

LOSING IDENTITY: A TEMPORARY PROBLEM FOR SINGLE-SEMESTER EXCHANGE STUDENTS


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I cannot be myself, let alone write for academic assessment. I've sort of lost myself". These remarks of an Australian study-abroad student in France are a painful reminder that one semester, or even one year, is a very short time to create an identity in a foreign language. This short presentation does not report formal research but is based on discussions with two students on one-semester study-abroad programs - an Australian in France and an Italian in Australia. Relatively short-term periods of undergraduate study in foreign countries are becoming a feature of international education the world over, and this presentation provides something of a reality check on the excitement and optimism which participants usually feel before they become immersed in the foreign culture and language.


Keywords: *exchange students, language, identity*



Perhaps you may be thinking the title of this little session is rather over-the-top – a bit melodramatic! Students on exchange don't lose their identities! They have a wonderful time! Don't they? In my LAS advising of international students, I'm seeing more and more exchange students who really need support. They're not having unmitigated fun! So I've been thinking about whether, and in what ways they might be different from international students here for the full duration of their courses and in what ways they share similar experiences. The theme for this conference is "Changing Identities". Maybe all international students undergo some change of identity. Single-semester exchange students in foreign language environments face particular challenges because of the telescoped nature of their international experience and the immanent pressure of the final semester(s) of their degrees back home. They have so little time to fully incorporate all that is new, as well as deal with the challenges often thrown up by accommodation and course arrangements. This is especially true when the exchange agreement between home and host university suggests that all has been satisfactorily arranged, but that is not so. Assuming a healthy sense of identity in their mother tongues, exchange students may well feel a temporary loss of this identity as they struggle to negotiate life in a foreign language.

Don't get me wrong! I think student exchanges are a great opportunity for students to really stretch themselves. Students don't go on exchanges unless they're prepared for a challenge. Many more Australian students make enquiries than actually proceed to go abroad, partly because they become aware, often by talking things through with a Study Abroad officer in their university, of just how challenging the exchange can be. But just think of it! They get their qualification from their home university, they get a taste, but not for **too** long, of another country, of different teaching styles and a different culture. They mix with other international students too, and get the chance to cope on their own, to experiment a bit and make a few mistakes, perhaps, away from the eagle eyes of friends and family, but without being away from everyone they know for **too** long. And what better way to improve one's foreign language skills than living in that language culture for half a year!

So where's the downside? Why suggest there's a possibility of them losing their identities? The literature is unlikely to address this issue, except perhaps from the field of psychology or psycholinguistics, but I thought I'd be able to find something




about how exchange students felt about their experiences, and what they thought were the positive and negative aspects; but the student voice is absent. The Australian literature of student exchange concentrates on administrative and business perspectives, advocating best practice, developing strategies and vaunting successes, measured by increasing numbers of bilateral agreements, of incoming and outgoing students and of programs which match stated university policies of internationalisation and globalisation, (Anderson 1996; Back, Davis & Olsen 1996; Davis, Milne & Olsen 1999).

I haven't found a single study in the Australian context which focuses on the quality of the experiences of incoming or outgoing, international, single-semester exchange students who have studied in a language other than their mother tongue, although Tootle (1999) strongly argues the need for such research. One telling article, however, did concern the experiences of European engineering students studying abroad on exchange (Markowski & Mainwaring 1995). The authors were considering the sort of linguistic and cultural preparation needed to cope with cultural differences in new study environments and to benefit more fully from an international sojourn. Their title comes from a student comment: "Engineering study abroad? – It's like expecting Carl Lewis to run backwards without any training!" Other overseas literature (eg. Kelleher 1996; Blumenthal, Goodwin, Smith & Teichler 1996; Skilbeck & Connell 1996) focussed on the macro-picture - benefits of exchange for international or regional co-operation, or career opportunities in a world of global business or personal development.

Exchange experience of two students


In first semester of this year, an Italian student on exchange from Florence was referred to me, because he was having a really hard time coping with his study, and his social interactions. My emotions and professional antenna had already been sensitised by my daughter, Lucy, having embarked, about a month previously, on student exchange in a French university. So I thought I'd talk informally with both of them about their experiences. A comment of my daughter's really started me thinking about the notion of identity and language. In a phone conversation I had asked her about her first written assignment and she said "I can't even be myself in



French, yet, let alone feel able to write for academic assessment.” Now I know that some feel that academic writing strips people of their identity anyway, so where’s the problem! But Lucy obviously feels that becoming fully functional in a foreign language and culture involves some change of identity. Alessandro, (who, like Lucy, was happy that his real name be used at this conference), also talked about losing his sense of knowing how to be and what to do, in Australian English-speaking society, and his host university.

For most of us, our identities are inextricably bound up with our mother tongues – the languages we learnt in babyhood and used in early childhood and usually beyond, with family and friends. But just last month I had a fascinating conversation with a Singaporean student whose mother tongue is Mandarin, yet who regards Singlish as the language in which she feels most Singaporean and standard English (which she speaks and writes extremely well) as the language where she has most power and most capacity to engage in the realm of ideas. Nevertheless, all international exchange students I’ve worked with have expressed their frustration at not being able to express their true identities because only in their mother tongues do they have the fullest sense of who they are. Even if they satisfy or exceed the host institution’s minimum language proficiency requirements, their weaker command of the foreign language in which they must study and operate socially in the host country restricts them and sometimes reduces them to silence. They are usually in language and culture shock when they start their formal study and some remain in that state throughout the semester.

Of course one of the reasons why students apply for exchanges to a foreign language environment is to strengthen their foreign language skills. Language study and discipline-based academic study, however, are very different study areas. The exchange student who is under pressure to achieve high grades for the home university, but who has limited proficiency in the four macro-skills of the language in which study (and life) must now occur, may immediately move into high stress mode. All available time is spent “studying” rather than immersing him or herself in all those activities which involve the social language skills the student so wants to develop. This was the situation with Alessandro. He couldn’t understand what was said in lectures and tutes and he couldn’t read quickly or widely enough to catch up on the




business-based general knowledge in the Australian context that was assumed in his second and third year subjects. He derived mainly frustration from trying to read newspapers and popular business periodicals, laden as they are with culture-specific schema, idiomatic and colloquial expressions, and reflecting Australian humour. His preoccupation with his poor language skills undermined his confidence in all interactions with fellow students, administration staff and even real estate agents.

In my intentional conversations with Ale and Lucy, firstly we talked about what each hoped to get out of the student exchange experience. Lucy is doing a French major, speaks Spanish and loves languages per se. She wanted to go on exchange to France because she could immerse herself in the culture and the language, and actually take French language studies as taken by native speakers intending to teach French as a foreign language, as part of her Australian degree. Alessandro had been studying Classics, including Latin and Greek, but then switched to studying business because business was better for job purposes. One reason why he applied for an exchange was that it would look good on his CV to have studied some business subjects in another country. He'd heard that there would be no hassle about assessment. The other reason he applied was that he thought he'd have a great time, and get to visit Australia, and maybe improve his English a bit, and after he finished the semester he'd be able to do some traveling.

So their study areas and goals were quite different. It's interesting that neither of them mentioned developing "a new international outlook" or "global work skills" or fulfilling a "key internationalisation performance indicator", all terms which feature largely in Australian university mission statements, policies and strategies about internationalisation. The achievement of their personal goals, to whatever extent they did achieve them, caused both of them for a time, feelings of despair and discomfort and a sense of unreality, which might be explained as a temporary loss of identity.


Most international students experience some periods of loneliness and homesickness, and the duration of those feelings and what I've termed a temporary loss of identity might be related to their foreign language skills. Although he admitted that English is not an important subject in Italy, Ale was stunned at how far below communicative competence level his English skills were. He had done quite well in



the qualifying reading and writing skills tests and thought he wouldn't have too much trouble, but each week when he had his LAS appointment he'd tell me how hard everything was. When I spoke to him after he'd finished his exams he said "Now I'm free to start improving my English". In contrast, Lucy had started her semester with quite high-level social language skills, because she had previously spent about three months travelling and working in France, but her academic writing and reading skills were less well developed. She found the very formal lectures, with students taking copious notes and rarely being invited to ask questions or make comments, or in any way argue with the lecturer, very difficult, and quite alienating as a teaching and learning style. Ale had been equally thrown by the expectation that he would not be given all the information in lectures but would be required to read widely, do group work, join in tutor discussions, and give oral presentations. Both students, therefore, had LAS issues which detracted from the rapid adjustment needed to maximise the potential benefits of a one-semester exchange.

Everything I've said pertains to NESB students from overseas for a full course, but my point is that the single-semester exchange student has so little time to adjust to **all** that is foreign in the host university and country and, depending on the particular arrangements between home and host university, so much at stake. Agreements about parity of subjects are a potential minefield. Ale started his end of semester exams still not knowing whether his professor in Florence would accept the Personal Investment subject he studied here as equivalent to a financial management subject he would have been studying there. There are many myths about exchange agreements, and one of them is that subject details are all sorted out before the exchange semester starts! Not so! In her first week, Lucy also had to negotiate her course details, in French, with French university administrators, because they had not understood the details of points allocations and her majors which had been forwarded by her home university. Until all parties involved in exchange arrangements are fully informed and fully professional in their handling of understandably apprehensive incoming students, there is a great possibility of those students feeling very vulnerable and lost.


As well as studying, exchange students live a life outside lectures and off campus. This is where I believe short-term exchange students hope to gain most, and on the



whole, I feel they do. Ale, however, was so stressed that most of his social life was spent with Italian speakers, more specifically with speakers of his Florentine dialect because as he put it “That’s where I can be myself”. Socialising with Australians was not easy, and since the academic side of his life was also not easy, he sought comfort in the familiar, rather than taking himself to where he felt like a fish out of water. Lucy enjoyed the social side of her exchange because she had earlier made French friends when she worked on a farm. She could go there for the occasional weekend to relieve academic stresses. Around the campus and in her accommodation, however, she found that French students didn’t really want to have much to do with international students.

Substitute “Australian” for “French” and it sounds very familiar – not a recipe for helping single-semester students settle in. Lack of ready acceptance by local students causes exchange students to seek out speakers of their mother tongue or other international students of similarly reduced skill in the target language. If one goal of an exchange is improved language because of exposure to native speakers, then during semester time, exchange students may be very disappointed.

I’ve just touched briefly on a few aspects of single semester exchange: foreign language skill, different teaching methods, reasons for seeking exchange, administration of exchange programs and the extra-curricula experience. These can have great impact on how quickly and how comfortably students settle into their host country. I don’t wish to suggest for a moment that these students are being exploited or mislead in any way. Nor do I underestimate the inestimable value to personal development of challenging experiences. A single semester on exchange into a foreign language culture, however, is a very intense experience. This is particularly so when there are worries about the effect of results on the eventual transcript from the home university. Temporarily at least, therefore, students can feel as if they have lost their identities because of personal and intellectual disorientation. LAS Advisers are in a privileged position in that students often open up to us, because they feel that someone is genuinely interested in them, as individuals. I think it is part of our work to keep raising awareness of the complexities of international education in its various forms, so that university



infrastructure and practices can truly reflect the oft-stated university commitment to quality.

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