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Cultural encounters: enhancing students' learning from a stay abroad

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Abstract

Students at the Department of Human Geography & Spatial Planning at Utrecht University leave their classroom to learn abroad: they go on exchange for a semester in Malaga, embark upon a fieldtrip to Stockholm for 6 days, or do a 3-month fieldwork in Africa. Learning outside the own classroom is an essential element of the training of geographers. Well-developed intercultural competences are vital to reap the benefits of such stay abroad, and, later on, to work in an increasingly internationalized labor market. However, immersion in a different cultural setting does not itself assure intercultural learning: an active learning environment is needed to achieve this (Trede *et al.*, 2014; Brendel 2014). Thus far, for several reasons, the stay abroad was a rather isolated component in our students' educational programmes. Upon return, exchange students often point to the immense impact of the period abroad on their academic and personal development, but they can hardly articulate their advances in specific intercultural skills and attitudes. This is strongly related to the fact that upon departure, students do not know what to expect regarding intercultural differences in the field. Furthermore, they are not stimulated to reflect on their intercultural experiences during their stay abroad. As a consequence, the learning of fieldwork abroad is not optimized. Previous experiences and literature call for an approach that confronts students with their own expectations and world views, that stimulate reflection and provoke discussion. Against that background, we developed two projects to prepare students better for a stay abroad, and to train their intercultural competences, using a three-step approach: before, during and after the stay abroad. This paper first introduces the topic and the literature on enhancing the learning outcomes of a stay abroad. Then, we will introduce our projects, one dealing with Master's students that do their fieldwork in Africa, Asia or Latin America, a second one dealing with undergraduate students that go on exchange. Next, we will present our preliminary findings on the impact of these projects on students' learning. We conclude with the observation that reflection as a skill deserves more attention in our curricula.

1. Introduction

Students study abroad to complement, deepen or widen their educational programmes at home. This study abroad can take different forms: students participate in international field trips, they collect data in unfamiliar settings, and they take courses abroad, in new university settings. While being abroad, they are exposed to much more than academic knowledge or academic skills as they have encounters with other people in often quite different economic, political, social and cultural environments. This is the reason that alongside their academic learning, students abroad develop professional and personal skills that enhance their competences. Studies mention a long list of expected benefits including language skills, transferable skills, a greater awareness of global differences, the appreciation of diversity, the development of personal and interpersonal skills, career awareness and academic focus, and critical-thinking skills, including the ability to apply academic concepts to an understanding of real-world situations (Jackson & Nyoni 2012; Crossman & Clarke 2010; Gu *et al.*, 2010; Farrugia & Sanger 2017). Unfortunately, more often than not students are unaware of the development of these skills, as this is not clearly articulated, and hardly

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reflected upon before, during, or after their stay abroad. A more structural observation is that the achievement of such benefits is not a natural process: the experience only, such as immersion in an international classroom or different cultural setting does not assure intercultural learning (Trede *et al.*, 2014; Brendel *et al.*, 2016; Huber and Reynolds 2014; Deardorff 2006; Lokkesmoe *et al.*, 2016). On the contrary, it requires guidance and in-depth reflection (Holmes & O'Neill 2012). These two teaching components are difficult to teach effectively when students are abroad. However, guidance and reflection might be manageable in an active learning environment specifically targeted at this student group. Several authors point towards the necessity of approaches that enhance these outcomes (Lokkesmoe *et al.*, 2016; Strange & Gibson 2017). Examples of such approaches are pre-departure intercultural learning modules that examine students' own and others identities (Holmes *et al.*, 2015) and the use of reflective diaries and learner journals (Dummer *et al.*, 2008). Many of these approaches see reflection as key to reap the benefits of a stay abroad. Reflection is a meaning-making process, about learning from experience, and developing one's own thoughts. Over the years, several models for reflection have been developed, such as Bain's model of the 5 R's (reporting, responding, relating, reasoning, reconstructing); Gibbs reflective cycle (1988), consisting of 6 stages of reflection; Johns' model of structured reflection (MSR) and the cycle of Driscoll (2000). These models have three main elements in common: i) a description of the event; (ii) the analysis of the event: what happened exactly?; and iii) the action, or the 'so what' question, the implication of the event for future actions. A model specifically elaborated for reflection on intercultural competences in an educational context is the PEER-model of Holmes & O'Neill (2010, 2012). This model consists of 4 interconnected and interrelated phases: Prepare-Engage-Evaluate-Reflect. To a certain extent the PEER-model also includes elements of Kolbs' Experiental Learning stages and Gibbs's Reflective Model, as it is also flexible and enables continuous use.

This contribution analyses the learning outcomes of two learning trajectories geared towards the development of intercultural and professional skills while abroad, using the PEER-model of Holmes & O'Neill. These trajectories were developed in the Department of Human Geography & Spatial Planning at Utrecht University. For geographers, learning outside the classroom is an essential component of their education. However, we noticed that students had difficulty to define the contribution of this learning outside the classroom to their academic and personal development and, in the longer run, their employability. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collected before, during and after their stay abroad, we aim to evaluate the learning effects of the training trajectories offered. In this paper we focus on the role of reflection in learning from intercultural experiences. In the following, we describe the objectives of and the activities in the two trajectories, and the first results. We conclude with comparing the two cases.

2. Two Learning Trajectories to Enhance Learning From Stay Abroad

2.1. Learning from fieldwork in the Global South

Setting. The one-year Master's programme in International Development Studies (IDS) prepares students for a career in the field of international development. Half of the programme is dedicated to a three-month research fieldwork in Africa, Asia or Latin America. Thusfar, the development of soft skills is not adequately addressed in our curriculum: students do not know what to expect regarding intercultural differences in the field, and the learning of fieldwork is not optimized. Yearly, about 45 students leave for a field work in the global South.

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Aim of the trajectory. Using the PEER-model of Holmes & O'Neill, we have developed a six-step learning trajectory that is integrated in the various stages of the fieldwork (preparation of fieldwork, actual fieldwork, writing of the thesis). The aim of this trajectory is to strengthen students' intercultural competences and their research skills. The six steps include lectures and workshops with assignments before departure, reflections assignments during their stay abroad, and structured discussion upon return.

Findings and evaluation of outcomes. We evaluated the learning trajectory with our students, asking them to answer some statements (Table 1).

Table 1

Students' assessment of contribution of the IDS Learning Trajectory
to learn from intercultural experiences, cohort 2016-2017

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
The lecture/workshops/assignments were suitable to learn to reflect on how the intercultural setting of the research and my positionality as a researcher may influence the process of data collection (N = 30)		3.3%	46.6%	46.6%	3.3%
Writing the interim report has helped me to identify practical problems I encountered (e.g. regarding health, time frame, infrastructure, safety, etc.) and their effects on the process of data collection (N = 30)		6.7%	30.0%	50.0%	13.3%
Writing the interim report has helped me to deal with these challenges (for example by adapting my research strategy) (N = 30)	10.0%	13.3%	40.0%	33.3%	3.3%
The reflection during the Return Day will help me to explain in the thesis the effects of the intercultural context of my research and my own positionality on the process of data collection (N = 29)		10.3%	31.0%	55.2%	3.4%
I enjoyed learning about intercultural research competences (N = 28)	3.6%	3.6%	10.7%	67.9%	14.3%

The overall opinion of the students on the contribution of the learning trajectory to their learning is positive. They in particular like to be introduced to the concepts of positionality and intercultural competences, linked to research. Some examples of comments that students jotted down include '*attention paid to how your own paradigm influences data collection, it is never neutral*', and '*discussing with other students helped to reflect on intercultural aspects I may not have considered otherwise*'. However, students value the contribution of frontal lecturing and reading texts on interculturality before their fieldwork as limited, as the concept remains rather abstract. Especially practical examples appeal to students' imagination.

Preparing a written reflection while in the field is considered less useful by the students, who indicate that '*writing an interim report takes up time one can better spend on data collection*'. An evaluation of the interim reports from the first year showed that at times students felt uneasy about describing the pitfalls in and challenges of their research. The reluctancy to reflect in an in-depth way may be caused by the feeling that their teachers might consider self-criticism as a 'failure', plus the fact that the assignment was graded.

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More activating forms of learning, in particular the exchange of views and experiences immediately on return, were highly valued by the students. The discussions the small groups had were very lively and, being together, the students seemed to be able to address these questions in a more in-depth way than they did in the individual written reflections halfway through their research. Linked to this we observed the importance of the interaction with peers, and the role of peers as reference framework. Beforehand, all the students added to the methodology part of their research proposal expectations regarding the impact of their positionality in the field. Afterwards, the form of reflection on this positionality varied considerably: some just added a few lines about being aware of the limitations/challenges they will encounter, while others wrote a rather detailed account of their expectations. We observed that most students were not familiar with reflection skills, and simply did not know how to deal with reflection assignments.

In the end, the intercultural research competences of our students should be adequate to deal with the requirements of field research. Generally, supervisors note that the majority of the students is able to at least superficially evaluate —in the final thesis— their positionality in the field, and link this to data collection. A more integrative approach, in which reliability and validity of data are profoundly reflected upon and critically linked to outcomes of the research, is considered a much more complex exercise, and performed by only a selected group of students.

2.2. The XChange learning trajectory: enhancing employability skills via intercultural experiences

Setting. Approximately 80 students of the three undergraduate programmes in the Faculty of Geosciences go on exchange every year, mostly one semester. Students often mention that they could have been better prepared and benefitted more from their stay abroad, and that they do not take time for a critical reflection on their stay abroad. This hampers the recognition of academic and personal returns of their stay abroad, and of the meaning and the value of their international experience for their future career, often linked to so-called employability skills.

Aim of the trajectory. In order to increase the effects of intercultural experiences, in 2018 the Faculty of Geosciences and the Centre for Academic Teaching at Utrecht University developed the XChange project as an extracurricular learning trajectory for Geosciences undergraduate students involved in an exchange programme abroad[1]. The learning trajectory aims to increase the awareness and effectiveness of the contribution of intercultural experiences to employability skills of students. Upon completion, the trajectory renders all participants a certificate.

The XChange training is based on the PEER-model of Holmes & O'Neill in emphasising the Preparation, Engage and Reflection stages, while accounting for continuous reflection and feedback on reflection (Gibbs 1988) during the process. The XChange training consists of three parts, each explicitly emphasizing and practicing awareness, reflection and goal setting in the realm of intercultural experiences abroad: 1) pre-departure meetings, with two 'transfer' assignments in between; 2) stay abroad assignments; and 3) a back home meeting, with preparation assignments[2].

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[1] Ethical Approval is applied for at Utrecht University (April 2019), as the measurement of learning effects requires students to be followed over time
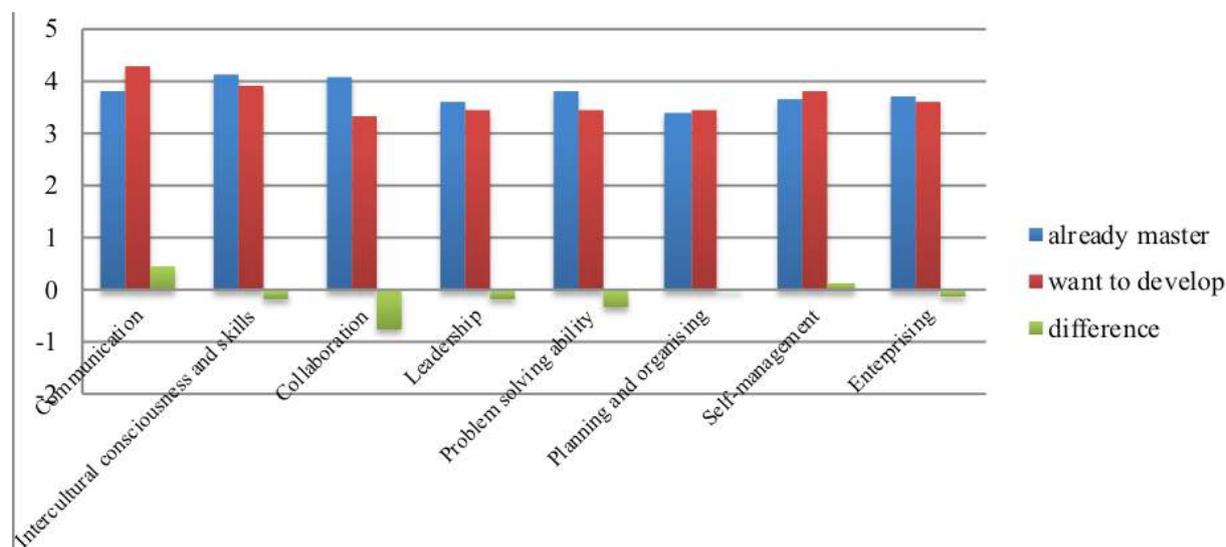
[2] Both former and current exchange students and advisory group members (staff and faculty) have provided input for these assignments

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Figure 1
Overview of the Xchange learning trajectory: awareness,
goal setting and reflection as key components
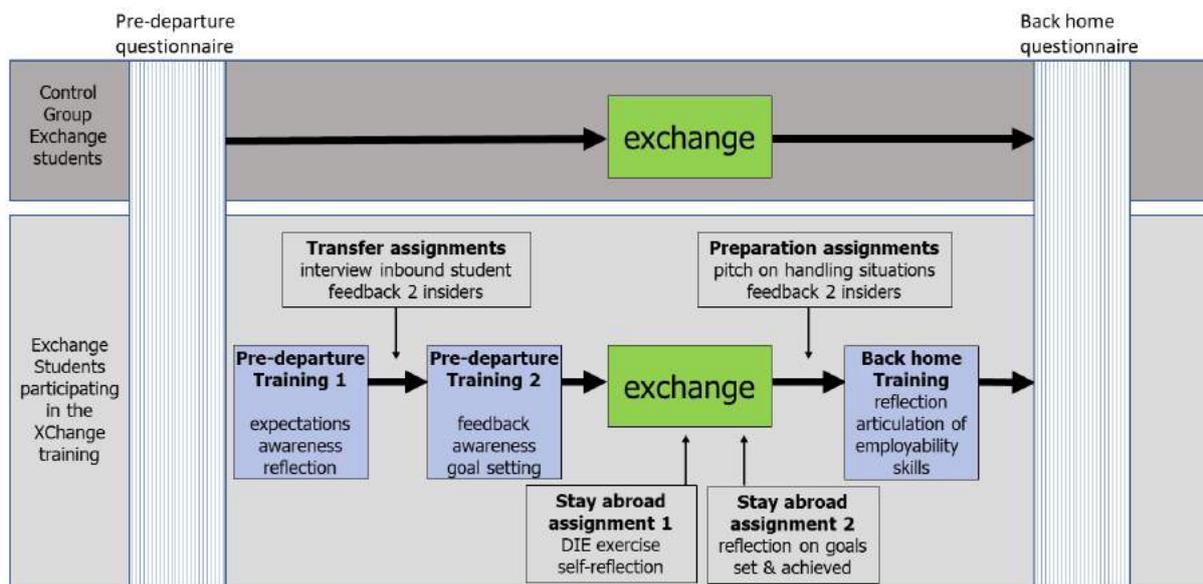
Findings and evaluation. Before departure, students believe to master best their Intercultural consciousness and skills, and Collaboration, followed by Problem solving ability and Enterprising skills. They strive at particularly developing their Communication skills, Intercultural consciousness and intercultural skills and Self-management skills, rendering the former and latter category to be the major skills to improve while being abroad.

Figure 2
Self-perception of employability skills already mastered and to be developed during
exchange (72 undergraduate exchange students GeoSciences)

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In evaluating the pre-departure meetings, students mentioned to like the self-reflection phase, and especially the awareness part: *"This [2nd] meeting, compared to the first, was about me as a person and how I can and want to change this – something I want to become aware of and from which I will always benefit from now on…"*. Finally, a student mentioned *".. I like to have been forced to think deeper about my exchange and the period beyond the 'honeymoon' phase…"*. Sharing experiences and expectations helped students to increase the awareness of the potential effects of intercultural experiences. The need for reflection however, was clear: *"Reflection: on what and why you want to do something. On how to change yourself if when you want to – or when you notice"*. Another eye-opener shared by a student: *"..to rethink my priorities and the goals I want to achieve"*. One student explicitly mentioned to have learned about *"the opinion of other people about myself – my own opinion about myself"*.

Students valued the personal and interactive approach in the pre-departure meetings, and mentioned that every student received time and attention in a friendly atmosphere with an interesting mix of theory, in-class exercises and interaction. However, students also remarked that critical self-reflection was rather difficult – one student mentioned to have preferred individual conversations with a trainer, instead of plenary pre-departure meetings.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

A stay abroad in another cultural context is not synonymous to learning. To actually learn from it, and reap the benefits of such stay abroad, activating forms of learning are often employed, including reflection. The first outcomes of two learning trajectories in our Geography programmes show that using reflection to enhance learning from a stay abroad is certainly not a 'one-size-fits-all'-practice. Both our cases show that students have difficulty to reflect, and do not always know how to reflect on their experiences abroad. As such, reflection remains often superficial, describing mainly how they engage with 'cultural others', and exploring the differences and similarities they encounter. More deeper forms of reflection —so analyzing the meaning of these differences and similarities on their own behavior— are often missing. This observation seems to point at a lack of what Holmes & O'Neill (2010, 2012) refer to as 'self-awareness': in order to analyze and evaluate the relationship with the other, one needs to have analyzed the 'Self'. This pleads not only for more attention for reflection in our curricula, by practicing it, but also for more guidance, in posing questions that force students to reflect on their own feelings, reactions and behavior: "what does it do to me, as a person, as an academic?"

The learning trajectories reveal the importance of favorable conditions for reflection and as such, learning from reflection. A first and crucial condition is a safe, inclusive and respectful classroom environment, in which students feel free to express and share their expectations. This requires the absence of dependency or power relations. A second condition for enhancing reflection of (expectations of) intercultural experiences, is to provide for an intensive interaction with peers and others. As self-reflection is hard, especially with limited time and experience, many students indicated to benefit from exchanging personal reflections with their peers, but also with insiders and trainers. A third and final condition to increase the role of reflection in the light of the learning trajectories described, is that reflection skills are practiced thoroughly and that exercises and assignments have clear instructions and guidelines. This also touches upon the literature debate on the optimal level of guidance during instruction (Kirschner *et al.,* 2006) to enhance transformative learning. The work of Moon (1999) and in particular her 'stages of reflection' (from description to deep reflection), might be of use here.

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Finally, the PEER-model appeared to provide a useful framework for our trajectories with a relatively long stay abroad, with distinctive phases to structure reflection. For us, the value of the PEER-model is particularly grounded in the way students practice self-reflection, and develop and document their intercultural competences through time, giving insight into the process through which intercultural experiences add to learning. This enriches the experiences, empowers students via reflection, which, in the long run, will also strengthen their employability.

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