

Study Abroad Beyond the Usual 'Imagineering'? The Benefits of a Pedagogy of Imaginaries

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Abstract This paper problematizes the imagineering of study abroad, especially in terms of set objectives and learning outcomes. The authors propose a shift away from a 'pure' cultural and intercultural preparation of mobile students, which tends to ignore the fact that unrealistic expectations and preconceived ideas about study abroad can be as much of a hindrance as e.g. 'culture shock'. The concept of imaginaries is used to prepare international students, some from Asian countries, to reflect on, discuss and 'reform' their perceptions of study abroad. Imaginaries, which are constitutive of human beings living in groups, are of course necessary components of the study abroad experience. The results show that the students are able to deconstruct critically their own as well as others' doxic discourses on the characteristics of study abroad. Yet at the same time, as one should expect, the students develop new imaginaries on mobility. We argue that by allowing them to develop more counter-narratives about study abroad—and thus multiplying imaginaries—the students can feel more apt to face the complexities and contradictions of the study abroad experience.

Keywords Preparation · Student mobility · Higher education · Pedagogy of imaginaries

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Introduction

This is how an international coordinator at a European university summarizes the benefits of study abroad:

Many employers look for students who have had a study abroad experience. Such students tend to be more flexible and open to new ideas (...) Intercultural skills, tolerance and of course a foreign language have been picked up along the way - qualities that are sought after by many employers.

This short excerpt, which replicates and recycles what can be referred to as ‘post-modern metanarratives of mobility’, is typical of the current global commonsense about the benefits of spending some time abroad, which is shared by multiple conduits: decision makers, supranational institutions, universities, scholars, students, the media etc. (see for example Messelink et al. [1] who present what mobile students *should be* learning). In this article, we refer to these elements as *imagineering mobility* or, as the portmanteau word suggests, the ‘engineering of imaginaries’ about mobility. The imaginaries contained in the quote above comprise *flexibility, openness, intercultural skills, tolerance*—and maybe also *language learning* and *employability*. In our opinion, no studies, be they qualitative or quantitative, have showed convincingly that a period spent abroad during one’s studies allow developing these characteristics [2–5]. Probably, one of the main reasons is the fact that these elements are both polysemic and based on firmly established, all-encompassing and often centuries-old empty promises [6]. Take the examples of tolerance and openness. In order to assess their acquisition and/or development, one can only rely on discourses and actions (‘I have become more tolerant now’). As we know, discourses and actions can differ as they are both context and interlocutor dependent [7]. ‘I might be tolerant here and now but extremely intolerant later. I might be deemed open-minded at moment x but not at moment y ’. Furthermore, in order to judge someone’s openness and/or tolerance, one needs to have a clear shared definition of these qualities. Yet that is far from being the case in the field of study abroad. Like many other scholars (e.g. [8–10]), we would actually want to discard these ambiguous and empty signifiers, which have contributed to creating multiple discursive underpinnings of the benefits of study abroad. We argue that these elements create not only confusion among students but also illusions and disappointments.

In this article, starting from the idea that study abroad has been ‘imagineered’, not just locally but across geographical boundaries and across time, we examine how a group of international students based in the Nordic country of Finland reacted to a course on the imaginaries of student mobility (‘a pedagogy of imaginaries’).

Finland, a ‘small’ country of five million inhabitants, has been a very popular destination for study abroad over the last 10 years [11]. Since the early 2000s, the number of incoming students has more than doubled. In 2013, a total of 9739 students stayed in Finland for at least 3 months either as exchange students or trainees. Eight percent of these students came from Europe and 13 % from Asia. Germany, France and Spain were among the top three countries sending students to Finland, while China topped the list of Asian countries [12].

During the aforementioned course, the students were introduced to the ideas of myths and imaginaries about academic mobility and encouraged to reflect more in depth on their own goals—why they wanted to study abroad—and to deconstruct ready-made discourses on the experiences of mobility. As training tools, we used other students' application letters for study abroad, research articles and examples of current discourses on the act of mobility and its impact and—as the basis for group discussions—the students' own experiences during their exchange.

We are interested in what the students learned, bearing in mind that when one deconstructs certain imaginaries, one reconstructs other shared discourses about a phenomenon [13]. However, we argue that an awareness of imagineering is already an important learning outcome for the students. Thus, we won't pretend in this article that our course was obligatorily successful—like too many such studies. Instead, we study the potential (and certainly unstable) shifts in the students' images and discourses (i.e. imaginaries) as noted in different documents that they produced during the course.

The students who took part in the course were both from 'Europe' and 'Asia'. Although this special issue concentrates on educating Asian international students for study abroad, our data contain both documents produced by Asian and 'European' international students. The students from Asia came from China and South Korea. As our approach is based on imaginaries, we refuse to contribute to imagineering the dichotomy of East vs. West through these students and to contribute to 'methodological geographism'. We feel obliged ethically to examine the case of these students who took part in the course together. Our analysis thus treats all the students ($N=9$) as individuals who share similar and different images and discourses about study abroad, rather than putting them in 'geographical straitjackets' which would contribute to essentialising them.

Beyond Mere Intercultural Preparation

Let us not be scared of thinking against the academic *establishment*.

Maffesoli [14, 15]

Most study abroad preparations, prior, during and/or after, tend to concentrate on intercultural and/or language preparation [16, 17]. The former has had at its core the concept of (national) culture, and students have been taught how to learn to navigate through a foreign culture [11, 18, 19]. The same has been true for language learning where the model of the 'native speaker' is often suggested as the only path to follow to be able to adapt to the host country [20–22]. The notions mentioned earlier such as not only *tolerance of ambiguity* and *openness* but also *awareness of culture shock* and *reverse culture shock* have tended to be used as learning objectives for intercultural preparation [10]. The overemphasis on cultural difference in this perspective has represented an ideological bias that is increasingly questioned by both researchers and practitioners [6, 23, 24]. In a previous article, we have claimed that such 'high' theories have created a certain number of flawed imaginaries about study abroad, which have an impact on the discourses and experiences of students abroad.

It is true though that the field of intercultural preparation has witnessed some changes over the last couple of years. Recent critical approaches to the ‘intercultural’, such as non-essentialist perspectives [1, 25], are interesting but they seem to have led to the construction of new imaginaries which can be counter-productive and naïve. For example, the recent EU project IEREST (Intercultural Education Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers, 2012–2015) which aims at developing an intercultural path for Erasmus students before, during and after their experience abroad exaggerates when its members set as learning objectives that the students can learn to approach the ‘other’ from a non-essentialist perspective and treat her in a *complex* manner. No need to say that the use of the word *complex* hints at an approach which exaggerates the power of intercultural training.

In this section, we propose to shift the emphasis from the mere intercultural (and the old and passé concept of *culture*) to imaginaries as a way of stimulating new reflections on study abroad when preparing students. Before we review how imaginaries have been problematized in different fields of study, let us reassure our readers: we are well aware that imaginaries, *the capacity to imagine*, are part of human life and under no circumstance are we trying to suggest that imagination should be curbed and repressed. We also agree that we live in a world where everything is imagineered and that we, ourselves, contribute to this phenomenon. What we attempt to do in our work then is to help mobile students to become aware of their own imaginaries, those of others (be they institutions, friends, families etc.) and to weigh these imaginaries against each other and to substitute or combine them with new imaginaries which may make their experiences richer and (more) satisfying. In other words, instead of limiting their world to one type of imaginary about the benefits of study abroad, imposed by decision-makers or uncritical approaches to the intercultural, they can enlarge the range of imaginaries. It is also important for the students to become aware of the institutional and personal ideologies ‘hiding’ behind these imaginaries [26]—with which they may disagree and thus need to renegotiate. Although most quantitative studies on students’ satisfaction claim that the students are delighted by their experience (e.g. [3]), in our own research, we have demonstrated that many students appear to be disappointed by the fact that they are unable to fulfill the ‘dream’ objectives set by canonical intercultural preparation (see [27, 28]). We believe that by multiplying the metanarratives about study abroad, the students can be better prepared for their time abroad and for their future lives as postmodern subjects.

The concept of the (social) imaginary has been dealt with by many scholars and thinkers [29–32] and is very relevant for discussing preparation for study abroad. They all start from the argument that sociality is not just based on the modern ideal of reason but also on imagination. In his work on religion as a social phenomenon, the father of sociology, Emile Durkheim (1912/1995) suggested that societies exist thanks to the sharing of symbolic forms that enable people to form collectives. He also argued (*ibid.*) that this leads to ‘collective effervescence’ which serves to endorse social bonds. Although he did not refer to the word imaginaries, we feel that these forms and especially collective effervescence correspond to the concept. Of course in the 2010s imaginaries are *glocal* (global+local), especially when they deal with phenomena that cross national borders and have become ‘compulsory’ in the postmodern and neo-liberal university.

Definitions of the imaginary tend to have similarities. For Cornelius Castoriadis [30], the imaginary corresponds to shared and unifying core conceptions. In a similar vein, Charles Taylor [32] sees imaginaries as widely shared implicit cognitive schemas. He defines them as ‘the ways that people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations’ [3, 32]. The psycho-analyst Jacques Lacan [33] added an interesting dimension to the imaginary: he sees it as a fantasy created in response to psychological needs. Thus while imaginaries tend to be ‘conditioning’, ‘discursive structures’ or ‘templates’ that ‘generate(s) a sense of identity and inclusiveness between the members of a community’ for some scholars ([34], 349); for others, imaginaries represent the oxymoron of a ‘dynamic substrate’, i.e. background imaginaries that are constantly changing [31]. As far as study abroad is concerned, imagineering leads to both stability and instability. It also goes beyond a ‘community’ as it is more of a global phenomenon. Salazar’s ([35], 865) conceptualization of imaginaries is most useful in defining imaginaries for study abroad. For the anthropologist, they are ‘socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people’s personal imaginings and are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices’. Imaginaries are thus constructed, expressed and negotiated between self and other. Although we agree with Rivzi ([36], 228) that the imaginary ‘describes a social phenomenon that is tacit and unconscious, and is adhered to by a group of people in an un-reflexive manner’ in some contexts, we shall see that students can be hyper-reflexive about the imaginaries of study abroad. For example, when the students applied for a study position abroad, they wrote motivation letters that contained mostly a list of ‘must-have’ imaginaries, passed onto to by decision-makers, former mobile students, their parents etc. but when they discussed them in groups many months later, they had no qualms in confessing that they had used them because they expected the people who were involved in the selection process to find them in the letters.

Towards a Pedagogy of Imaginaries

In this section, we review some of the imagineering about study abroad that was critically and reflexively discussed and problematized with the students who participated in our course. The two following tables summarize (1) the kinds of imaginaries identified in our previous work and in the literature but also through our engagement with study abroad administration over the past decades and (2) objectives for working on imaginaries as a way of preparing students for and during mobility.

Table 1 describes the imaginaries shared by many students about their time abroad as they have been described and problematized in previous research. The imaginaries are divided into (1) behaving, (2) learning and (3) post-sojourn benefits. The first category relates to the relationships between the students and their ‘same’, i.e. people who share the same passport and first language(s). Many students in previous studies report wanting to pass as an other and not to meet people from their own country because they are ‘too similar’ [27]. This first category goes hand in hand with the second one as many students tend to say ‘I study abroad to meet new cultures and new people’ (ibid.). In relation to learning, most imaginaries relate to culture, the intercultural and language (see above). The imaginaries tend to correspond fully to culturalism (culture explains everything) and essentialism [24]. Finally, the last category contains imaginaries related to the outcomes and benefits of study abroad. These tend to be overly positive and treated a-critically.

Table 1 Categories of imaginaries in relation to stay abroad

Category of imaginaries	Contents of imaginaries
Behaving	Interacting with people from one's own country while abroad must be avoided Speaking one's own language must be avoided
Learning	Other cultures, exclusivist and differentialist approach Interculturality Oneself, one's (personal/national) identity Speaking like a native speaker
Post-sojourn benefits	Becoming cosmopolitan—'citizen of the world' better employability Better person, more tolerant, less—see—no stereotypes Respecting diversity

When we planned our course on imaginaries, we started with the above categories to determine a certain number of 'renewed' learning objectives. In other words, the above imaginaries guided the planning and implementation of the course. Table 2 shows the four main objectives were determined based on the aforementioned imaginaries:

Table 2 Renewed objectives

Renewed objectives	Contents of studied imaginaries
Awareness of one's own imaginaries about study abroad	Reviewing (impossible) goals Ideologies about study abroad (cosmopolitanism, leading to respect and tolerance etc.)
Awareness of others' imaginaries about study abroad	People I know who have studied abroad Institutions Educators and international officers at home and abroad Media productions Other international students
Questioning usual imaginaries in ourselves and in others (individuals/institutions)	Culture/interculturality Over-emphasis on difference Language—learning to speak like a 'native' Myself and others Sociality abroad
Preparing for return	Dealing with the potential lack of interest in one's stay from family and friends Reflecting on one's identity and that of those who stayed behind Dealing with the egocentric idea of having become better ('citizen of the world'; 'no stereotypes') Facing what we consider as 'silly' questions about stay abroad

The general pedagogical approach to imaginaries finds some echoes in Rivzi's ([36], 234) 'dialectical mode of thinking' in education 'which conceives cultural formations as neither absolute nor necessarily antagonistic, but deeply interconnected and interdependent, so much so that they reveal how the tensions between cultures indeed can be comprehended and transcended. In such a dialectical approach, we understand others both in their terms as well as ours, as a way of comprehending how both representations are socially constituted. This relationality denies that our cultures are fixed and essentially distinct, and suggests the possibilities of continuous self-examination, learning and transformation'.

The contents of the studied imaginaries during the course derive directly from the imaginaries from Table 2.

First, they aim to support the students to question official discourses about study abroad and help them to analyse 'how (their) personal imaginings interact with and are influenced by institutionally grounded imaginaries implying power, hierarchy, and hegemony' [8, 37].

Second, the studied imaginaries also promote questioning the underlying ideologies of interculturality—an important element of the doxa about study abroad.

Third, the positivizing imagineering of study abroad outcomes is discussed through the flawed idea of cosmopolitanism. It is important for the students to reflect on their position as 'privileged' movers. Calhoun ([38], 106) argues that 'It is easy for the privileged to imagine that their experience of global mobility and connection is available to all, if only everyone would "be" cosmopolitan. We need continually to remind ourselves of the extent to which felt cosmopolitanism depends on privilege. (...) the genuinely attractive ethical orientation toward a common human community of fate can be undermined by an unattractive self-congratulation and lack of self-critical awareness of privilege'. Students should thus be given the opportunity to reflect critically on these kinds of discourse and to contemplate alternative ones.

Data and Research Method

Our data consist of recorded student discussions, presentations and written assignments which were collected during a course entitled 'Analyzing International Mobility Experience' (3 ECTS). We developed this training as an elective course for exchange students at a Finnish university of applied sciences.

The course was piloted during the autumn semester 2014 with participants who were both European Erasmus students ($N=4$) and Asian exchange students ($N=5$) studying in the bachelor level degree programmes in International Business, Social Services, Electronics and Automotive and Transportation Engineering. Six of the students were female and three male. The students were aged between 20 and 24. All students, with the exception of one, studied in Finland for one semester (approximately 4 months). The number of participants was small, but in terms of gender, age, field and level of studies, the students represented a typical exchange student studying at a Finnish university of applied sciences [39].

One student had taken a course in intercultural communication before arriving in Finland. The other students had attended either orientation sessions focusing on

practical matters (or in their own words on ‘paper work’) at their home university or no orientation at all.

The course included four 1.5-h face-to-face sessions. In between the sessions, the students were asked to write two assignments, and at the end of the course, they gave a presentation and returned an essay based on the course content and their personal experiences.

We used poststructuralist discourse analysis (e.g. [7]) to analyse the data which consisted in total of four session recordings (120 min each), 18 written assignments, nine Power-Point presentations and eight essays. This approach allows us to ‘dig’ deeper into discourses in order to make subjectivity (and all its positionings, negotiations and contradictions) emerge.

Findings: (De-)(Re-)Imagineering Study Abroad

The discussions during the first session and the written assignments reveal that at the beginning of the course, the students had very similar imaginaries related to studying and living abroad—regardless of where they came from. There thus appears to be a ‘substrate’ in their ways of conceptualising the phenomenon [36, 40]. Their imaginaries were also similar to the findings of our previous study on Finnish exchange students [41] in which we created four categories of imaginaries related to study abroad. The same categories emerged regularly in the data of this study:

A dream place	Everything is green, quiet, clean and not noisy in Finland; the Finnish education system is great; Finnish people speak good English
A new me and life	To have a new perspective of life, become open-minded towards other countries, to develop personality
A career boost	Exchange means a lot for future career prospective; employers are eager to hire people who have been on an exchange abroad
A ‘must’ for my generation	One should go now when no obligations like later in life (such as house and job); it is a time to go now—later it is too late

There seems to be no real difference between European and Asian students’ imaginaries about study abroad and in general, the starting point in terms of awareness of imaginaries was more or less the same for all the participants of the course. This confirms the kind of global and circulating imagineering of student mobility mentioned earlier (see also [35], 865).

The students also shared a common interest in reflecting on their study abroad experience. In a sense this is understandable because they had selected this elective course among other options. It is, however, noteworthy that all the participants attended the sessions and contributed actively to the discussions because of their own decision and motivation, not because the course was part of a compulsory orientation at the host university. Anquetil [19] found similar results in her study on an action research that she led on student mobility in Italy.

The following excerpts show that the goals set for studying abroad have puzzled at least some of the students already before their exchange period started and that the

reason why they selected this course was because they wanted to learn the ‘truth’ about the benefits of student mobility:

(1) It is convenient to learn which expectations are good to have for such stay abroad.¹

(2) And also I would like to analyse some myths about this experience because lots of my friends they don’t want go to somewhere because it’s easier for them to stay at home. Also to discover truth about other myths like if this exchange period has real meaning for future life.

Awareness of One’s Own Imaginaries about Study Abroad

During the course, we asked the students to reflect on their goals for student mobility on several occasions, because they gave the group a good basis to discuss their own imaginaries about study abroad. As the background material, we used motivation letters that some Finnish students had written and letters that the students had written themselves. Reading their own letters seems to be quite an eye-opening experience for many students:

(3) we read our motivation letters. I was really surprised and little bit shamed because it took much time to write that motivation letter. I didn’t want to read it because I don’t want to check my first mind. There were so many ‘promises’! I will do something, I will do something... There were so many ‘somethings’. When I wrote the motivation letter, I had many dreams in Finland.

For the students, having to read through and analyse their own motivation letters leads them to experience *doppelgänger*, i.e. a double of their own person. Students giggled, sighed or seemed nervous when they analysed their motivation letters. It seemed that many of them were a bit embarrassed about what they had written. We did not ask students to share the content of their letters with the others if they did not want to. The objective was to raise awareness about their own imaginaries and challenge the students to think if they would still agree with what they wrote about *finding their true self* and *changing their life during their exchange* (two very common imaginaries, see Table 2 above) (see [10, 27]):

(4) I really said that. I said the same that I want to discover my real self here and in every exchange that I do but I realized that you yeah that you cannot find your real self that is true because you always change and that is good.

(5) As far as I am concerned, it is reasonable to say one’s stay abroad changed his/her life. However, staying abroad is not the only way. The change of one’s life occurs simultaneously with the people they have met and the problems they have solved. Nowadays, everything seems unstable and the speed they change is so

¹ The excerpts appear as they are in the data. They are therefore (sic).

fast. Even human being, nobody can really imagine what they will be in next ten years for the instability of ourselves. As a conclusion, I do think it is normal to say that my stay abroad changed my life since every individual is changing along with the time.

All the students accepted the idea discussed during the course that people change constantly wherever they are and that it is not exclusive to study abroad [18]. However, some other imaginaries were not so easily agreed upon. The students discussed e.g. their behaviours during their exchange time and their need to avoid people from their own country and speaking their own language. The goal for meeting and spending time with students from other countries divided the opinions among the students. They described this dilemma in their presentations and assignments:

(6) I think I thought I had to [to avoid people from the same country] but it was really hard and I didn't need to. Do I have to avoid them? Yeah I thought like that do I have to? No I thought no.

(7) I tried not to meet friends from my own country. I came to Finland to meet other country friends and learn different cultures. So I tried to not talk and meet with Koreans. – However, sometimes I felt lonely. Spending time with other country friends was quite worth it because it helped me to learn English and cultural things. I missed Korean and home things like food and talk in my first language. – At first, I tried to not contact friends in Korea and not to watch Korean movies. Later, I felt homesick so I tried to have balance between home things and Finland life things.

The 'avoidance of the same syndrome', as Dervin [27] puts it, is an imaginary that seems to be rather constant in our students' discourses. A student said confidently that she always wants to meet something different abroad and that she will try to avoid people from her own country also in the future, because she is able to meet similar people to her when she is back in her home country. On the other hand, the same student wrote in her assignment that 'the more you travel and the more people you meet, the more you question your own culture, the more you will find your true self and you won't be influenced by any choiceless identification someone wants you to wear'. The two assertions appear to be typical of identity making as, in a sense, they contradict each other.

Awareness of Others' Imaginaries about Study Abroad

It seems that it is more comfortable for students to discuss the imaginaries of other people than to talk about their own. This is probably because the discussion does not focus on their personal expectations, but on those of the 'faceless' other: institutions, social media and other exchange students. Students are not totally blind towards imagineering, and many course participants were aware of at least some of it even before attending the course. One student told us how she had actually twisted the truth in her motivation letter because she guessed what kind of expectations the person

responsible for selecting exchange students would have, the kind of intertextuality that was needed to ‘seduce’ her:

(8) Some of the things I just lied because I – like I grew up in a city for my whole life so I hate being surrounded by buildings but actually I kind of like the city life.

The students also blamed institutions of higher education for giving sometimes a wrong image about studying abroad and for actually teaching them imaginaries about it. They discussed e.g. the situation of one student who was disappointed with her exchange in Latin America. This student was given the impression that people speak English and that she would be able to practise her language skills at the host university which was, in reality, not the case. Another student referred to a course she was taking during her exchange in Finland:

(9) we have a course which is basically about intercultural communication and understanding the other cultures and people’s mentality. We learn that people who come from the same country also behave the same in certain situations, exactly the opposite of what Anne Cheng [one of the authors the students had to read in our course] says that we should avoid assuming people from specific cultures will think in a certain way. Here we learn that we need to know their behavior to prevent awkward situations and we learn how you should behave in certain cultures.

The students also experienced that they themselves had become the source of imaginaries for other people during their time abroad. In what follows, the student appears to be aware of culturalizing practices within study abroad [9]:

(10) I didn’t think much about the ‘culture’ when I was in South Korea. I mean, before exchange student period. But after I came here, I have to think about culture so much because I am a representation of South Korea, and Asia also. With this class, I thought many times about ‘my role (part)’. It was quite hard but it was important for myself.

Perhaps, even more interesting is the fact that the students appear to be aware of many imaginaries of their peers who had decided to either study abroad and or stay at home:

(11) Sometimes, some students just want to become exchange student because it looks cool and everyone wants to do it.

(12) They think that study period abroad is too expensive and unreachable. I think this is a myth because every Erasmus student can get support from the EU fund and students will not pay any tuition fees for foreign university. Also every student has some living costs in their home university so if we will count these two expenditures together, study period abroad is still achievable. – One thing I don’t like is fact that some people tell that Erasmus programme is only about having a lot of fun. They didn’t come to Erasmus but they know that it is easy. Of

course this is not true because we had a lot of school stuff like presentations, group discussion etc. here during the semester.

On the other hand, the writer of the last quote contradicted himself a bit when he told us about his active social life and many travels during the exchange in his oral presentation. He also criticized those students who believe that studying abroad is too expensive and will prolong the study time, even though not all Erasmus students actually receive a grant. On another occasion he expressed his concern about the fact that he needs to do all the exams he had missed at his home university after he returns to his home country. In his extensive study on Erasmus exchange students in Finland, Dervin [27, 28] shows that his participants keep contradicting themselves when they identify with the international student group or when they discuss what study abroad is about. It is thus important when one researches or teaches about study abroad to make the students aware of these discursive phenomena.

Questioning Usual Imaginaries in Ourselves and in Others

Stereotypes and whether it is possible to get rid of them caused one of the liveliest discussions during the course. This was probably because all the students were very familiar with the term and had some personal experience of using stereotypes themselves or of being the object of a stereotype that somebody had used [16, 19]. The following quotes show some awareness of the roles and consequences of stereotypes:

(13) I have been traveling to several countries in my life already. Every time I had an imagination of how it will be abroad. I had an idea in my head how the people are going to behave. This comes from stereotypes which are connected to the foreign culture.

(14) The task in which we had to analyze each other is in my opinion an interesting task for reflecting the stereotypes which are stuck in our heads already. – Everybody has different feelings about people from certain countries. I think the first lesson helped already to get aware of these stereotypes.

As asserted in the first part of the article, the concept of ‘culture’ is often used as an alibi, see an excuse, in intercultural encounters [24]. Study abroad is also a context of such misuse and abuse of the word [11, 19]. The pedagogy of imaginaries that was proposed to the students insisted on this aspect. The students told examples about how stereotypes or representations about their own culture are sometimes used to justify behaviours:

(15) I often used my alibi when I was abroad, for example “That’s how Austrians behave!” “Maybe it’s because I grew up in another culture!” etc. Always when I behaved in different way I explained them that’s how the Austrian culture works etc. but actually it is not the culture itself, it is my individual being, my behavior in a specific country. The people around me affect me and not the culture.

(16) Some say that Koreans are really fast at everything and they cannot wait so long. However, this thing is sometimes right and wrong depending on each person. And also before I came to Finland, I heard that Finnish people are really shy and not talkative. After I spent one and a half month, I found out that not everyone is the same as I heard before. Therefore, I made my mind that I should not hurry to make a decision until I am certain about it.

These are very good examples of awareness and critical reactions to such imaginaries. As such instead of confirming such or such culturalist argument about e.g. Koreans, they manage to individualise their perception of the other and the ‘self’ [24].

The students also discussed the values of what they consider to be ‘good’ and ‘bad’ stereotypes. There seems to be a consensus about seeing good stereotypes as something positive and polite, and this is probably why students did not feel it would be so important to give up on them. Some students actually claim that good stereotypes are suitable topics for small-talk with people from other countries:

(17) In my case, when I talk with Japanese people, sometimes I say about animation. Because Japanese’s animation is really famous, and popular to many people. And Japanese friends also like that topic. Because they felt happy that foreigner is interested in their culture I think this is good intercultural situation.

The instability of stereotyping and the acceptance versus the refusal of certain stereotypes is a common phenomenon [27]. Maybe because of this, one final essay is full of stereotypes about Finland and Finnish people:

(18) I found Finnish people always respect time and rules. It is very hard to see someone break the light when they want to go across the road. Almost everyone prefer waiting until light turns green. If you have a meeting with Finnish people you will see they always arrive the destination on time.

The bad stereotypes were seen as negative and even rude. Some students talked about their experiences of these stereotypes in Finland:

(19) I have experienced that negative thing. I think there are some stereotypes with South Korean girls. Yes, honestly, our nation is famous with plastic surgery. – 3 weeks ago, I attended one party. That was not big party. There were many Korean, Japanese, some Chinese and Vietnam student. Middle of the party, one of the Japanese students asked some questions: many Korean girls did plastic surgery, really? I was shocked.

(20) we talked about eating some unique food like dog meat in Korea, escargot in France most people couldn’t accept well. I face this discussion a lot here when I meet foreigners because they have curiosity. However I felt embarrassment whenever I discuss this kind of thing. Because most of the people consider that kind of behavior as the representative of the nation. I didn’t know how I can explain. We also have the prejudice that the people who are from this country will act like this. Sometimes it is not applied to all the people who are from there.

Usually, we do see some phenomenon after defining something, not define something after seeing the phenomenon.

These last excerpts concern Asian students and the sort of biases that they have to face in the ‘West’ about certain phenomena related to food and appearance. Yet national or geographical stereotypes are not exclusive to the Asian students as has been seen before. The content might differ but the phenomenon appears to be universal: every ‘national’ being has to face stereotypes about who they are.

Surprisingly, there was no problematizing of who decides the good or bad category of each stereotype. For some reason, the students also told quite harsh stereotypes about their own country and home universities (about their co-nationals and local cultures of teaching among other things) but they did not seem to think that they were recycling the aforementioned bad stereotypes, even though they would have certainly thought like that if a foreigner had mentioned the same stereotypes. Again this type of contradiction is important to underline to prepare students for such discourses [27].

One of the students confessed having had a bad stereotype about people at her practical training place in Finland:

(21) I have a practical placement in the youth centre in Turku. In that centre there are mostly boys from 13–18 years old. Most of them are refugees from other countries. So before I worked there I had some stereotypes for refugees, well.. they will be like very aggressive and they will say bad languages or they will be grown-up and in bad economic situation. I felt a little bit scared by them but I realized I had very bad stereotypes for them even though I don’t know them but I have already stereotypes in my mind. So I realized what if other person thinks I am just that kind of person because I am from this country. It would be insulting and rude. I try to get rid of some bad stereotypes.

This was an exception among the other stereotypes which mostly focused on nationalities and countries. The quote is interesting also because it emphasizes similarity that the student felt towards refugees. In addition to issues related to diversity and difference, we did try to make students also aware of the many similarities between people and countries, but mostly the discussion revolved around the other and the difference.

Preparing for Return

Returning home after a stay abroad also leads to creating and recycling imaginaries. For instance, students often believe that they will experience what has often been labeled as ‘reverse culture shock’ in the literature, i.e. their own country or culture will be a source of shock [10]. The phenomenon is often presented and discussed in intercultural preparation courses. What kind of thoughts did our students then have about their forthcoming return home after their exchange time in Finland? Some students relentlessly wanted to keep the illusion of multiple benefits and the positive impact of study abroad on their personal development and future career. According to these students ‘exchange looks good in your curriculum’, ‘semester abroad is a really good point in your personal CV’ and ‘people you met can be useful’. For them, student exchange still

seems to guarantee certain personal characteristics: being ‘willed to learn, not afraid of challenges and open minded for the world’. We have here many of the elements (potentially ambiguous and empty signifiers) found in studies by e.g. Demos Helsinki [2] or the Erasmus Impact Study [3].

One student even wrote that ‘I would say doing an internship, studying as an exchange, working abroad is culture of our generation’, thus repeating the imaginary that study abroad is ‘a must’ for anyone who wants to belong to the group of educated 20-somethings in the 2010s [41]. A few other students joined in supporting the idea of this new ‘proud mobile generation’. At the same time, they created imaginaries of non-mobile adult generations that they would inevitably become part of 1 day themselves: people with jobs and houses who would never get a chance again to live abroad.

Other students were, however, more hesitant about the benefits of their exchange:

(22) Growing depends on person, like some people they just stay the way they were. I think I am growing up but I don’t know when I go back.

(23) I am not sure exchange experience will help to my employability. There are so many exchange students in my country so it is becoming common thing.

(24) When I go back I am not sure if I get a good job.

The students were also critical about the contacts they had created during their exchange in Finland. Even though they wanted to hold on to the imaginary of building their own global network, at the same time, they seemed to be aware of the difficulty in staying in contact with people they had met during their exchange (see [28]). During the discussion, one of the students refers to Facebook updates and asks a bit cynically ‘what does keeping in touch mean?’

As the end of the exchange was getting closer, students became aware of the change in their everyday life they were about to face when they would return back home. Many of them wanted to continue a lifestyle similar to being an exchange student also in their home country, and some even planned to do things they had wanted to do in Finland but for some reason did not:

(25) We can join the foreign community in our own country. – I hope you keep finding about new in your own country. – I realized the new thing can be found in our own country also so of course the exchange if I have the opportunity I will try also try to go and study abroad keep trying but I think don’t give up finding new things in your own country.

(26) And also there are another so many things that I wanted to do but couldn’t. Something was really kind of ‘I couldn’t’. But something was kind of ‘I didn’t’. It was my fault. Near by the time that departing, I was lazy so I didn’t. I am feel little bit regretful. My mind was not strict. So after I am going back to South Korea, I will live more systematically. After I going back, I am 4th grade in home university. I have to graduate and job searching. It is really sad but I have to. So I will do more perfectly than before.

Conclusion

The training course under review was developed because we believe that a pedagogy of imaginaries is needed in study abroad and that it is the responsibility of HEIs to prepare students for exchange abroad with adequate knowledge and tools. The usual ‘cultural’ and/or intercultural approach seems to be inadequate as it only deals with ‘encountering the other’ and lacks discussions about the imaginaries of study abroad—which can do much more harm than e.g. the usual objective of integrating into a host society or ‘culture shock’ [10]. Instead of the usual imagineering of study abroad that many preparation courses propose, our model questions this phenomenon and leads students to multiply their imaginaries—with the idea that the more imaginaries (rather than one sole official imaginary passed onto them by decision makers and institutions), the better for them.

The primary objective of our training was to help exchange students to develop a more realistic and critical perspective on study abroad and on today’s world and encounters in general by revising and expanding their views on study abroad through the study of imaginaries. The analysis shows that in some cases, we succeeded but that discourses on such issues are so unstable—as they depend on interaction and context—that it is unrealistic to make believe that the perspective is fully effective. What some of the students seem to have realised is the instability of discourses on mobility and its characteristics and impacts (see [27]). To us, this is a major achievement. For example a student asserted that ‘that is the most important thing I know I learnt, instability. I don’t know before my culture, I thought my culture is always the same. But then later I noticed there was suddenly a difference, a developing difference. We always change, even now.’ We could easily present this as an example of ‘victory’ from our side. But again, we need to bear in mind that this somewhat new imaginary and ideology can easily give way to something more static.

It is important to note here again that the pedagogy of imaginaries is not a miraculous recipe for study abroad, a recipe that can transform the students entirely. Modesty is needed here. However, we believe that there needs to be time/space for more discussion about imagineering study abroad in higher education. Our students all seemed to have enjoyed reflecting, discussing and questioning things that they had taken for granted—or at least given the impression to have taken for granted. The more realistic and modest approach proposed here also entitles the students to ‘fail’ and to accept the fact that failure can be inherent to study abroad and intercultural encounters. This is a very important outcome in a world where only success seems to matter [14] and failure thus becomes some sort of tragedy for those who experience it.

Finally, repeatedly, our article shows that there is hardly any difference between the imagineering discursive space of both European and Asian students. In fact, they seem to share a similar doxa about study abroad. This, of course, raises the question of training: should there be specific training for specific audiences (Europeans vs. Asians, French vs. Chinese etc.)? We believe that one very positive aspect of the course is that all the students were able to share and see similarities in the ways they discuss study abroad. This might have led to more trust-building and more group identity in the class. Reading through the students’ productions for the course, it is surprising to see how similar their accounts of study abroad and their expectations were. This thus calls for a

real reshape of research practices that rely exclusively on some form of methodological nationalism, culturalism, ethnicity and geographicality.

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