Living and learning abroad: A pilot study of student perspectives on the value of participating in student exchange programmes

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Focus of this study

Student experience of living and learning abroad - from the perspective of 10 Australian students at UQ.
The construction & analysis of student narratives to investigate the following issues:
- Motivation and choice of destination
- The process of cultural adjustment
- The nature of cross-cultural learning
- The impact of exchange on cultural identity/identities
- The impact of exchange on personal and professional development
- The transition back home
- The perceived value of the experience
- Participation in this study and its impact on students’ understanding of their experience

Note: The findings reported here relate to the first issue only
The significance of this study

A review of the literature

- challenges commonly held ‘romantic’ assumptions that study abroad ‘automatically’ (Tarp, 2007) benefits participants
- suggests ‘there is no conclusive evidence that would link study abroad to cross-cultural understanding or to the development of a cross-cultural personality’ (Scheuerholz-Lehr, 2007: 195-6)
- points to a need for research that assumes cross-cultural learning is shaped over time, by a range of factors including
  - the student’s personal history, cultural traditions, personal & professional aspirations
  - the nature of the student’s experiences and interactions while on exchange
- calls for student-centred, qualitative research (e.g., Byram & Feng, 2006; McInnes, 2004) which will elucidate how transformation does (and does not) occur

Narrative research methodology: What is it?

- Grapples with the complexity of experience holistically
- Is not concerned with the ‘facts’ but the meaningful shape emerging from the selected retelling of inner & outer experiences
- Long history in education research: Clandinin & Connelly (2000:xxiv), citing Dewey: the study of education is the study of life – for example, the study of epiphanies, rituals, routines, metaphors and everyday actions
This study: method, data sources & analysis

**Method**
- Designed to address methodological issues in earlier narrative studies of student sojourns (e.g., Pearson-Evans, 2006).

**Data sources:**
- 10 participants, over 8 month period (9 female; 1 EAL student)
- Various artefacts/texts (e.g., MySpace, email, blogs, audio/visual, 'scrapbooks', artwork, diaries)
- Pre-departure & return interviews
- Pre-departure questionnaire

**Analysis:** 'Re-storying' methods:
- Key narrative elements - inter/personal (character), continuity (plot), and context (setting) - will be constructed in ways that suggest causality & development, and
- Deconstructed in order to expose dichotomies, silences and contradictions (Creswell, 2007: 55-56).
- Meta-analysis of the process

Early findings

At first glance, emerging themes from the first interview
- Family background: professional, experienced overseas travelers
- Financial support: narrative of independence versus subtext of strong parental support
- Relationship between previous travel experience, mobility (& perceived risk?)
- Long term planning
- Student exchange as a way of dealing with a significant ‘fork in the road’
Feedback requested

- Tension between constructive and deconstructive approaches; i.e., reconciling the students’ and researcher’s interpretations
- Developing findings to the level of theory without losing the richness and uniqueness of the narratives (Josselson, 2008)?
- Is the methodology itself gendered, or more attractive to Anglo-Australian students? What can be done to engage more male and EAL students in narrative research? Or are there other forms of qualitative research that would be more appropriate?
- Publishing narrative research on student exchange?

References

References (cont.)

