Beyond the numbers: enhancing the quality of learning in study abroad programs

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Forms of ‘study abroad’

- AKA ‘temporary’ or ‘credit mobility’
- Australia: ‘student exchange programs’
- EU: Erasmus programme
- USA: ‘study abroad programs’
Globalisation & Study Abroad

- ‘Democratisation’ of Study Abroad (Lewin, 2009) involves significant increases in funding

- The ‘democratisation’ movement is related to diminishing prospects for the ‘monolingual, monocultural’ graduate (Luker 2006)

- But does/can study abroad really help students become ‘global citizens’? If so, how?
Great expectations

Career benefits

- **Students’ beliefs**: 90% of UK ERASMUS students believe that SA is advantageous for their careers (Sussex Centres 2004; also Van Hoof & Verbeeten 2005, USA; Young & Harper, 2004, UK/Australia)

- **Employers’ beliefs**: 70% of multinational and 55% of national employers in the UK highly value SA (QETI & IEAA 2006; also see Archer & Davison 2008 UK; Trooboff, Van de Berg, Rayman 2008, USA)

Social/cultural benefits

- SA is represented as a transformational experience, which can strengthen people-to-people and institutional relationships (DFAT, Australian Govt, 2014, New Colombo Plan)
A critical reading of the Study Abroad literature

- Personal development/transformation (McName & Faulker, 2001; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Van Hoof & Verbeeten 2005)
  
  But – students’ ‘epiphanies’ can be ‘fake or temporary’ (Memard-Warwick & Palmer, 2012:132)

- Further, studies reveal mixed results for the impact of SA on:
  - cultural understanding (Dolby, 2004; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Schuerholz-Lehr, 2007; Williams, 2005),
  - linguistic development (Goldini, 2013)
  - academic benefits (Gore, 2005; Van Hoof & Verbeeten 2005),
  - ‘global citizenship’ (Clarke et al, 2009; Jessup-Anger, 2008; Memard-Warwick & Palmer, 2012)

- As students ‘grapple with emotional responses to the unfamiliar’ they need guidance to make deeper connections between intercultural experiences and course theory related to identity, diversity and equality’ (Jackson 2011: 80)
Study abroad as a ‘rite of passage’

(Beames 2004; Gothard et al, 2012; Van Gennup, 1960)

- Separation
- An ending
- ‘Old Self’

**Preparation**
(Pre-departure)

- Liminality
- Transition
- ‘In-between Self’

**Initiation**
(Study abroad)

- Liminality
- Transition
- ‘In-between Self’

- Integration
- Incorporation
- ‘New Self’

**Reintegration into community**
(Re-entry)
WRIT3060 (Reflective writing: documenting the international experience)

A course of experiential, reflective, critical & creative learning

Pre-departure (In class)
- Preparation
- Critical (re)examination of expectations
- Practice blogs

Abroad (Online)
- Experiential learning
- Reflective, individual blogs
- Group discussion with feedback from lecturers
- Integration
- Travel writing
- Annotated bibliography (critical reading)
- Reflective essay

Return (In class)
Our study

The context
Australian research intensive university

Methodology
Explanatory Design: Participant Selection model (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007) – foregrounds qualitative (narrative) data

Methods
- Survey sample:
  - Survey sent to 278 students returning from study abroad
  - 94 respondents
- Narrative interviews (Riessman, 2006)
  - 21 students selected from survey respondents (11 non-WRIT3060/ 10 WRIT3060 students)
Interview themes
1. Pre-departure: expectations v. realities

**Students NOT taking the course**
- Greater sense of feeling underprepared*
  
  I was completely unprepared... I didn't have any experience preparing me for exchange (S2)

- Surprised by initial culture shock
  
  I didn't think I'd be struck down by culture shock but yeah it was shocking (S2)

**Students taking the course**
- Greater sense of excitement & purpose
  
  I'd always wanted to go to France ever since I was about 10. So it was really good to finally achieve that goal ... and live something that I'd dreamed about for so long

* Also found in survey
**Interview themes**

2. Study Abroad: Personal Development

**Strong theme in all students’ interviews***

- More confident socially/’outgoing’ (19 interviewees)
  - [I have] a greater degree of confidence in my ability to adapt to a different environment (S26)

- More independent (14 interviewees)

- More ‘open minded’ (15 interviewees)
  - Just dealing with people from such varied backgrounds [I’ve developed] more of an open mind (S11)

- More ‘mature’ and/or ‘grown up’ (8 interviewees)

- A stronger sense of self and confidence to act on that
  - I do things that I want to do - not necessarily what's expected of me. I feel like if I keep doing that then I'm going to end up in the right place (S3)

- Ability to deal with uncertainty and unexpected challenges
  - I have more problem-solving abilities (S2)

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*Also found in survey*
Interview themes

2. Study Abroad: Cultural/national identity

For many Australian students (course and non-course):
- Pride in Australian national identity - reinforcement of cultural stereotypes
  - I thought we were the best country in the world. So I did that trip to America and then I sort of did that around the world thing and I just thought we were the best country (S5)
  - (superior) outdoor sunny lifestyle, e.g. we're clean, we've got great beaches, great weather (S5)

But for Australian course students, more awareness of privilege:
- I've had a very privileged life to live in Australia. I guess you take that for granted a lot of the time. So that was really important just coming to appreciate what I have (S21)

For international course students, awareness of exchange as experience of 'third culture':
- I've got Asian features and I'm half Korean. So they just speak to me in Korean ... but my speaking isn't that great. Then people are like, who the hell is this? A Korean or what? I'm confused too (S24)
2. Study Abroad: Intercultural understanding

**Strong themes across all students’ interviews (course and non-course)**
- Predominantly interacting with other international students
- Intercultural exchanges based on a sense of Self and Other, with
  - ‘Australian’ ways of interacting seen as superior, ‘normal’ or standard
  - We had to make the Swedish people come out of their shell a bit ... we knew that they were reserved [they had to] stop being so Swedish (S1)
- Strengthening, rather than challenging preconceived cultural stereotypes
  - Germans: much more direct, less room for ambiguity, less emotional (S27)
  - Japanese are more conservative and reserved (S22)

**But prevalent in students who took the course**
Heightened appreciation of cultural contexts, identities, ways of being
- I became more open to people from other backgrounds. I got to know them first before I stereotyped them. I became more accepting of other ways of life (S13)
The majority of participants in both groups found re-adaption difficult, experiencing sadness and/or frustration, which lasted weeks, months or was ongoing.

**Students not taking course**
- absence of a way to celebrate the exchange experience & bring it into life in Australia
- disconnectedness between exchange & life at home, exchange seems ‘like a dream’, an ‘unreality’
  - When you come back home, everything is the same. It's like nothing has changed (S8)
  - I've come back and slotted in exactly where things left off (S10)

**Students taking course**
- appreciated post-exchange classes as a ‘reflective community’, where they collaboratively made connections between experience & theory
  - I think I got most out of WRIT once I got back ... forcing me to to reflect in greater depth (S26)
  - WRIT gave me a place to think about the exchange process... it built on my whole degree, tying everything together (S21)
Interview themes

3. Re-entry: Impact on future directions

**Strong theme across all students’ interviews (course & non-course)**

- Disconnect between exchange experience and future – inability to apply the exchange to imagining the future
  - In terms of my study and career goals... I'm not sure what I'm doing (S27)

- For some, experiences overseas challenged their previous goals or desired pathways, making them less certain about the future
  - I don't really know what I want to do in my future career now (S13)

**Students who took the course**

- Appreciation of skills learned through exchange & the course, but inability to apply these to imagining concrete future outcomes/direction
  - The skills that we've learnt throughout WRIT... in terms of my future career I'm not too sure how much of an effect it'll have (S21)

- But, all course students felt that the course should be offered to all students who study abroad
Summary
All students articulated personal development through exchange. However...

Non-course students felt less prepared & experienced greater, more long-lasting ‘culture shock’

Pre-departure

Study Abroad
- most Australians – ethnocentric
- but course students more aware of global inequities & cultural contexts, identities, ways of being; international course students more reflective re ‘third culture’

Re-entry
- Course students connect experience/theory & incorporate learning into life on re-entry
- Non-WRITs, exchange seems ‘like a dream’
- But both groups - disconnect exchange & future
Implications

This study suggests students **gain more from studying abroad** if it is framed as a ‘rite of passage’, with support & guidance to:

a. develop **realistic expectations**; ‘expectancy violation’ can lead to stereotyping and impact negatively on learning (Burgoon & Ebesu-Hubbard 2005)

b. **critically reflect** on their experience; ‘learning from [intercultural] experiences ... emerges from our capacity to construe those events and then reconstrue them in transformative ways’ (Bennett & Salonen 2007: 46)

c. **integrate** their experience upon re-entry, through further creative & critical reflection in a supportive community

BUT – in future iterations of **WRIT3060**, we will focus more on:

I. **challenging ethnocentrism** (esp. Aust. students)

II. More attention to the experience of ‘third culture kids’ (esp. international students)

III. connecting exchange to **future careers**/global citizenship


