use it as one of their projects or assignments, just like we've come here.

On top of our experience at the Golden Cow we just had a really enjoyable time, and we learnt a lot, which was mostly due to the dairy farmers and the families that we were staying with. A lot of them drove us around, talked to us, just answered our questions that we shot at them every kind of couple of minutes, but just by watching their day-to-day work I can say for all three of us we've learnt more about the dairy industry than we have learnt in our entire lives.

So we thought by trying to incorporate these dairy farmers into maybe what Golden Cow does they could set up some sort of a tour or even like have a rotational basis so that tour groups can go and visit the farms, not while they're milking or anything or at the most hectic time, but just so they can go in and actually have a look at what the farms look like and then they could get taken back to the Golden Cow so they've got a context in their mind of where exactly all the milking has taken place and everything like that, and then they could actually see the milking as we did at the Golden Cow.

Then watch the video that will have been updated, and then have a look through the museum and learn about the history of milking.

CLARKE: This is Smart Societies on Radio Australia and we're in rural Victoria with a group of local and international students from RMIT University.

Next we hear from Mustafa Merchant....

MUSTAFA MERCHANT: I come from India from Bombay and it's called Mumbai now, and the population of Mumbai is more than the population of Australia, so that was the first shock when I came to this place I could barely see anyone on the road. Like well I'm the only one out here. But that was alright, there were people passing by put their hand out say, how you're doing? That was good. I got off the bus and I was taken to my host family's house, Chris and Rob Brown, beautiful, beautiful place, made me remind back home, dinner especially. When I used to get back home I used to have my dinner ready on the table, that's what I got back there as well.

Yeah the first day I went down to the farm, the dairy, I thought it would be exciting, how hard could it be milking cows? Went in, wore the jumper, walked inside, wore my gumboots, got in, standing behind the cow and there goes the cow, bptttt! But damn, that was good wasn't it? Milked the cows and asked Rob do you need a hand out here, do you want me to clean up? He goes yeah; certainly we could use another hand. He gives me the hose, and goes hose the whole place up. Like uh oh, that's quite a bit to do now. Got that organised and came back home and I was flat out, went to bed, completely I was dead. Next day was school, school was exciting, 42 students in school, well that's quite a bit actually. They're more than people you see on the roads, so that's alright. But the best question I found out, the best thing one student comes up to me and goes do you have tigers in India? Like yep, what colour are they?

CLARKE: Rob and Christine Brown were Mustafa's host family.

CHRISTINE BROWN: This is our second year at it and we find that the cultural exchange that our children actually experience makes it really worthwhile and we find it educational for us as well. We learn about a different culture that we're not exposed to any other way.

ROB BROWN: Yeah because we're in a small rural community our children don't get exposed to different nationalities. We thought well it's a good way of our children experiencing that. I mean we get a lot out of it too.

CLARKE: If you say that this is a great experience for you as a family, what about for the wider community do you think?

CHRISTINE BROWN: Well the kids at the school find them fascinating. The fact that Mustafa's skin's a different colour for one, last year that was the big impact thing. This year just having somebody with different ideas, different background and to be able to talk about a totally different country has really broadened their horizons as well.

TALENT: Hi everyone my name is Daisy, I'm from Indonesia. I came here as everyone else a bit anxious as well, but the school treated me really well, and the host family are really, really friendly I can say, I should thank Jenny and Brian and Somara and Jessie, they're really lovely. I think my experience is a bit different from the others. Being an Indonesian and Rochester Secondary has Indonesian classes, so the teachers assign me to all the Indonesian classes to talk to the students, and they try to pick some words from me or in other classes I just told them some Indonesian folk

stories, and in some other classes I just told them how to sing some Indonesian songs. Besides that, the host family took me to the piggery and dairy, which I found I was really lucky because you guys, some of you only visiting the dairy, some of you only visiting the piggery, some of you only visiting the school, and I've been to all three.

BILL BARKER: I'm Bill Barker from Rochester Secondary College, I'm a teacher there and we're up in northern Victoria. I've just developed a program for the two students that we've had there to go around to different classes and to basically sit there and talk to the students, tell them what their experiences are and to answer questions. So it was a real eye opener for me, food, school, homes, money, animals, sport, the list goes on, just yeah, a real eye opener.

SUE SLAMEN: So you'd definitely sign up for the program again at your school?

BILL BARKER: Without a doubt, without a doubt, we'll be there next year.

MARSHA: Hi my name is Marsha, I'm from Singapore. Basically I got the privilege to yesterday go to Rochester secondary school and today to St Joseph primary school. So it's quite good in the sense that I get to look at two different perspectives of primary and secondary school, which I thought was very good. Because initially I was quite worried that I didn't know that we're supposed to take the class for the whole period, I assumed it was a sort of a sharing thing. So yeah, so I was a bit worried and I was just quite anxious in that sense, but it went on pretty well, I taught some of the classes how to make a Chinese sweet desert, which we have six weeks before Chinese New Year. It's called tang yuan. Chinese families take this because to symbolise unity and harmony, and also taught them a bit of Chinese like Chinese writing, which I thought was very good.

I guess what I got out of this trip was that at times we tend to stereotype certain people, so I actually would really encourage international students to take up this course because it can really give them an overview, because sometimes you assume in your own country that you may be living in such a comfort zone and you know what's out there, because in Singapore we are very pampered. So I guess we should really go out there and experience for ourselves. Thank you.

CLARKE: One of the attachments was to the local deer industry. Deer are bred for their meat - venison - and their antlers as Catherine explains.

CATHERINE: Overseas the antler from deer is used in many Asian countries for traditional medicines, and also for the production of tablets. Venison is sold to many countries where it has been a traditional year round meat for hundreds of years, unlike in Australia where it's a non-traditional meat and is considered seasonal. We had a few suggestions for further promotion of the deer industry in the global markets, instead of just using pamphlets; they could try and include a video or DVD version. This would be good when making approaches to countries who don't already import venison.

Another way to promote Australian venison to the world is to have one comprehensive industry website that would cover the supply chain, the areas where deer are farmed, industry statistics, contacts, and even have it in a choice of languages. So promotion overseas should stress that Australia is of course free of diseases in their stock, the health benefits of eating venison, the fat content as well as the quality of the venison compared to other meats. Just any way that we could help the industry get a better name for itself.

CLARKE: The third industry the students had a chance to explore saw them visiting a piggery.

NANCY: Good evening everybody, I'm Nancy, I'm from Singapore, currently doing my degree in transport and logistics management. We were quite fortunate to actually visit this piggery farm. I personally feel that this is a very, very interesting one because everyone assumes that the farm is really stinky because of the piggy, so yeah, it was totally stinky, but it was a good experience for me because in Singapore we don't actually have these kind of farms and we don't really know what's happening at a piggery. So this is kind of different for us.

MALE STUDENT: And just by starting to think about communication or public relations is what we do as a vital business tool for all levels, and not just those at the corporate level. So communication is not just about advertising and promotions, but it's about developing, creating and maintaining relationships with those people or organisations that are important. So how good is your relationship with your fellow farmers? Do you swap ideas? What's your opinion of Australian Pork Limited or the relative industry bodies? Do you know the names of the journalists that report on pig issues? Developing relationships is always going to take time, and time's a problem, and that's one thing that we've learnt up here that there's always something to do. But this is something that you can do at your own pace, and it's something that can always have positive outcomes.

Now having said all that, I came up here with the expectation to think that none of these theories or none of these ideas would ever be in existence up here. I was dead wrong. I've never seen a better example of an interconnected community, a sense of friendship, of reliance, of people laughing together and enjoying each other's company. There seems to be up here an amazing sense of togetherness and I think it's something you should all be proud of. What I heard about last year when the lake was dry and everyone set out a drought relief marquee out on the lake. A public relations company would have charged \$20,000 for that in Melbourne for that idea, and yeah, deadset, that is one of the most amazing ideas we've heard just from the point of media attention. So I think you guys are doing a fantastic job and you don't need us to tell us your personal perspectives, I think you guys have got it down pat.

RON GRINTER: Hello my name's Ron Grinter, and I've been at Carrig Carrig six mile west of Stanhope since 1934.

SUE SLAMEN: And your wife, your name?

NOELLE GRINTER: Well my name's Noelle Grinter.

SUE SLAMEN: You took one of the overseas students into your home as part of Yaso's program. Can you tell us how you came to host the student and who ended up at your place?

RON GRINTER: We finally ended up with Nancy from Singapore; I can't pronounce her Chinese name.

SUE SLAMEN: And have you actually been to Singapore yourselves?

NOELLE GRINTER: No, I haven't been out of Australia.

SUE SLAMEN: What do you gain do you think from this experience, I mean for others who might be considering whether they'd be prepared to open their homes and their hearts to someone they've never met before from another country?

RON GRINTER: Oh well I think it's a wonderful idea really, and especially when you see how little they know about our country and what we do. I must say that Nancy must have used a lot of film on our farm, photographing calves and horses and tractors.

SUE SLAMEN: And do you think it changes your perceptions also of other countries? You mentioned you haven't travelled overseas yourself; this was a chance to talk to someone on a one-to-one basis from another country?

RON GRINTER: Yes that's very true, while we've always been sympathetic to refugees and people from other countries, but it must help broaden people's outlooks in these things.

CLARKE: Ron and Noelle Grinter.

With the students presentations complete it was left to Pat Kennedy to reflect on the whole experience.

PAT KENNEDY: I'd just like to say that if we gain nothing else from this experience, and I'm saying we gain because it's not just the students from RMIT or the overseas students or the city students, we all learn, we on the farms learn, we learn that uni students aren't all ratbags. We learn that kids from the city are really interested in what we do, we learn that kids from overseas are great and also very interested in what we do and can teach us a lot about their countries. So I really thank Yaso and RMIT for allowing us to have this time with these students. I'd also like to say to those who are studying in the industries, if you go back to Melbourne and you can talk about the farms you've been on, put a face to that carton of milk, or ask for venison the next time you go to a restaurant, or enjoy that lean piece of pork, well I think this has been a well worthwhile visit. Thank you.

CLARKE: Well Yaso we've come to almost the end I guess of another community engagement project, you must be excited?

YASO NADARAJAH: My excitement is everyone in the community has been involved in some way or the other. The students have seen that, they understand knowledge is complex and they're going back saying this is one of our best experiences of learning. So for me that was my outcome, the reward for me is when they actually turn around and they actually say all of that, which I did not state in the beginning.

CLARKE: One of the criticisms we often hear particularly from an international student's point of view is that they don't often have the opportunity to engage with an Australian family, perhaps the real Australia if you like. This seems to me as though it should happen across all universities, across all colleges.

YASO NADARAJAH: I totally agree with you Barry, I think that if we can get all our international students to actually come on a trip such as this, meet a community that is welcoming, I think so much of the conflict that we have in the world will not be there, because one of the host families said to me, when something happens in Indonesia now because I've hosted someone from Indonesia, my care and concern for that country is so much more acute. And for the Indonesian student, you know like Daisy was saying to me, she said, life will never be the same because I will now always look upon Australia with fondness. So how can you beat that?

CLARKE: Our thanks to everyone who took part in this program.

This program was produced by Sue Slamen and Barry Clarke from Radio Australia.