

International students' cultural representations and their implications for intercultural learning in Australia

ABSTRACT

Intercultural learning is frequently stressed as an essential component of the study abroad learning experience. Overseas students not only have different cultural backgrounds, they also hold different cultural representations of their experience as international students. These representations deserve to be explored, as they offer insights from the students' perspective for intercultural learning experiences.

This paper relates the results of a case study carried out in an Australian university in 2012. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fourteen international students. A thematic analysis was performed to identify the main concepts used to give an account of their cultural experience in Australia. The study found three dominant cultural representations important to consider for intercultural learning. First, most students from abroad see themselves as an 'international students community' during their stay in Australia. Second, they generally claim that international students have a sort of 'global cultural identity'. Third, social relations are essential to understand their intercultural experience in Australia.

This paper advocates for the importance of intercultural learning in the academic context. The findings support three propositions for enhancing intercultural learning: establishing a real mixing between international and local students; adopting a contextual and meaningful view of intercultural learning; and integrating overseas students' academic experience in their overall experience abroad. International students' presence can enhance intercultural learning for the student population in general, and this chance deserves to be seized.

AUTHORS

Quentin Thomas Maire
School of Education,
University of Adelaide

Introduction

Approximately two per cent of the higher education student population is on student mobility every year (de Wit, Ferencz, & Rumbley, 2012).

Alone, Australia welcomes nine per cent of the world's mobile students (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008). These students not only originate from various cultural backgrounds, but also construct cultural representations about their study abroad experience. These cultural representations reveal how international students live their sojourn in Australia. Thus, they are important judgments to investigate for improving their intercultural learnings. The academic setting can play a role in intercultural learning for both local and overseas students. This paper focuses on three concepts used by overseas students to relate their cultural experience: these have been selected for their potential to improve intercultural learning in the academic situation.

CONCEPTUALISING STUDENT MOBILITY AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS

Modelling Lanzendorf and Kehm's definition (Lanzendorf & Kehm, 2010) for the present study, international student mobility is the action of quitting one's home country to spend a study period in another country's higher education system. Three paradigms coexist about study abroad learning: the positivist paradigm, where cumulative learning happens through basic exposure to a new context; the relativist paradigm, where transformative learning occurs by 'immersion' in a different culture; and the experiential-constructivist paradigm, where learning abroad is constructed by a mediated experiential relation between the student and his/her environment (Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012). This paper advocates for intercultural learning (Bennett, 2012), and recognizes its affinity with the experiential-constructivist paradigm.

The concept of culture has been incisively discussed by Mason (Mason, 2007). Highlighting the symbolic facet of culture (Mason & Evers, 2010), this view focuses on 'what culture does rather than what culture is' (Bocock, 1992). The symbolic approach explains how

culture frames people's representations, by generating a repertory of cultural concepts. The term 'culture' is then used to classify perceptions and place them into 'cultural boxes'. The common emphasis on culture as a shared attribute (Hofstede, 1991) can thus be balanced with a conception of culture as a personal construct. In this view, culture is not monolithic (where a given individual would possess an 'Asian culture' for instance) but composite, closer to a patchwork than to a unified entity (Mason, 2007). This approach emphasises the individual appropriation of cultural categories (Hall, 1977) for comprehending cultural experiences.

The lack of reference on what international students mean when they talk about their 'cultural experience' abroad is recognized (Montgomery, 2010a). Therefore, it is important to gather overseas students' cultural representations about their experience abroad, especially for their relation with intercultural learning questions.

METHODOLOGY

This piece of qualitative research is a case study carried out with international students at an Australian university. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. The literature review guided the development of the interview schedule. The individuals were selected for their sociocultural properties, using a purposive maximum variability sample¹. The interviews were completed between three and four months after the commencement of Semester 2, 2012.

Bearing in mind how the researcher's beliefs can frame the project, a constructivist grounded theory epistemology has been employed (Charmaz, 2006). In concrete terms, the data collection contained mainly open questions. The interpretive dimension influenced the passage from codes to categories and the creation of categories.

The data interpretation consisted in a thematic analysis. After coding the data by individuals, the codes were gathered in eight categories: study abroad motivations; adaptation to the study abroad situation; interpersonal

¹ More detailed descriptions of the students are presented in appendix.

relations; identity and cultural views; ways of life; dominant cultural categories; views on language; and experiential perception of the international student situation. These categories create a conceptual web depicting the respondents' cultural representations.

Using international students' cultural representations to enhance intercultural learning

The interviews contained rich data for the eight categories. Three categories emerged as particularly important for the students: 'cultural representations', 'experiential perceptions' and 'interpersonal relations'. Three categories showed interesting relations between representations in context and sociocultural properties, but no governing trend: they are 'study abroad motivations', 'adaptation to the study abroad situation' and 'views of language'. Three categories indicated a dominant representation, no matter the student's sociocultural characteristics: 'dominant cultural categories', 'identity and cultural views' and 'interpersonal relations'. Accordingly, three emergent concepts offer valuable insights for improving intercultural learning: 'community', 'identity' and 'social relations'.

The 'international students community': the necessity of including local students in intercultural relations

Most international students experienced their Australian immersion as organized by communities: for instance, Ayo stated that "in Australia culture is international but at the same time people gather with people from the same origin". The communities emerging in the data were not only geographical, but also ethnic, religious, or university-related. The representation of an 'international students community' dominates: thirteen out of fourteen interviewees indicated living more in an 'international students community' than immersed in an Australian community. Accordingly, some felt that they have not experienced the Australian culture enough. Chrissie pointed out that "the international context makes it difficult to meet Australian people"; Eva explained: "I think I have met five Australians; with none of them I am really close"; and Sheryl added: "I regret I spent too much time with Chinese friends when I was in Melbourne". Clearly, the findings show that students from abroad have rich cultural interactions, but only within the 'international students community'. Here, the academic setting has a role to play in encouraging intercultural learning, and the present results indicate that the relations between local and international students could be fostered to enhance intercultural learning.

The overwhelming majority of the interviewees stressed the importance of the orientation week organised by the University for building an 'international community'. This certainly is a first step for engaging them in intercultural learning. But intercultural learning goes beyond the international students community: thus, academic practices could foster intercultural learning by providing intercultural mixing with local students. Acknowledging the difficulties of such an enterprise (Rafferty, 2011), the cultural immersion has to be progressive. The success of this initiative goes not only through an integration of international students to the existing structures, but requires an institutional adaptation to the student population as a whole (Zepke & Leach, 2005). This approach can encourage interactions between local and international students. In concrete terms, the adaptive teaching model where mutual adaptations are decided would be appropriate to create richer intercultural learning opportunities (Volet & Ang, 1998).

International students' identities: trading globalization for internationalization in intercultural learning

The recourse to the concept of identity was crucial in the interviews. For example, Robin said that "culture identifies people", and Marion specified that "culture is almost everything that is your identity". The results show a dominant trend: international students see themselves as having 'globalized features' (amongst others). In their view, globalization can represent the progressive separation of individuals' spatial belonging from their identity belonging (Inglis & Thorpe, 2012). Kevin stated that "everyone seems to have some type of common grounds" about the international students population. In short, these students gave credit to the claim that globalization could be associated with a less 'territorial' form of identity (Mason, 2007). These international students have, to some extent, a global cultural identity. This claim has to be nuanced: exchange students insisted more on this dominant representation than full-degree international students. Still, this finding has an essential implication for the university approach of intercultural learning in Australia.

Rather than viewing intercultural learning as learning for generalized competences applicable in different cultural contexts (Bennett, 2012), the present finding encourages a construction of more specific and contextual intercultural competences. Concretely, it could involve a mutual exploration of cultural experiences for both local and international students. This would build a contextualized approach of intercultural learning, which the interviewees find more meaningful. Chrissie is a noticeable example:

"I have learned so much about people, countries, ways of life through the study abroad context". This approach assumes that diversity is richer than homogeneity. The study abroad experience is a great occasion to encourage the sharing of exclusive and original features. In other words, the teaching situation carries a chance to encourage internationalism above globalism (Paris, 2003).

International students' social relations: integrating the academic time in the study abroad experience

The students unwaveringly claimed that 'social relations' are a critical element of their experience abroad. Megan pointed out: "for me, the most important culture is the personal relation-wise"; Eva even defined culture as "the relations you have with people". The importance of the social dimension for the study abroad experience is well acknowledged in the literature: (Montgomery, 2010b). The present findings demonstrate that the interpersonal aspect of university learning might be of great importance for international students. The respondents described their first moments as international students as an active search for rich social interactions: Kim explained that "the first couple of months are very important for international students; if you don't meet local students you cannot involve in their social life". This finding supports two propositions for intercultural learning practices.

First, without underestimating the variety of learning styles, it seems important to multiply interaction situations. Smith and Hill laid emphasis on the importance of group tasks and collective involvement for Chinese students (Smith & Hill, 2011). The present results indicate that this pedagogical organization could be beneficial not only for Chinese students, but positive for intercultural learning in general.

Second, the interviews support the claim that international students could have initial contextual predispositions for engaging in active learning (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). This outcome suggests that an active approach of intercultural learning could be appropriate. Drawing on Qian's practical tools to facilitate active learning (Qian, 2011), mini-debating could be one adequate model for stimulating active intercultural learning. Two practical conditions for improving active learning are interactive practices and the development of individualised relations between tutors and students: these could appropriately be applied to intercultural learning. Bartram & Bailey stressed that international students consider personal qualities as particularly important to define a 'good teacher' (Bartram & Bailey, 2009): their findings are

clearly in agreement with the present propositions.

Methodologically, this study demonstrates the power of giving voice to students' cultural representations. Burgess *et al.* worked on the effect of cultural background on the academic adjustment of dental students (Burgess, Crocombe, Kelly, & Seet, 2009). In reference to the cultural background, their questionnaire proposed three choices: 'Australian', 'Aboriginal Australian', or 'Other'. Most respondents defined their cultural background as their 'nationality' because the question inclines to this answer. Here stands the interest of qualitative inquiry and the advocacy for allowing emergence (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) instead of forcing predefined categories into the individuals' answer. Presently, accessing international students' cultural representations offered some original insights for intercultural learning possibilities.

CONCLUSION

This study found that international students from various sociocultural backgrounds have complex cultural representations about their study experience in Australia. Even if exchange students and full-degree international students are different, they regularly hold common cultural representations. Notwithstanding their diversity, three emergent concepts are important for intercultural learning. The collective limitation to an 'international students community' and the meagre interactions with local students advocate for mixing local and international students in intercultural learning. The self-representation as a 'globalized population' calls for more localized and contextualized approaches of intercultural learning abroad. Finally, the academic setting can build on the international students' initial thirst for social relations to involve them in active intercultural learning. Here, timing is imperative, as their relational openness seems to progressively decline over time.

From the intercultural learning perspective, this paper argues for an active approach of intercultural learning, through an active role of the academic community in nurturing intercultural learning possibilities.

From the study abroad perspective, academic intercultural learning is a chance to bridge the gap between the academic and extra-academic experiences. The study abroad situation does not have to see its academic and cultural learnings being opposed: by integrating intercultural learning into the pedagogical and learning practices, the university can not only provide a coherent study abroad experience, but also a mutual enrichment for local and international students.

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Appendix 1 – Students characteristics

	Gender	Age	Country	SES*	Religion	Study type	Degree	Major	English*
Vincent	M	18	Malaysia <i>Kuala Lumpur</i>	High	Athiest	FD	B1	Architecture	Yes
Kim	M	21	China <i>Xuchang</i>	Mid	ND	FD	B2	Civil and Mining Engineering	Yes
Carmen	F	20	Brazil <i>Rio de Janeiro</i>	Low/ Mid	ND	EX1	B4	Marine Biology	No
Eva	F	23	Chile <i>Santiago</i>	Mid	Christian	EX1	M2	Engineering	No
Victoria	F	19	USA <i>Jackson</i>	High	ND	EX1	B2	Biology	Yes
Sheryl	F	23	China <i>Zhengzhou</i>	Mid	ND	FD	M2	Finance and Economics	No
Lena	F	21	Germany <i>Dusseldorf</i>	Mid	ND	SA	B3	Psychology	No
Robin	M	20	Indonesia <i>Jakarta</i>	Mid	Muslim	FD	B3	International Business	No
Ayo	M	23	Ghana <i>Accra</i>	High	Christian	FD	M1	Computer Science IT	Yes
Kevin	M	20	England <i>Birmingham</i>	Mid	Athiest	EX2	B3 M1	Chemical Engineering	Yes
Megan	F	22	USA <i>Denver</i>	Mid	ND	EX1	B3	Literature	Yes
Marion	F	22	Norway <i>Oslo</i>	Mid/ High	Athiest	EX1	B3	Social Science (Sociology)	No
Chrissie	F	20	England <i>Nottingham</i>	Low	ND	EX1	B3	Psychology	Yes
Sabra	F	24	Uganda <i>Kampala</i>	Mid	Christian	FD	M2	Medicine (Research)	No

SES* socioeconomic status in their home country: 'High'- upper class; 'Mid'- middle class; 'Low'- lower class

SA study abroad (short-term mobility without an exchange program) | **FD** full degree student (degree fully undertaken in Australia)

EX exchange student ('1' for one semester and '2' for two semesters) | **B1/B2/B3/B4** Bachelor (1st /2nd /3rd /4th year)

M1/M2 Master (1st /2nd year) | **English*** fluently mastered the English language before being an international student

Appendix 2 – Data extracts

	Dominant representation of overseas students' collective organization abroad	Dominant representation of international students' identity in Australia: 'globalists', 'localists', 'glocalists' ^{2*}	Dominant representation of the social relations abroad: importance and features
Vincent	International students are a "whole [group]". Most friends are international students. Australians are responsible for that situation.	Glocalist: international students are all autonomous, but there are differences of language, race, and state of mind.	Sociability counterbalances university. He values verbal interactions and likes "talking for hours". Adaptive approach of friendships.
Kim	Most international students are between themselves, and frequently gather by nationality. Chinese don't like to walk out of their circle.	Globalist: there is an 'international way of life' (gym, shopping, TV shows, enjoyment). Asian people are more accepted by the Western culture. "There are no more strong cultural barriers".	"I would like to make friends more than anything so far". Going abroad made him become active to make friends: "[I] walk out of my small circle". The first months are very important.
Carmen	Mostly in contact with international students because the location "is a cosmopolitan city".	Globalist: international students are friendly (but temporary friends). "I can make friends with all the world". Race or religion don't matter.	She made a lot of friends during the orientation week. Essential because she is very studious and would only study otherwise.
Eva	International students are always together ('exchange students' group). Met very few Australians (five).	Globalist: international students have similar ways of thinking and behaving. Same judgment for her two exchange programs (USA and Australia).	The accommodation and orientation week were good opportunities to meet people. The university exchange is an excuse to go abroad and meet people.
Victoria	Only international students in her course. Only close with international students except for her two roommates (same for the others).	Glocalist: international students are a confident, friendly and independent population, but being a native English speaker makes difference.	She was nervous during the first week because lonely. The accommodation and orientation week made her meet people. "It is definitely the people that I will remember".
Sheryl	Community at the student accommodation: almost exclusively international students. Only one Australian girl at the apartment.	Glocalist: all like communication, have independence and confidence, but real Western/Eastern separation. "Since I went abroad I feel more Asian".	She felt lonely so she volunteered at the university to meet people. It is more important than the academic part. "I regret [that] I spent too much time with Chinese friends".
Lena	International students community at the student accommodation.	Globalist: open-mindedness and lifestyle are shared attributes. "You have many things in common, the same preferences".	"For me it was important to meet many people". She met people at the airport, the accommodation and "the orientation week was very important".
Robin	Robin Mostly international friends, did not mention any Australian. International students gather with international students.	Glocalist: all overseas students are daring to try new things, but several levels still create identity differences (supra-national, national, local).	"The first three days you feel lonely and miss home, but when you meet people that's OK". The orientation week and accommodation made the difference.
Ayo	Australia is community-oriented. <i>Ayo expressed no clear opinion about the collective organization of international students.</i>	Globalist: friendly population, open-minded. "It is the situation that makes your identity". Even language does not really make a difference.	"I didn't meet anyone until the orientation week". He feels very busy, so the social relations he has are the very important ones.

Appendix 2 – Data extracts

	Dominant representation of overseas students' collective organization abroad	Dominant representation of international students' identity in Australia: 'globalists', 'localists', 'glocalists' [*]	Dominant representation of the social relations abroad: importance and features
Kevin	Australia is very multicultural. Specifically, overseas students are in a "very international setting" (the accommodation plays a role).	Globalist: all international students have some common attributes: everyone tries to make friends, sports etc. People are looking for common points more than difference in the study abroad context.	"I know it's easy to be shy but everyone just tries to make friends". After two or three months people form closer groups, more selective friendships. Some friends here are closer than some friends back home. "The main thing I will take away from here [...] it's about the people".
Megan	Numerically, most of her friends are international students, but she still has good relations with Australian people at her accommodation (private college).	Globalist: studying abroad changes your identity, it creates common points. International students become self-confident and independent. "Identity is just how you interact with others". Your identity changes: "I like who I am here and I hope I can bring that person back [home]".	Way of developing her social relations: "I feel like the key was just to always say yes to something instead of no". Over time, some relations have waived and others have become stronger. Her memories: "I would probably focus on the people that I've met, because they are all amazing".
Marion	International students community as the 'meta-group' with subdivisions: Europeans, US people, and Asian people.	Glocalist: during the first weeks, your identity is pretty much your nationality. "People search for similarities without knowing it". International students have "very much in common" but cultural origins (geographically) still matter.	She met "tons of people". "I didn't think I would get close friends but you don't have a choice". The travel experience, friends and the international relations are the important memories she will keep from her stay in Australia.
Chrissie	Very limited possibilities to meet Australian people (it only happens at the accommodation, and rarely). Talks about an "international context".	Globalist: big shock to see very limited differences amongst international students. "I think it is just how much time you spend with people". Common points and differences, but the former matter far more.	The orientation week "helped you to strengthen your relationships with the people you have met". She developed meaningful relations: "I would like to keep in contact with them in the future".
Sabra	Personally she is in a very international community, but did not generalize her situation to other international students.	Globalist: most international students come from urban cities so their behaviours and ways of life are similar.	She has limited friendships (finds most overseas students immature). Most of her interactions happen at the accommodation. She gives a lot of importance to the academic dimension.

^{*} the 'globalists' give importance to global features, the 'localists' to local features and the 'glocalists' to a combination of global and local features.

The table displays the dominant opinion held by each individual for the three relevant categories.