Transformation

A resource for study abroad

Australian Learning & Teaching Council

Produced by Tonia Gray, Greg Downey & Jan Gothard

2012
The Bringing the Learning Home Team:

Jan Gothard (Murdoch, Project Leader)
Greg Downey (Macquarie)
Tonia Gray (University of Western Sydney)
Linda Butcher (Murdoch, Project Manager)

Design by Greg Downey

The BTLH Students were exchange students from Macquarie University, Murdoch University, and the University of Wollongong.

Support for the production of this publication has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

With the exception of the Commonwealth Coat of Arms, and where otherwise noted, all material presented in this document is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/).

The details of the relevant licence conditions are available on the Creative Commons website (accessible using the links provided) as is the full legal code for the CC BY 3.0 AU licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/legalcode).

Requests and inquiries concerning these rights should be addressed to:

Office for Learning and Teaching
Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education
GPO Box 9880, Location code N255EL10
Sydney NSW 2001
learningandteaching@deewr.gov.au

2012
ISBN [Office of Learning and Teaching WILL ADD]
Program goals

- To assist students in identifying the personal growth inherent in their study abroad experience and enhance their metacognition
- To enable students to re-storying their learning and transformation into the experiential learning cycle
- To incorporate the basic tenets of the experiential learning cycle: experience, reflection, processing and application into their behaviour change which was enriched by the study abroad experience
- To become informed life-long learners by incorporating their newfound knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviours into their personal survival toolkit.

Rationale

The overseas sojourn can be a catalyst for attitudinal and behavioural change. Separating oneself from a safe, comfortable and familiar world and being transported to a unique, novel and unknown territory, brings a distinctive set of challenges. These transformative challenges can be emotional, physical, social, spiritual, intellectual or cultural to name just a few.

The Transformation module is designed to help students recognise and accept the changes in themselves that are likely to accompany sojourns abroad, including the risk and discomfort that can come even with positive change. The goal of Transformation makes it clear that education is not simply intended to increase skills or knowledge, but also to bring about growth. Although some forms of growth are inevitable, recognising and documenting these changes can help students to consolidate their gains while overseas and to maintain positive forms of change even when they return home and seek to resume many of the same roles and relationships that they left behind for their sojourns.

The Transformation module uses techniques borrowed from experiential learning including re-storying to give students tools for thinking about personal change and making sense of the effects of sojourns abroad.
**Mode of delivery**

Some content can be highlighted in-country through facilitated reflection; but primarily the module is to be delivered after students return from their sojourns abroad. Although we recommend alerting students to Transformation goals and opportunities prior to departure (see the Pre-Departure portions of this module for a discussion), the majority of the material is probably best conducted as a re-entry workshop or, less ideally, as a self-study option.

**Approach**

- This module draws heavily from a wide range of student blog posts and becomes a springboard for students and facilitator/s to *work through* and *draw upon* the transformation evident in each experience.
- This module requires students to prepare beforehand, and be ready to participate and share.
- The role of the presenter is to facilitate and direct discussion.
- The module also contains suggestions as to the sorts of points which the students might be encouraged to reach.

---

This module is supported by:
- Exploration
- Adaptation
- Reflection

The content of this module supports or feeds into:
- Globalisation
- Professionalisation
Contents of this module

This text, intended for workshop facilitators and travel abroad curriculum coordinators, is the primary pedagogical materials. This instructor’s guide includes a discussion of the Module’s goals, rationale and strategies, advice for running the workshop, scripts to accompany the workshops, and additional resources.

Slides (in Prezi, Apple Keynote and Microsoft Powerpoint) are provided for both a pre-departure orientation and a re-entry workshop on Reflection skills (see OzStudentsAbroad website for links).

Student guide (available if the Module will be run through self-study).

Video of the workshop being run, available through OzStudentsAbroad on YouTube. A complete list is available in the Additional Resources at the end of this guide.

If you are preparing your own reader to accompany study abroad, the student guide materials are all made available under a Creative Commons license. You are free to incorporate the materials into your own reader or course package as long as you clearly attribute the origin of the work (see Creative Commons license). The creators also include in the license the option of using the work for commercial gain, although we respectfully ask that the material not be republished and sold (we hope that the workshop materials will be useful to both university-based and commercial providers).
The importance of designing and implementing quality re-entry programs for returning study abroad students is well documented. This concept is magnified by Szkudlarek (2010: 1) who states: “Re-entry should become an issue of the highest priority to both sojourning individuals as well as people managing the re-entry transitions of travelers”.

The Bringing the Learning Home teaching materials have purposely chosen the Goldfish metaphorical anchor to concretize the transformational components of the experience. The majority of study abroad participants will re-enter their home culture a very different colour goldfish, changed since they they departed. Figure 1 below exemplifies a ‘gold’ coloured fish leaving their home culture and returning as a ‘green’ (or hybrid variation) of their original self.

This module will unpack the factors responsible for transformation during a study abroad experience.

As shown in the reflection and coping modules, well delivered study abroad programs (with book-ended phases or components), coupled with a debriefing or processing session by a well-versed facilitator, is of paramount importance. The sojourner’s newly acquired attitudes, values, behaviours and expertise in global travel, need to be concretized. Their metacognition can be enhanced.
by incorporating personal stories and photo-blogs into the pre-departure and re-entry phases, the facilitator can augment, illuminate or anchor their experiences in relation to their life. This transformation module is fundamental to ‘book-ending’ the study abroad experience at the re-entry point. It will assist students in the assimilation and integration of the study abroad experience into the students’ lifelong learning.

By helping students to harness their own inner resources and problem solving skills, we can also assist them to reach heightened levels of metacognition, or the ability to reflect upon and modify their own ways of thinking. To better understand the phenomenon, let’s turn our attention to understanding the notion of transformation.

**Unpacking the perception of transformation in study abroad**

The transformative power of an international sojourn should not be underestimated (for instance, see Brown, 2009; Brunner, 1991; Lathrop, 1999; Lean, 2009, 2011 & 2012; Neppel, 2005; Raymondi, 2005; Stitworth, 1987; and Yachimowicz, 1987). Student exchange and study abroad have a long association with the possibility of transformation (Constantinian, Guinyard, Hermosisima, Lehman and Webb 2008). As Bruner (1991) articulates, this process of change is often described in stereotypical forms, such as saying study abroad or exchange was ‘a trip to remember’ or ‘a trip of a lifetime’. Similarly, for those working in the study abroad field, it is commonplace to hear generic statements from newly-returned students such as, ‘I went away a girl/boy, came back a woman/man’. Teasing out the processes that underpin these types of statements, however, is not entirely obvious.

What is even more ubiquitous, however, is anecdotal evidence has, for the most part, remained relatively underdeveloped. In the same vein, Lean (2009) points out that there is a dearth of a balanced corpus of academic literature exploring the transformative potential of international exchange, especially why and how a person might transform as a result of studying abroad.

Returning students often say that, “I found myself whilst travelling abroad”. However, Gordon (2009) challenges the idea of self discovery in his work on studying abroad; Gordon cites Thomas Szasz:
People often say that this or that person has not yet found himself.

But the self is not something one finds, it is something one creates. (in Gordon 2009: 64)

We believe that the idea of self discovery is a misunderstanding of transformation, although the description captures the strong sense many students have that the new things they learn about themselves and discover while away gives them greater sense of autonomy, individuality, and authenticity.

**Learning, education and transformation**

Transformational education, such as that obtained through study abroad experiences, is a successful learning strategy; however, transformation is not widely promoted or explicitly discussed within many educational institutions, perhaps because the goal appears so ambitious (Markos and McWhinney, 2003; Jones, 2009; Risko, Vukelich, Roskos and Carpenter, 2002). In this module, we will explore the nexus of learning, education and transformation and develop a clearer picture of how transformational travel is embedded within the study abroad context.

Accordingly to Lean (2009: 194) the impact of study abroad upon students has come under the researcher’s microscope for over two decades to include:

- Skill acquisition, personal growth, and general learning (Milstein 2005; Neppel 2005; Williams 2002);
- Global understanding and cultural sensitivity (Cook 2005; Forgues 2005; Kehl 2006);
- Attitude toward host country (Bueno-Popkey 1991; Litvin 2003; Young 1990);
- Racial identity (Bryan 2005; Raymondi 2005);
- Transformative learning (Brown and Smith 2005; Hoff 2005; Kiely 2005);
- Psychological development (Herman 1996; Lathrop 1999);
- Personality (Kauffmann 1983; Stitsworth 1987);
- Attitude toward home (Johnston 1982; Yachimowicz 1987);
- Moral development (Garvey 1991); and
- Spirituality (Porterfield 2002).
The diversity of this list illustrates the multi-layered manner in which participants can grow, change and transform as a result of going abroad. Although we wish to highlight learning in particular, any re-entry instructor of facilitator should be aware that students may have grown in a diversity of ways; ideally, our re-entry programs should encourage them to recognise and consolidate this growth, even if the area might fall outside of our own speciality (or comfort zone, for that matter).

**Learning**

The learning experienced overseas can either be either **shallow**, where information is retained and not necessarily understood and assimilated, or **deep**, where complex knowledge can be applied in real life situations and a significant increase in a person's ability occurs. Priest and Gass (1997: 150) describe this process as analogous to a swimming pool.

The process of education is a lot like learning to swim in a pool that has a shallow end and a deep end. Some people often learn to swim in the shallow end, and move to the deep end when they have their basics down. Some people learn by plunging right into the deep end, hoping they learn quickly before drowning. Still others enter the shallow end, wade around slowly with a great deal of trepidation, and never develop the confidence to progress further. In all of these cases, some flounder and a few sink, but the ones who become independent swimmers accomplish this feat because they are able to build on and connect all of the elements of their learning experiences. And although many prefer to just get their feet wet, none are really truly educated unless they venture into deeper waters.

As described by Bateson (1972), learning through experience has distinct levels. This model presents the idea that learning is a *process*, and not a *program*. Learning itself, is not only the acquisition of knowledge, but a way of *organising*, *making decisions* and *exploring* our assumptions and constructing a new reality. Ideally, sojourners should continually be undergoing this process.
According to seminal work by Mezirow (1981, 1990, 1991 & 2000), transformational learning involves transforming taken-for-granted frames of reference into more discriminating and flexible habits of mind. Participants gain meaning in life from both the experiences that they live, their existing expectations about the world and events that promote reflective learning (Taylor, 1998). This process means that what is learned will affect the individual’s ability to perceive in the future, establishing a new starting point for future learning.

The process of transformational learning has a beginning, middle and an end. The area in the middle, known as the area of negativity (English, 2010) signals the point of interruption in an experience which occurs when we encounter something unusual, unfamiliar, different, or unexpected. Dissonance, disequilibrium and loss of homeostasis ensue. The space between the beginning and end of a transformational experience is often characterised by questions as to how one got into the current situation, and how they will navigate themselves out of the situation at hand. Discomfort is a predictable part of transformational learning, as the individual struggles to become accustomed to a new way of seeing and understanding the self.

Dewey’s theory of reflective learning (1938) makes reference to the ‘in-between’ period of time between the known and the unknown. Conceptually, this space is where we dwell between old and new experiences. When we encounter an unexpected event, we may become perplexed, frustrated or even confused, especially if that event undermines our prior taken-for-granted ways of making sense of our experience. The resulting tension can cause individuals to become stuck (or sometimes frozen) in an indeterminate situation that is difficult to navigate. Being perplexed promotes reflection of self, which forces individuals to see themselves in the bigger picture or after shedding assumptions about themselves that prove, under unfamiliar experience, to be inaccurate.

To refer back to Priest and Gass’s (1997) metaphor of deep and shallow learning, transformational education could be likened to a swimmer who reaches the far wall across the deep end of the pool, proceeds to pull him- or herself out of the water, and turns to reflect on the entire experience, seeing the pool from a whole new perspective.

Transformational education has developed as a minor subset of mainstream education, as many educators believe that bringing about personal change is not within their institutional responsibilities (Markos and McWhinney, 2003). Most institutions provide the learner with the information necessary to swim to the deep end of the education pool, we might say.
However, the structure of our curriculum may not allow for the extended transformational experience or encourage individuals to recognise how they are changing. In one form or another, something transformative takes place in many learning processes, a change that contributes profoundly to the lives of adults and the effectiveness of whole societies. In the current world climate, economy and political situation, transformational education could be the key to producing globally aware citizens who are capable of solving the problems faced by society.

**Experiential learning - A pathway to transformational education**

Experiential learning, as with transformational learning, involves shifting the learner’s belief systems and questioning assumptions. The study abroad experience is experiential in nature; and provides an ideal environment of *learning by doing aided by reflection*. Coleman (1979) found that the emotions associated with experiential learning increased participant’s capacities in learning retention. He believed that experiential learning:

> grounds each word, each phrase, in a rich bed of experience. One remembers a word, a phrase, because of the very emotions it provoked when it was not understood by another or when it was understood and evoked a response from the other. One cannot forget it, because its usage is an intrinsic part of the fabric of experience that constitutes one’s life.  
> (Ibid.: 8)

For a program to be classified as experiential, in a formal sense, the program must provide an experience for the learner and facilitate the reflection on that experience (Joplin, 1981). Experience alone is not sufficient to be called experiential education, nor is it generally adequate to assure that we are achieving the outcomes we might hope. In international study, this is certainly the case; experience alone may not lead to change. *Debriefing and facilitation* are necessary to ensure that students actions or the events that they experienced do not remain unquestioned, unrealised, unintegrated or disorganised.

**Relevance to study abroad**

The three basic tenets of transformational learning are: 1) understanding, 2) deep engagement, and 3) connectivity beyond one’s own personal world (Markos and McWhinney 2003). Current literature suggests that learning is enhanced by an experience that places individuals outside their comfort zones, in part because this type of experienced tends to provoke greater engagement (see Reflection
The Comfort Zone model is based on the belief that when placed in a stressful or challenging situation people will respond, rise to the occasion, overcome hesitancy or fear and grow as individuals (Brown, 2008; Luckner and Nadler, 1997; Priest and Gass, 1997). In much of our daily life, we are too willing to respect self-imposed limits. Transformation can occur in the student travelling abroad when that student does something he or she would previously have avoided or has an experienced outside their previous experience. Because these type of experiences are so common when living abroad, international study should be an ideal forum for employing experience-based learning; we hope to show students that the challenges and difficulties that they face are not merely a nuisance, but a chance to fundamentally change who they are.

Using reflection to consolidate transformation

A number of researchers have explored the role of the visual image (such as photographs, postcards, and souvenirs) in stimulating reflection, recall of poignant moments or encounters, or relationships with places (for instance Bærenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen and Urry 2004; Braasch 2008; Edwards, 1996, 1997 &1999; Harper, 2002; Loeffler, 2004 & 2005; Martin, 2009; Morgan and Pritchard 2005; Ramsay 2009; Robinson and Picard, 2009; Scarles, 2010; Schell, Ferguson, Hamoline, Shea & Thomas-Maclean; Wang, 1999). Photographs can be anchors for memory and are conducive to bringing the past into the present and making it alive once more (Lean 2012). As they contain the power to act as anchors or symbols of our past experiences, photographs rekindle memories that serve to inform our transformed self.

Student Blog entries and photos

Embedding students’ stories from while overseas, either gathered through in-country blogging, elicited through photo reflection, or simply recalled on their return, can be a powerful way to stimulate discussion and concretise learning in a re-entry workshop. What follows is a selection of photos and blog posts from our project which can be useful as a springboard for discussion. These examples, however, can and should also be replaced by your students’ stories and photos as you work with them on the topics in this module. Ideally, the examples of other students talking about and reflecting on the way that they have changed through study abroad will provoke your students to find examples from their own experience.
Example One

Arriving into host culture: This photo captures Hayden’s openness and willingness to take risks, exposing himself to new and potentially life-changing experiences. No baggage, no history – just a clean slate. Although students may not find Hayden’s approach a path they want to pursue, his willingness to change, even the awareness that he has to have a ritual to signal that possibility, is certainly worth discussing with students, either prior to departure or upon their return. Hayden wrote to us:

Starting my new life in America. It was only appropriate to start the same way I did last time, naked. At this point in time I've never felt more free, no worries in the world. It was an instant stress reliever! Travel has the power to do that to you...

In order to help students to engage the transformative potential in study abroad and international exchange, an instructor might lead a discussion about how students specifically hope to change, and what might impede those changes:

- Write briefly a list of things you hope to change or accomplish while overseas. What might be an obstacle to you achieving this change? Which of those obstacles are self-imposed, or able to be changed by our own attitudes and actions?
- What would we like to discard or overcome when we’re abroad?
- What are you hoping to change or modify, if shedding part of yourself is not relevant?
- What strategies might we use to make these changes more likely?
Example Two

"Home", by Steven Wells

The following post was written by a student during his exchange experience in Sweden. The post might serve as a spark to hold on online discussion, in-country, with students who are themselves adapting to their host countries, thinking about how the experience has changed them. The questions at the end should help to spark some discussion. Use similar questions if you wish to conduct an in-country discussion with students about their own transformations, using a different post or piece of reflective writing that touches on themes of personal change and growth.

It’s been four months now.

I’ve seen so much of this place. Made a lot of friends, a lot of memories, seen and done things I would never ever have imagined.

This is much like the story of every exchange student, I would imagine, but to me, it feels special.

As I find myself nearing the end of my stay here in Umeå, Sweden, I feel like a little reflection is in order:

Actually, I’ve spent more time on my various trips around Europe than here in Umeå. Just got back from a trip further north at 1am today. I’m writing this blog now rather than later since I’m leaving again for another trip around Europe in a couple of days. Tiredness is no longer a problem, just a fact of life.

So far I have visited a whole lot of Sweden, plus bits of other countries like Poland, Finland (twice), Norway (thrice), Russia, Italy, Switzerland, France and Monaco, with plans to see Spain and Germany.

Original post and photos at: http://tiny.cc/zlvzew
as well as Italy and France again before I leave – in a month.

I’ve been roaming around with friends I made here, friends from just about every country in the world (in fact I’m convinced Sweden has more Germans than Swedes). I have a bunch of Swedish friends as well, of course, but they are not so interested in such touristy activities...

One thing that you notice when travelling with non-native English speakers is that many will call just about anywhere “home”. Instead of “let’s go back to the hotel where we are staying for one night”, it’s “let’s go home”. Of course I don’t feel at home in that hotel, it’s just the place we sleep. In this case I usually try to correct people (which some really appreciate, more than others).

There is one case, though, when I don’t feel that this is a mistake; When people say we are going “home” as we return to Umeå, then I am inclined to agree with them. I do feel like I’m coming home. This feels like home.

The snow; the cold; the sun that we never see, and the beautiful skies by which we know it is still there; this tiny little room; my curtains that I found in a dumpster – held open by a coathanger; riding my bike across the frozen lake; cooking my own food in my own shared kitchen; my housemates, about whom I know nothing, not even their names (as is the Swedish way); the times when I find myself thinking “$5 Australian, what’s that in crowns?”; the big dirty factory next door, whose smoky beacon guides me safely home from any place in town at any hour of night...

All of it. It’s home.

Students may not have experienced such a sense of belonging as Steven, but they no doubt have changed while overseas. In reflection questions we would suggest that you encourage them to assess those changes, think about which ones they might wish to hang onto, and consider how this might reflect deeper growth.

• Does the place you are staying and studying feel a bit like ‘home’? Are there things that you will miss about your host country when you return?

• In what ways have you adapted to your host country? Are there things you do now, habits you have, expectations, that will have to change before you fit in back in Australia when you return?

• Do you feel that you are different in any significant ways in your host country to the way you are at home in Australia? Do you want to hang on to these new qualities, or are you hoping that you will revert to older ways of doing things or being?

• Have you learned anything important about yourself while overseas?
Example Three
Reverse culture shock as symptom of growth

During re-entry, students will often experience some degree of ‘reverse culture shock.’ Upon return to Australia, as they get back into daily life, students may experience a gamut of emotions. Some may have ‘reverse culture shock’ (see the Adaptation module); others may realize the importance that their home culture plays in their identity and belief systems.

One thing to point out to students is that discomfort upon return is not simply a nuisance, but a sign of the change that they have undergone. That is, reverse culture shock can be an indirect measure of adaptation and transformation, marking that they have grown to such a degree that older ways of being may seem like an odd, too-small fit for new ways of seeing things.

By helping students to identify the specific points of friction in their re-entry process, to recognise the new dimensions of their identity, and to articulate strategies to make their own transformation consistent with life in Australia, we can help students to see that becoming comfortable again need not involve unwinding any personal growth. Here are some examples of students own accounts.

‘Re-entry – Reverse Culture shock’, by Maureen F.

Hey all,

It’s been my first week back at UOW this week and I found myself a little scared to be back! So much had changed and was different and yet so much was still the same! Every now and again I find myself thinking “I’m homesick.” I had this really weird moment the other day, where I was sorting through my UK photos for printing and I thought “I miss being home.” Huh? Was? Ich wohne nicht in London/Scotland/Wales. But it doesn’t matter, I’m still homesick.

I was thinking about what was discussed at the ‘welcome back’ session with Tonia, and I can definitely say that I feel like a bit of a hybrid of an Australian and a British girl now. As I posted on my personal blog, “I love Australia. I love the bush. I love the sun. I love my friends. I love to write Australian bushland poetry and I love going to The National Park for swims and picnics. I even love the song ‘I am Australian’, in particular these stanza’s:

I’m the teller of stories
I’m the singer of songs
I’m Albert Namajira

Original post and photos available at: http://tiny.cc/s1wzew
And I paint the ghostly gums
I’m Clancy on his horse
I’m Ned Kelly on the run
I’m the one who waltzed Matilda
I am Australian.

I’m the hot winds of the desert
I’m the black soils of the plain
I’m the mountains and the valleys
I’m the droughts and flooding rains
I am the rock, I am the sky,
The rivers when they run
The spirit of this great land
I am Australian.

But see the UK and Ireland have my family
and they have the culture we don’t have.”

I decided in light of how I’m feeling at the
moment I’ll sum up the things I liked best
about the UK using pictures.

1. Seeing real snow for the first time and
understanding the meaning of ‘proper
cold.’

   A day trip to Loch Ness
   Stuck in a snow storm without an umbrella
   in London.

2. Meeting my relatives overseas in both
Ireland and England for the first time!

3. My flatmates and our weird and
wonderful adventures.

   Halloween at Flat 12!

4. The history and culture in the UK

All those old buildings and churches were so awesome. One fond memory is of
my American flat mate and I doing a guided tour of Lancaster castle with a truly
creepy guide who seemed ghoulishly obsessed with death. On the entertainment
front, I went to the theatre four times when I was in the UK itself! That’s a play a month! I couldn’t help it. The tickets were so much more affordable then back home and I loved the atmosphere. And after all, who wouldn’t have fun trying to explain the three hour plot of *Les Miserables* in London’s West End to their Chinese flat mate throughout the entire performance without annoying everyone around us?

My two play Guides. One for *Hamlet* and one for *Season’s Greetings* with some of the cast’s autographs.

5. Real Christmas Markets.

Market and fair in Edinburgh, Scotland. I took this on the actual ferris wheel.

It’s funny. When I got towards the end of my trip in the UK, I was so homesick and just wanted to come home to Australia. After a week or two, I instantly wanted my travelling life back! Anyone else going through this?

Like many students, Maureen focuses on the things about her host country that she misses, offering a wonderful snapshot of the types of activities, people and places that can create these powerful ties between students and the places that they visit.

To move the students to think more about transformation, however, these reflections can be turned into questions about the ways that they’ve changed: for example, Maureen might talk about how her love of theatre has been deepened and her appreciation of the art grown more sophisticated because of her experience. She may have found that she makes new friends more easily than she thought, or really enjoyed the company of people she might not have met had she not be thrown into a flat with them by the international student office.

Reflection questions about the symptoms of reverse culture shock can ask:

- Do the things that you miss surprise you in any way? Do you miss things now that you didn’t realise, before you left, would be important to you?
- Do you think you can find surrogates or substitutes here in Australia for the things that you miss from study abroad? How can you maintain the relationship with the things you loved about your host country?
Example Four
Unfinished business & feeling out of place

Some students don’t finish up their study abroad or international exchange experiences as they had intended. They may have to come home early because of financial pressures, illness, a death in the family, or a host of other reasons. Sarah S., one of our students in the BTLH program, had to return from Japan due to the earthquake and tsunami that struck the country in 2011.

Her story of rushing to pack, suddenly changing plans, and feeling like she was back in Australia before she was really able to come to terms with what was happening, is a powerful account of how circumstances can force transformation upon students on terms that they do not choose. Just because the experience a kind of ‘exchange interruptus’, however, does not mean that reflection cannot help them to make sense of their experiences, and how they have been changed by what they have witnessed.

Sun Sand and Fish and Chips – by Sarah S

36 hours to pack, 15 hour flight home and 19 hours later sitting back in a lecture theatre; not the way I had planned my return home to Australia but that was the reality I faced.

As the plane started its descent into Sydney my heart was racing. I was more nervous coming ‘home’ than I was starting this whole adventure. What was I coming back to? Before I left I had run away from a few things using the excuse that I would be abroad for the next year so I could not commit to anything. In the last week before my departure, I had three final exams, a farewell dinner and the enormous task of packing my bag (which I finalised the night before!). Things were a blur before I jumped into the unknown, but looking back that was so much easier than coming back.

Some students may relate to Sarah’s story of coming home from Japan. Sarah talks about her anxiety, her sense that she had to face things she had left behind in Australia, and her initial sense of being out of place (that she was only holidaying in Australia) are a powerful example of reverse culture shock.

A videotape of a portion of Sarah’s interview can be found at: Re-entry (2:06)
http://youtu.be/6MsgEI_GKfw
While overseas I logically knew that time continued second by second, at the same rate for my friends and family back home and for me in Japan. But while I was living my life over there, it didn’t seem as though things in Australia were progressing at all because I wasn’t there. I had sat through the workshop on culture shock at the pre-departure meeting and studied the theories in commerce, but I didn’t real feel as though I experienced the trough in the experience curve… until I encountered reverse culture shock.

Coming back to what I thought I knew, but knowing it would be different, was a daunting and overwhelming thought. For a while after I was home, it felt like I was playing a life-size ‘spot the difference’. And every difference I saw reminded me not only of what I had missed in Australia while I was away, but how much I was missing my life in Japan. Using Facebook as a window looking at all the things that I should have and could have been doing; it was hard, and there were many moments where I found myself wishing that I was not back. The day before I returned, while I was packing the life I had created for myself back into my bag (which seemed to have become a lot smaller since my arrival), I was sitting, surrounded by the clothes I had taken out of my draws, with nothing in my suitcase, overwhelmed by what I had to do. It was
such an emotional experience and battle of will to finally empty my room and zip up my bag for the final time, knowing that this was the end.

Coming back to Australia did make me reflect upon what I had missed while I was away: fish and chips at the beach, walking along the sand, rolling down a grassy hill, looking out onto the horizon. The things that remind you of the Aussie lifestyle. Before I had even reached my house, I made my parents drive the coastal road around North Beach. We sat and had fish and chips, taking in the moment. Even embracing the flies and the seagulls. To be honest, though, it felt like I had come back for a holiday. I had to keep reminding myself that I didn’t need to try the food or drink right then and there because I would be able to come back in a day, a week, a month, a year and the same thing would still be there.

The permanence; the indefinite of the monotony that I had wanted to get away from was there once again. My days consisted of going to Uni, coming home, doing homework and then doing it all again the following day. A few times I caught myself looking around campus for the friends who I had studied with in Japan only to find myself being disappointed. Campus was so lonely without my Australian friends who had graduated the year before, without my Japanese swim team and without a communal lunch hour in which we used to sit and make friends with other students.

Living at home again I have also noticed how much chicken my family consumes! It seems as though I’m eating it at least once a day. In Japan frequently meal time would turn into Master Chef; my friends and I would bring the contents of our fridge to the communal cooking area and be faced with the challenge of creating something for dinner. Some of the dishes were rather inventive, but nothing inedible was made and every day was a surprise. I now crave rice, particularly onigiri (which was only ¥100) – so cheap yet so satisfying – and am still adjusting to the Australian diet which is the only thing I’d ever known before going away. It seems so strange that nine months can change a lifetime. I’m still waiting for Dad to set up the BBQ so that I can be a
true Aussie and “throw a few shrimps on the barbie” as my American friends often told me.

Before going on exchange, going on exchange was my goal. I was working four part-time jobs in order to self-finance my trip and was so committed to my Uni work for fear of failing and being ineligible to actually participate on the study abroad. Coming home I didn't have that driving goal, and I felt lost. It has taken me three months to build and work towards my next challenge, but I am confident that I will get there. I am slowly beginning to settle back into ‘Aussie life’ but don’t think I’ll be back for very long before my next sojourn overseas, whether it be as a holiday or for work. After having this experience I will not be content until I can see and do all that is out there waiting to be discovered.

Sarah’s account of reverse culture shock is particularly eloquent and dramatic, her time in Japan clearly quite powerful, even though cut short. Elsewhere, Sarah wrote about this disorientation in a post on our team weblog, Oz Students Abroad, and another student responded, sharing her own experiences with reverse culture shock and the sense of incomplete transformation.

**Walking on a Dream by Sarah S**

I realised today, home is no longer home. Yes, I still live in the same house and the same room that I left a year ago and my family are always there to support me no matter what, but I am living in a world of memories and virtual contact. I have no friends that still live in the area; I can’t simply call by and have a chat or a cry, watch a movie or bake cookies. I truly miss the friends I made in Japan during my exchange. I keep in contact via Skype and Facebook but I see photos of events that I know I would have attended if I were still there. Seeing the laughter and the frivolity all while I have been in my room studying for final exams made it even
harder. It is all through virtual contact. I am grateful for these technologies as I know that if we had to write letters and send them through the post I would have lost contact with so many more people, but it is still difficult.

I so desperately want to start the next chapter of my life; to begin the next challenge, as my exchange was a year ago. I don’t know why I cannot be the confident, proactive person I was in Japan while I’m here. I feel like I want to run away (particularly back to Japan) but I know that is not the answer. I don’t want to face the reality that was and is my life in Australia. Reverse culture shock is worse than what I experienced going abroad. At the beginning of an adventure there is excitement, anticipation and an unknowing. Back home, back at Uni, back to routine I feel like I am losing touch with all the experiences I had and returning to the person I was before I left rather than the being person I became.

I know that every person’s experience is different so I would really like to know how other people are dealing with being ‘home’.

Another student responded to Sarah’s post, offering concrete suggestions and a sympathetic hearing. The exchange of post and comments shows the benefits that can come from allowing students to communicate about these experiences, how they can talk about their own strategies for reinforcing the positive transformations that they’ve experienced while sojourning abroad. Even the opportunity to check to make sure that they are not alone in feeling awkward and out of place can open up students to talk with greater assurance and less anxiety about their own transformations.

A videotape of a portion of Sarah’s interview in which she discusses her changed views on Australian culture, especially diet, eating, socialising, dress, and student life, and how she’s integrated Japanese popular culture into her daily life.

Australia through a New Lens (4:07) http://youtu.be/BKuolYQ-ug4
Morgan’s response to Sarah

Hi,

I completely understand and relate to everything you have posted here! I too have found it really hard to re enter, and its not the first time.

I found the way that I have been able to move forward easier is to do what you do when you are travelling or to get the feeling back that you had when you first moved overseas. Get out of your comfort zone. I signed up with the local volunteer bush fire brigade. Completely out of my comfort zone, completely out of character, BUT its something that I would do when I was travelling and has given me that thrill again and made me much more confident.

I am also meeting new people. I am also trying (‘trying’ being the operative word) to learn a language, to keep a connection with Europe and my friends who also speak this language and to also keep busy and etc.

I hope things get better for you! Also another thing that I find easier on re entry is to plan a new trip (even small) which gives you something new to look forward to.

Goodluck!
Morgan x

Original post and response available at:
http://tiny.cc/no2zew.

On a note related to the communication dimensions of this exchange, readers should also note that the two students were at different university campuses, on opposite coasts of Australia.
I recently returned from three months living and studying abroad in the current economic shambles that is the country of Greece.

Having travelled extensively and lived abroad before, I presumed this return would be like the others. Sure I would be sad for a day or two, but would get back into the flow of things quickly like an professional traveller.

WRONG.

For some reason this return has been the hardest, and I was not sure why.

This was only three months away, last time I was abroad living in Ireland for seven. I knew I had limited time in Greece due to visa restrictions, so it wasn’t a surprise I was asked nicely to leave once those three months were up.

I was looking forward to seeing my family and friends and the beautiful country which I realised I loved more than I let on.

Yet something had gone wrong this time and I fell into a pit of sadness and had a mini depressive episode the first few weeks back.

I realised that whilst my family were pleased to see me, many friends had moved on or were busy or lived in differing corners of the globe now.

Being the constant traveller makes you extremely popular on social networking sites such as Facebook where everyone claims to live vicariously through your travels. But it makes for a pretty lousy physical relationship, with many wary of
putting in a lot of effort when I’m potentially going to run away again to some other distant land anytime soon.

Those that I have seen have helped make the transition smoother, especially my best friend. It doesn’t matter how long we go without seeing each other, nothing changes and we still have the best time.

I had applied to two internships before I came home so that the reentering of Perth would be easier, both of which I found out I did not succeed in getting. I finally found a part time job which is lovely and has definitely helped in regards to finances, but something is missing still.

Two of my best friends currently still live in Greece, and it is often with a pang of jealousy that I Skype with them with their tanned skin, sunny weather and hilarious stories of the daily trials of Greek life. Whilst in the current situation I don’t have a pressing desire to be living in Greece again, I have come to the conclusion that right now Australia does not hold the answer. And that I need to continue my searches for jobs and experiences elsewhere.

I also had a terrible headache for the first week and a half which I realised was my body going through caffeine withdrawls from the amount of coffee and frappes I was consuming daily in Greece. It was also hard to get up before 12pm in the day, and eating dinner at 6pm was also eerily strange, as that was normally coffee time not dinner time!

In saying all of this things are better now, I have been home a month and have really enjoyed spending quality time with my family and catching up with friends. I am still struggling to find any work or work experience or internships in journalism or public relations but am becoming more upbeat and positive again.

I think the change of weather (well in three months when spring arrives and winter ends) shall be good, and

Morgan’s original post is available at: http://tiny.cc/t52zew.
I’m starting new activities and volunteering in an effort to re inspire myself and feel as though I have a purpose being back here in Perth (study doesn’t count, it’s like having a job you don’t get paid for).

To all of the other returning study abroaders: I hope your transition home is much much smoother than mine was this time and that the reverse culture shock of returning home does not last too long. Even with re entering culture shock as bad as it has been this time around, I certainly would not change the experiences and friendships that I made in Greece and would readily go through it again in a heartbeat.

Morgan x

Example Six

‘Husky Forever’? : assessing study abroad

‘Student Today, Husky Forever’ by Kelly

Even though I have only been home for a month, it seems like a lifetime since I left the University of Connecticut on a very, very cold day. Summing up a week is hard enough, so 5 months is all but impossible! Instead, I will write about some of the things that I learnt that stuck with me.

Firstly, there were the little things that were different to Australia that I simply did not think of, but made a lot of difference. Driving on the opposite side, not a problem, but crossing roads defiantly did! The first night my 2 friends and I arrived in LA, we decided to walk down to Dennys (best restaurant ever). After standing at the traffic lights, having a chat, for AGES, we were soon embarrassed to discover that in LA the ‘walk’ signal doesn’t make a noise, so we had missed about 3 goes, because we weren’t paying attention! It may seem insignificant, but I can still clearly remember it, 6 months on! Being a western country, I had naively assumed that everything would be the same as in Australia. Boy, was I wrong. And don’t even get me started on tipping! 5 months later, and I’m still not 100% sure of the proper way to do it.

Next up, adapting. While for the first couple of days I felt like a fish out of water, by the end of my stay, I was an unofficial American. I adapted really quickly to all the little things that would make my life easier. With limited funds and no one but yourself looking out for you, you have to! I also started saying ‘bunch’ instead of
‘heaps’ and ‘chug’ instead of ‘skull’, just to make my life easier when the Americans had no idea what I was saying.

I cannot write about my stay in America without mentioning School Spirit. At UConn, there is a slogan written all over the place ‘Student today, Husky forever’, and that is how I feel. Long after leaving there, I will still be a Husky, and I have all the merchandise to go with it! On any given day, half the students would be wearing UConn clothing, on game day, this would go up to 99%. The basketballers were famous around College, people would literally go up to them and ask for photos. The Co-Op sold UConn branded EVERYTHING, from Christmas decorations to dog collars to baby clothes. UConn wasn’t just our school, it was our life.

By the end of my trip, I was feeling homesick, and I was ready to go home. After 1 week back in Australia but, I was already missing everything about the place that had been my home for the last 5 months, and the best 5 months of my life. Exchange was the best thing I have ever done, and the experience will stay with me for life.

Kelly’s original post is available at: http://tiny.cc/0h4zew.

Example Seven
An easy landing from the US

‘Being home’, by Emily

I have been home for almost two months, and I wouldn’t say I am struggling to cope with the change, but it’s certainly a lot different to what I expected. I thought the experience of returning to Australia would leave me in despair, because of the final few incredibly intense days I spent in Los Angeles. The fourth of July was my last night in the city and rather than heading out, drinking and partying, I spent it watching fireworks outside my window with my best friend. It was the most magical moment of my life, it could have come straight from a scene in a Hollywood movie, but it happened to me and I am very grateful. While watching the fireworks show, I thought about home and how nothing could ever be this good again.

In reality, and in the present day I am very happy. I don’t think there was anything anti-climactic about going home at all. In fact, I knew that coming home was a huge part of exchange. It wasn’t a negative experience, as I thought it would be. I really wanted to see my family, I missed them a lot. There are only so many places in the world you can visit, without feeling the hollowness that comes with not
having your family beside you.

I haven’t seen all my friends from home yet, but I regularly meet up with a few of my closest friends. I feel like I need that interaction, otherwise I will probably go crazy. It is difficult to stay motivated for uni, and since I am only there once a week, I’ve been looking for a job. I’m in the transition stage between university and the real world. I feel like this is one of those things that’s not as bad as it seems to be.

Anyway, I hope everyone who has recently come back from overseas is settling in and sorting out their new lives

Good luck!

Example Eight
Wrapping up study abroad in Bath, UK

‘On the road home’, by Erin L

My semester abroad is now coming to end, with exactly 14 days left until I have to get on that long haul flight back to OZ.

Its exam time here in Bath, which I am finding quite odd. Classes finished about 5 days before Christmas, students are given 3 weeks off and then into exams. If I was to be continuing on for another semester, I would only have a one week break before starting the next semester. I much prefer our university system, it just seems to make more sense! (Although the 3 week break over Christmas did allow for ample travel time. Spain was gorgeous!)
I spent the Christmas town hopping, 3 or so days in different towns around the UK with friends from uni and also friends who were on exchange in Australia last year. A cold Christmas felt a tad odd, although it did feel more ‘traditionally Christmas’ or what Christmas seems like in all the films anyway! But it felt pretty weird without my family and friends and the beach, although we did manage to get in some snow cricket on Christmas day just for my benefit.

Having exams right before I finish my semester abroad has made it incredibly hard to see everyone before I fly out. But making sure I see everyone has made me realise just how many amazing people I’ve met over here. From England, Europe, and even some new Aussie mates. My English friends have taken me under their wing completely, and where at the beginning of the semester I was introduced as “the token Aussie,” I’ve now received “Oz” instead of ‘Erin’ as a nickname. My sports team were even going to see if they could get uni funding for me to come back to Italy in April for their beach tour! (Unfortunately it’s not going to happen... 😞) I’ve managed to convince some friends from some of my classes to do placement in the southern hemisphere, with some scattered over Aus and a few in NZ. Just gives me an excuse to go and see more of the world closer to home (I have most definitely got the travel bug!).

This 6 months has gone so fast, and yet at the same time it feels like so long ago that I was in Wollongong. Leaving Bath is going to be bittersweet as I’m excited to go home, but also sad to leave. But yesterday when I packed up a box to send...
home (mainly consisting of a winter wardrobe), I thought about just how amazing this experience has been.

Not only have I made friends from around the world and seen 16 countries, but I’ve seen snow for the first time, had a cold Christmas, learnt how to cook, tried new sports, survived a long distance relationship and minus temperatures. I’ve even been able to recommend places and travel spots to other people. I’ve had a snow day, town hopped the UK, met relatives on the other side of the world, experienced homesickness, stood on a frozen lake and represented my country as we lost the rugby and the Ashes, and loved every minute of it all! I’ve even started hearing English accents as normal and Australian accents as incredibly odd (when they pop up on TV or on the street).

When I was organising my exchange trip, I met another girl from Wollongong who was also coming to Bath; we even discovered we have a lot of close friends back home. Having her here with me in Bath has been so wonderful. Not only did it give me a travel buddy, but also a cooking partner and someone to talk with about home. She was there when I had some family troubles, and also when we both had boy troubles back home – it was great to have someone to talk to.

Obviously procrastination has kicked in at its best with this long post.. But a few photos from awesome times here.

The range of students’ experiences, including differing degrees of discomfort upon return, can lead some students to question themselves. They may wonder why other students seem to be re-integrating so easily when they are struggling; others will feel that, because their experiences were relatively milder and the intensity of cross-cultural learning apparently less, their study abroad experiences were not as worthwhile. Remember to point out to students that variety is normal they will experience both highs and lows in the course of their own transformation. By bringing them together as a group, both in online discussion and re-entry workshops (or a for-credit course), students can learn from each other’s experiences, not just their own. They may realise that the very fact of participating in study abroad gives them insight into each other’s experiences.

Erin’s original post is available at: http://tiny.cc/m57zew.
Discussion activity one

Travelling and studying abroad can have a profound and life-changing experience on sojourners. Share the two passages below with students and ask them to respond in terms of your own study abroad experience. How have they been transformed? What lingers or is evoked when they reflect on their time overseas?

Passage 1: from Lean (2012: 274):

When I returned from two months in West Africa, I was haunted by memories of the experience. It had reshaped my perspective upon my life in Australia, altered the way I looked at my personal and professional relationships and left me longing for the freedom, excitement and adventure that I had found while travelling. After a few months, however, this thinking had begun to subside as I settled into ‘home’ roles, routines and performances. Yet, despite this, even in the familiarity of home, the experiences and moments of Africa never completely disappeared. The cultural moments, which had altered my thinking and behaviour in the performance of physical travel, had lingered in social interactions, altered routines, photographs, objects and through continuing to travel and reside in mobile spaces, places and landscapes.

Passage 2: A Student's Story (US student visiting Australia)

Ernest Hemingway once said “you can’t escape yourself simply by moving from one place to the next,” and that’s true... but you can certainly find yourself. I know, because I did... Since I have arrived in Australia I have tested and broken my limits over and over again. If someone had asked me a year ago if I thought I could bungee jump 150 feet above a rainforest in Cairns, climb a mountain by moonlight, or dive into the ocean near the Great Barrier Reef in a country known for its sharks, I would have laughed in their face, but I did all that here, and more.

Australia offers experiences that you simply cannot find anywhere else in the world, from climbing the Sydney Harbour Bridge, to watching dolphins while...
lying on the whitest sands in the southern hemisphere, to staring in absolute awe at Ayers Rock. This country gives you every opportunity to challenge yourself.

I feel stronger and more confident now, which is a sensation that will stay with me for the rest of my life. All of a sudden calculus doesn’t seem quite so daunting ... if I can swim with sharks, I can do anything.

— Sarah Lyons, University of Arizona

Discussion activity two

Another option for a re-entry educational activity on the Transformation theme is to invite students to bring in a photograph or a story from their study abroad experience that they think has changed them. What are the memories that they think will last the longest? What events stuck with them, upset them, or made them think long and hard?

Ask students if anyone has told them, since their return, that they have changed. How? Students can be quite vague about the less tangible outcomes of study abroad, parroting a language of achievement or travel experience that they may have heard. They may say events were ‘unforgettable’: Why? How? They might say sincerely that they’ve learned ‘that they can do anything that they put their minds to’ or other vague, general points. If possible, push them to be more specific about how they’ve changed.

Consider showing the videos of the interview with Sarah discussing the way that study abroad in Japan has affected her (see Example Five above, including the written text and the video links). Although her story is particularly dramatic and your students may not feel that impact has been so indelible, her account may help them to think about different dimensions of their lives that may have been changed by the experience of studying abroad. Ask them to consider how they may have changed in the following ways if they need further inspiration:

- Adaptability
- Ambitions for future
- Awareness
- Daily routine
- Empathy
- Ethnic identity
- Gender expectations
- Global awareness
- Hobbies
- Intellectual interests
- Knowledge
- Leadership ability
- Patterns of reaction (emotion)
- Perseverance
- Problem-solving
- Self-presentation or style
- Sense of humour
- Sensitivity
- Skills
- Social mannerisms
- Taste (food, music, arts)
- Values
Discussion activity three
Updating your photo passport

If you have suggested to students that they assemble a ‘photo passport’ (discussed in the Reflection and Communication modules), you might have them re-examine that project as a re-entry activity in the Transformation stream. Just as their passport has accumulated some new stamps especially if you have students present them as digital slides, you can save these photo passports for reconsideration during your re-entry workshop.

Ask students to look at the photos that they assembled for their initial passport, and ask them to evaluate how they feel about their choices given their new perspective, after living abroad:

- Do you have any photos that you’ve taken overseas that you would choose to put in your photo passport, that represent who you are in your own opinion? Which photos would they replace? Is the change illustrative of a change in you?
- Are there any photos in the passport that you would no longer choose? What has changed about you that makes these photos less important?
- Are there any photos in the photo passport that you would still choose, but that may have different significance to you now after you’ve lived abroad? For example, do you think that you feel differently – more strongly, with greater appreciation, more aware of its distinctiveness – of a favourite place or activity that was on a photo in your original passport?
- Were any photos that you had misunderstood by people overseas when you showed them the photographs? How were they misunderstood? Why do you think that the photos were misunderstood? Because of stereotypes? Because the cultural context of your friends overseas was so different?
- Were there any photos that you wished you had with you while traveling that you didn’t have? Do you think that this was because you just forgot an image, or because you didn’t think of it for another reason?

Revisiting the photo passport, comparing this collection to their photos taken overseas, and choosing a small set to represent themselves, may help students to see in a quite tangible way changes in their priorities, values, sense of self, identity, and autobiography. The photo passport provides a simple visual way to help students to ‘re-story’ their selves.


Johnston, Gary. 1982. Perceptual Change of Culture and Belief System among Selected University Age Mexican and Japanese Foreign Students in the U.S. PhD dissertation. The University of Arizona, United States.


Cover photos by distorted faces photos by Joan Teresa; original available at http://tiny.cc/louyew.

Photo of autumn leaves by Tom N.

Self portrait in rain gear by Hayden.

Photo by lake side in Sweden by Steven; original available at: http://tiny.cc/zlvzew

Photos of memories from the UK (snow scenes, roommates in fancy dress for Halloween, playbill & Christmas markets) by Maureen; available at: http://tiny.cc/s1wzew

Photos from her sojourn in Japan (aquarium, group in traditional Japanese dress, eating, crossing rope bridge, and girls in pink costumes) by Sarah.

Photos from Mykonos in Greece by Morgan; available at: http://tiny.cc/md3zew.


Photos from winter in the UK (standing on a frozen lake, squirrel in a tree, and snowball) by Erin; available at http://tiny.cc/m57zew.

Photos from the Austrian Alps by Betty; available at http://tiny.cc/60j0ew.
Bringing the Learning Home
ozstudentsabroad.com
http://www.tlc.murdoch.edu.au/project/btlh/

Requests and inquiries concerning rights should be addressed to:

Office for Learning and Teaching
Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education
GPO Box 9880, Location code N255EL10
Sydney NSW 2001
Australia
learningandteaching@deewr.gov.au