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Teaching for Understanding the Year Abroad:

Thoughts on Fostering the Reflective Learner

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Abstract

Using data collected from student surveys, the author has outlined a program of study designed for students on the verge of embarking on study abroad, or year abroad, programs. The goal is to help students become more autonomous, self-reflective learners while abroad to increase the cultural and intercultural benefits of such study. Using the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) framework and the concept of Intercultural Anchored Inquiry are helpful in fostering such learning.

Keywords: Year abroad, intercultural learning, reflective learners, foreign languages.

Part I: Context and Research Findings

Over the last 60 years, scholars in many countries from disparate disciplines in the Arts and Humanities have documented the multiple learning paths a student can take during his or her Year Abroad (YA).[1] Personal learning, culture and intercultural learning, linguistic benefits, and intercultural competence are some of the outcomes identified in academic literature (Selltiz, Hopson, & Cook, 1956; Church, 1982; Freed, 1995; Coleman & Parker, 2001; Coleman, 2005; Ehrenreich, 2008). If the pedagogical idea underlying the year abroad is not realized, a huge loss of learning for the student, both personally and academically, may result. One challenge for the post-secondary teacher is to impart enough knowledge to send students abroad curious and interested in learning about the culture, creating a scaffold for further learning without enforcing any stereotypes that will hinder students going deeper into the culture. The teacher must create a curriculum to help promote self-reflective learners while abroad, while fostering in students the ability to recognize processes working to help or hinder their individual learning outcomes. In this light, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning framework is helpful to examine *what* one is teaching and *how* teaching can be improved with this aim in mind.

My interest in what is being taught and how it can be improved is based on twelve years of post-secondary teaching experience. I have observed that many students do not make the most of the YA learning experience, returning happy but largely unchanged in their knowledge about the culture and deficient in their reflective abilities. This paper examines curriculum designed to prepare students for the YA and explores the associated learning implications. In order to determine what curriculum content is suitable to meet the above aims, information was needed on a number of levels. First, it was important to find out about students' experiences during the YA. For this, I tapped into previously unpublished research I carried out based on the experiences of students while abroad in 2002[2]. Building on this research, I carried out further studies to establish where the obstacles to learning were. Those findings form one of the pillars of the curriculum advanced here.

[1] The term I use here, the Year Abroad (YA) is also known as Residence Abroad and Study Abroad denoting the same phenomenon: students remain registered in their home countries and return home to finish their degree after one year's sojourn abroad. This can be distinguished from international students who leave their country of origin to study for the entire duration of a program abroad.

[2] The author first began YA studies research in 2002, with a German-Irish Project together with Dr. Gisela Holfter and Prof. Alexander Thomas. The project, funded by the Royal Irish Academy and the

An equally important step in this study was to establish what my courses designed for the YA were achieving or not achieving in terms of teaching and learning goals. To this end, two courses devised to prepare undergraduate students for the YA were analyzed and evaluated, and form another pillar of this paper.[3] Two study cohorts were participants in this evaluation, namely Arts and European Studies students (these will be collectively known as the Arts cohort in this paper), and Business students. Significant differences emerged in terms of the qualitative learning experience between these groups. These differences, important for curricular design considerations, will be discussed later. Overall, the stepping stones to the curriculum suggested in this paper are based on the following pillars:

- Analysis of the current YA curriculum to establish what works and what doesn't
- Ascertaining why students are not maximizing their time during the YA by examining obstacles to the learning experience during the YA
- Drawing on previous Teaching and Learning research utilizing and integrating knowledge on self-regulation and self-ownership, and applying this to the YA

My study showed that YA students need to become more directly involved in their learning while abroad, taking ownership for their individual learning goals. Based on research in teaching and learning, the proposed curriculum focuses on fostering ideas of self-regulation and self-ownership.

Implicit and Explicit Ideas behind the Teaching Approach to Intercultural Learning

Classroom observations.

Only by deconstructing my ideas of how to bridge the student's world and the potential learning outcomes of the YA, with the help of the SoTL framework, could I learn how to help students fully utilize the YA for their individual learning goals. I began to see more and more (not only seeing but learning from practice, as Schulman (2004) encourages us to do) the case for helping students understand what I wanted them to learn. Students commonly believe they have nothing new to learn

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DAAD, consisted of an analysis of the learning experience both at university and within the socio-cultural environment of Irish students in Germany. Interviews (lasting between 55-90 minutes duration) with 11 Irish students were carried out by the author at the University of Regensburg and University of Nuremberg-Erlangen in Germany.

[3] The analyses took place within a formal course (Diploma in Teaching and Learning at Higher Education) where academic peers provided feedback on teaching practice based on two classes which were filmed for this purpose. Student feedback was also gathered in the form of anonymous questionnaires filled out in class.

about cultural and intercultural learning as they are continually confronted with these issues in the foreign language classroom. This belief often goes hand in hand with the opinion that they will learn and gain an appreciation of the culture just by being physically there, what Wilkinson (1997) terms in her study as the "culture myth." Sotto's (2007) realization on the learning process became my conviction:

> Learning, real learning, isn't what happens when we are fed information. Learning is what happens when we realize that we do not know something that we consider worth knowing, form a hunch about it, and test that hunch actively. In doing that, we might also have to seek information, but notice that finding information is only a part of that process. And notice that the process begins when *we realise we don't know something* [emphasis added]. (p. 56)

After years preparing students for the YA, it became clear that making students aware of where I wanted to take them on this journey was essential. Students need to see that the materials are not just – in colloquial terms – 'nice to know' but instead are personally essential to them. In a recent introductory class, I was again surprised that all twenty-five students in the class thought that merely by being in the foreign culture they would return home fluent or near-fluent speakers. This belief is nothing short of a fallacy given the fact that many students continue to socialize with members of their own culture while abroad, as fellow travellers and through social media. This assumption needs to be challenged.

From a SoTL perspective, and from the perspective of an educator, the words of Jerome Bruner (1996) can be applied to the YA context: "A failure to equip minds with the skills for understanding and feeling and acting in the cultural world is not simply scoring a pedagogical zero. It risks creating alienation, defiance, and practical incompetence. … All of these undermine the viability of a culture" (p. 42-43). Although this is a big ask, and arguably not something the classroom setting can achieve at once, it does point to the need to think carefully about what content will help students appropriately experience the cultural and intercultural world.

These general observations are an important part of why I have chosen certain materials and omitted others. Before the curriculum is proposed, I will first examine two courses I taught for a number of years and which helped me reflect upon the qualitative nature of the course materials I had been employing up to that point.

Establishing What Works and What Doesn't: Course Analysis and Student Feedback

Description of Course I.

Feedback from two recent YA courses informs the first pillar of curriculum revision. The first course, *Intercultural Learning through Literary and Media Texts,* ran in the academic year 2009-2010. It was designed for Arts students in a four-year program and was divided into two parts, each lasting 12 weeks. In Part I, concepts relevant to the YA were covered including:

- Intercultural Competence – contrasting Selected Models
- Intercultural Learning – Concept and Process
- Reactions to Living Abroad and Adjustment Strategies
- Study Abroad Research: Empirical Findings

Classes focused on Intercultural Competence and Learning were taught from the disciplinary perspective of social and cross-cultural psychology, based in particular on the work of German culture psychologist and author Alexander Thomas. Milton Bennett and others' work on Intercultural Learning was also discussed. The class typically began with an introduction into the concept with a visual aid or a handout, followed by a discussion, and questions to be worked out in groups. In Part II, the concepts and theories examined in Part I were applied to literary and media excerpts. Literature excerpts were chosen that shed some light on German-Irish behaviors, each from the other perspective. Novels by Irish-German author Hugo Hamilton including *The Speckled People* (2003), *Die redselige Insel* (2007) and Heinrich Böll's *Das irische Tagebuch* (1957) formed the basis. These texts were read and discussed primarily in German. The literature excerpts (discussed in a circular gathering, with myself acting as a facilitator of the discussion) aimed to foster differentiated thinking about cultural groups and sub-groups in the context of Irish-German relations. The concept of Self and Other – *Selbstbild* and *Fremdbild* – was included to raise students' awareness of how stereotypes can help or hinder their communication when abroad.

Student feedback: an overview.

A continuous assessment technique (CAT) was carried out between Part I and Part II in order to evaluate how the students related to and grasped the YA concepts discussed. This assessment

showed that concepts, though at times abstract, were seen as applicable and relevant by Arts respondents with no exceptions.

The following responses illustrate that students showed the ability to keep both an open mind and make links between culture and behavior:

- I think the concepts we studied are helpful for a year abroad. Especially to be tolerant with a new culture and try to find out more *why* people [are] acting like this and not just complain about different behavior (CAT_B, 2010).
- Now that I have studied these concepts, when I start to feel they apply to me, at least I can be reassured that I know what to expect and feel – to a certain extent. They provide the foundation for further education (CAT_F, 2010).
- I think I am less apprehensive about the year away because I feel more prepared now to deal with encountering aspects of another culture (CAT_A, 2010).

Additionally, students reported that studying the concepts in this course changed their *perspective:*

- Perhaps I would seek to be more tactful and culturally aware than I would have been prior to the course (CAT_K, 2010).

Furthermore, the YA concepts had the desired effect regarding the choice of *peer groups*:

- I definitely feel that I will be more aware of branching out from the Erasmus[4] group. Helpful advice during the course of this class has definitely encouraged this (CAT_G, 2010).
- I think my interest has grown in the German culture. I am now more determined to make the most of my year (CAT_I, 2010).
- I now think that I need to be far more aware of customs and integration with other people and with housemates. It has also made my year abroad slightly less daunting in that things have been explained clearer to me. I have also started to view it as quite a serious year in terms of being productive with what little time I have in the country and just to step outside my comfort zone and develop personally (CAT_J, 2010).

[4] ERASMUS: European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students. ERASMUS is a joint student exchange program between the European Union (EU), European Economic Area (EEA) and Turkey.

Also pertaining to the language aspect of the class, students seemed to enjoy the discussions of content through the second language:

- It was interesting and helpful to see how one can express themselves in the language [L2] about the YA (CAT_A, 2010).
- I found the discussion of the concepts in German as beneficial as one would never be able to gain a grasp of much of the vocabulary that is new relating to these concepts if one only studies through the medium of English (CAT_K, 2010).

Thus, many of the key aspects held central to the YA, i.e. choice of language and peer groups when abroad were grasped and internalized.

Description of Course II.

The second course (run a year later in 2010-2011) was entitled *Intercultural Learning for the Year Abroad: Theory and Practice*, and was designed for Business students, but included a handful of Arts students. It was conceptually similar in the first semester as *Intercultural Learning through Literary and Media texts* with content focusing in the first 12 weeks on intercultural learning and living abroad. In the second semester, to reflect the fact that this was a different cohort, 12 weeks were spent concentrating on language for YA purposes – on 'Institutional' German and 'German for University' (in addition to German language discussion class).[5] Previous student experiences were included: two post-YA students were invited to discuss their experiences with the outgoing students, and findings on YA studies were presented. The objective was for students to learn from, and be challenged and motivated by, other students. To this end, students were asked to articulate their own YA goals (which we called YAGs) in an online learning forum ('Blackboard', open to members of the class) which was only visible to me. In a second Blackboard entry, students were asked to identify what action points they needed to adopt in order to realize their goals over the year.

Student feedback: an overview.

An assessment of the course was carried out between the first and second semester. Business students had the following comments about the first semester (Intercultural Concepts):

[5] All materials concentrated around teaching students how to react to YA situations in the target language. Some authentic documents were used (registering with the local authorities, filling out forms at a bank), supplemented by the book "*Alltag in Deutschland"* (2005, Klett Verlag) which focuses on daily situations in Germany with language exercises.

- Concentrate less on the theories; they really don't seem all that practical. Half of the experience next year will be learning these things for ourselves (03_BComm International, 2011).
- I would rather more concentration on situations, on year abroad experiences, i.e. key information we need to know about living in Germany rather than cultural ideologies (05_BComm International, 2011).
- I was very disappointed with the first term after having expected so much more. I found learning about the theories and such to be a waste of time, where we could have been learning more practical and useful things. I look forward to this term though with the promise it'll be more central to the year abroad (06_BComm International, 2011).

Conversely, the Arts students in the same class unanimously found course concepts very beneficial as the sample quote relates:

- I think the theory behind preconceptions and culture standards is extremely beneficial and the course structure / layout is good, i.e. theories, then practice (11_Arts / LCS, 2011).

Both sets of students enjoyed learning from older students' YA experiences:

- Getting previous students in to speak is a brilliant idea (10_Arts / LCS, 2011).
- Final year student (was) the best way – first-hand information (06_BComm International, 2011).

In contrast to the first semester, the second semester, which concentrated on academic language and practicing authentic YA situations, received more favorable feedback from Business students:

- I feel I got great benefit from this semester because it was incredibly practical and I really felt I got a great understanding of the various systems. Also I felt that I would be able to put the vocabulary to great use. I would have liked if more time could be spent on this area just because I feel that everyone would be able to benefit more from this both on a long-term and short-term basis (15_BComm International, 2011).
- Extremely helpful classes, they helped prepare us for practical situations we will have to experience next year. Very helpful in preparing us for what to expect, what sort of paperwork we will have to fill out and especially the small but nonetheless extremely important things

such as applying for a TV license. Role-plays used were also very helpful as they helped prepare us for conversations we will be faced with in Germany. Perhaps doing more role-plays would be beneficial as I personally feel they are the best form of preparation and also force us to practice our spoken German (12_BComm International, 2011).

- I found the work we did on the banks, looking into work contracts, and the working in groups to practice using these phrases and how to open a bank account, very beneficial as it is something that we are guaranteed to need when we go to Germany (13_BComm International, 2011).
- The material in Semester II should be taught throughout the term as some material I found from Term I did not help (09_BComm International, 2011).

Despite developing an online social platform (in the form of a blog, a wiki, and a learning entry between the student and myself as lecturer), there was little interest among the Business students. The feedback forms offer some insights as to why this was the case:

- I really didn't give it much thought. It didn't seem that urgent. I don't see a practical value to be honest (03_BComm International, 2011).
- [I] keep forgetting about it – lack of time to sit down and do it (08_BComm International, 2011).

Against this, Arts students all participated in the online learning opportunity, grasping much more the reason for this learning forum:

- Yes, I participated in Blackboard. I think I'm much more aware of the cultural opportunities and hurdles that will be present. The focus for me has changed from "get better at German" to "integrate into their world" and in doing this become more fluent (11_Arts / LCS, 2010-2011).

Curricular implications of course analysis for teaching and learning.

An analysis of courses shows that the content was most effective when students understood the relevance to their own YA and could see how knowledge could be applied outside of the classroom. Arts students in particular grasped the reflective capacity of the intercultural concepts and seemed to be more determined to take their learning seriously during the YA as a result. However, the study of different academic programs has shown again that an effective program with one group

will not necessarily be successful with another: Business students need to see more explicit connections to everyday life or they tend to lose interest early in the term. Creating more relevance is important for motivating these students.

Because the current generation of students is so adept in social electronic practices, I expected that writing or reflecting on their YA Goals online would be an incentive to learning for both Arts and Business students. As seen above, this did not prove to be the case. The non-participation by Business students in the voluntary online learning tasks shows that many students choose to overlook components that are not assessed or do not affect their overall grades. The initial idea, i.e. that there would be learning across disciplines and across student cohorts, with some sort of learning synergy *between* groups, did not come to fruition; students tended to stay in their own groups with a tangible unspoken barrier between them.[6] Students themselves remarked on this fact:

- Perhaps for next year Commerce and Arts students should be in separate classes. It is quite clear that there is a big gap between the two groups (10_Arts /LCS, 2010-2011).
- Perhaps a separate commerce class would benefit LCS /Arts as they seem to want different content (11_Arts / LCS, 2011).

Why Students are not Maximizing their Time during the YA: Obstacles to the Learning Experience

Inquiry into students' qualitative research experience while abroad began in 2002 and continued periodically until 2011. Face-to-face interviews were held with students during their YA (2002)[7] and with returned YA students (2009-2010).[8] The 2002 interviews were the basis for questionnaires later developed and completed by 42 students on returning from the YA (2006-2011).

In this sample of students, academic adjustment challenges were notable, and began outside of the classroom before the commencement of the semester with issues such as registration for courses, which was not as centrally organized abroad as at home. A running thread throughout the

[6] One case study by Sherry Linkon (2000) on "Students' Perspectives on Interdisciplinary Learning" explores the right conditions for interdisciplinary knowledge: The author argues that the educator needs to ask questions at various levels and in various contexts (p. 69), and do this for a number of courses over a period of time to see the students' point of view. One deduction is that teaching interdisciplinary knowledge is more difficult and complex than one might first assume!

[7] See note 2 for details.

[8] Interviews with five returned YA students were held during 2009-2010. All students questioned in this survey are Irish nationals.

interview scripts was the language challenge students faced at university. Comments revolved around understanding content through the foreign language (L2) and adapting to a different academic system. The in-class experience required adjusting to the higher levels of class participation by German students. However, there was evidence of positive academic and intellectual exchange, with students commenting on different teaching methods and styles. Overall, the academic side of their YA presented more challenges for the average 20 year-old Irish student than experiences in the wider socio-cultural environment.

Analyzing all questionnaires and the interview data collectively from 2002-2011, three factors were identified that prevented students fully immersing themselves in the L2 apart from the university setting:

Peer groups and choice of language.

As already identified in sojourner and YA literature, staying in groups with co-nationals is considered undesirable as it creates a barrier to understanding host nationals. Irish students who remained in English-speaking circles did not break away from familiar interaction patterns or engage to any great extent with the host culture on a deeper level. Findings show that speaking the L2 was a repeated challenge for Irish students particularly in the early months abroad. This may be one reason why students found that German students chose to speak English with them despite their attempts to keep conversations in the L2.

Speaking English with (home and) host students.

In the first months, Irish students appeared to lack confidence in their German, unwilling to switch to German when German students began speaking English with them. Others found that this fact encouraged them to spend more time in ERASMUS circles.

Multimedia usage and breaks in stay.

Although multimedia usage positively influenced L2 gains for some ("*I read a lot of German books, newspapers and watched German TV, this helped my adapting to living in Germany"*), for many, multimedia proved to be a significant obstacle to learning (students mentioned *Facebook*, and being on *Skype* every night to family members). This observation is echoed by Ehrenreich who finds that "media opportunities are increasingly changing the quality of the YA experience itself, as it was never so easy to be connected to home even in the most remote corner of the world" (Ehrenreich, 2008: 30, translated by the author). This was compounded by frequent visits home to family and

friends – a vast majority of students made trips home at Christmas, over the semester break, at Easter and even for family occasions – and meant that students who were speaking German were speaking it for less time than intended by the sending institution.[9]

In summary, many students expressed regret at not fully utilizing the learning potential during the YA. These sentiments were voiced more often by Business students than by Arts and Humanities students. Business students as a cohort seemed to grasp less clearly the explicit reasons for going abroad – to be immersed in the culture, to develop more native sounding language structures and differentiated thinking, and to learn about their own cultural conditioning from a new perspective.

Part II: Proposed Academic Curriculum

In Part II a curriculum is advanced to prepare students for the YA, based on the above analysis of courses and student feedback. The revised curriculum seeks to address two key findings of this study. First, Business students did not see the relevance to intercultural concepts studied in preparation for the YA. This needs to be addressed and improved. The curriculum will connect course content and application during the YA to create learning motivation which, in turn, should mean changed behaviors once abroad. Second, all students need more help in becoming reflective learners in order to meet their YA goals during their YA. Unfamiliarity with the academic culture of their YA, choosing to socialize with peers from their home university, using social media through the medium of English, and traveling home during holidays all prevented students from meeting their YA goals. Work on self-regulation and other concepts from Teaching and Learning discourse will be discussed to foster students' engagement with their learning processes.

Creating Learning Motivation and a Scaffold for Using Knowledge outside the Classroom

To address the first problem of students failing to see the relevance of their studies in intercultural concepts prior to the YA, the concept of the Intercultural Anchored Inquiry (IAI) is adopted. This tool, first proposed in an intercultural learning environment by Stefan Kammhuber (2000) in Germany, uses critical incidents (CIs) to stimulate reflective learning and is an adaption of Kolb's research in 1984. The IAI resonates with Bruner's idea of helping students be active learners in the classroom (see

[9] The majority of students travelled home 3-4 times during the year. In the sample 2006-2007, only one student travelled home once during the year (1:20), in the 2010-2011 sample only one student travelled home once (1:13).

Schulman, 2004: 513), and also satisfies much of what Arndt Witte (2011) identifies as necessary preconditions in the teaching and learning of Intercultural Competence. He argues that Intercultural Competence

> must be *actively acquired by the learner*, i.e. s/he must be inherently prepared to invest time and effort into the holistic process of learning, due to experiences of personal deficits in this regard. This investment-potential can only be realized by rich *experiential learning* which includes affective and psychological components of personal identity-construction and their cognitive, affective and behavioral expression. The process of learning and acquiring intercultural competence must combine elements of intercultural experience and an acute awareness of the *differences and similarities of the cultural constructs, norms, categories and beliefs* [emphasis added] involved (p. 102).

The IAI offers an apt integration of many of Witte's points: using critical incidents, it is based upon experience in cultural settings (fulfilling the requirement for experiential learning); it demands of the learner a response (active learning) and it focuses on behaviors and how these are to be understood from a different cultural mind set (bringing in a discussion of difference and similarities of cultural constructs, norms and beliefs).

The IAI is particularly relevant in light of the feedback by Business students who largely failed to see any relevance of studying YA concepts and failed to connect with approaches designed to stimulate reflection in intercultural learning. To use the critical incident method of teaching and learning in preparing students for their YA, critical incidents are extrapolated from the interview data with Irish students during their YA in Germany. These critical incidents are presented to students preparing for their YA and used to facilitate "intrinsic motivation and critical reflection" (Torosyan, 2007: 14). First, individual responses to the CIs will be collected in order to ascertain students' emotional, rational and cognitive interpretations of behavior. Then, critically reflecting on premises for attributions will generate multiple perspectives. Understanding multiple perspectives will allow students to reflect alternative behavior consequences. Finally, this knowledge can be meta-contextualized in different intercultural settings. After following these steps, students will understand that their cultural knowledge may be too limited to understand the behavior in question, at which point the introduction of the intercultural learning concepts becomes timely and relevant. Apart from the textual analysis of critical incidents, other learning inroads can be used: testimonials from students

themselves where students learn from returned YA students also foster intrinsic motivation. Short film excerpts could also serve as anchors to show learning relevance (such as *Cold Water*, 1987 Intercultural Press). The IAI offers a helpful, non-prescriptive tool to build a necessary bridge between theory and practice showing students the relevance of intercultural concepts and how they will be beneficial to the students during their YA. Integrating this method into the new curriculum will create learning motivation and build a scaffold for students to use this knowledge during their YA.

Reflecting on Curriculum: Proposed Changes

The second problem revealed by this study is that students are not meeting their YA goals in regards to language acquisition and cultural understanding. The obstacles which prevent students from achieving their YA goals will require adjustments to the curriculum both in order to raise students' awareness of these issues and provide them with tools to overcome them. Knowledge from teaching and learning is helpful here to address this, and is discussed with some solutions below. To address the problems exacerbated by language patterns and choice of peer groups, students will be encouraged to break away from English speaking circles. In particular, students will be made aware of the dangers of staying in English-speaking circles (the so-called ERASMUS trap). Presenting students with the testimony of peers who did not meet their language and cultural acquisition goals during their YA because they did not step outside English-speaking circles will be used here. Furthermore, students will be prepared to speak German by incorporating language role-plays into the classroom. These activities will increase students' confidence in speaking German and provide them with ideas about how to overcome obstacles concerning their language progression. From the findings in both cohorts, more focus on academic language and academic structures in German-speaking countries need to play a role, and more experiential exercises here can facilitate this as they involve students both emotionally and intellectually. An example here would be role-plays in the L2 simulating student experiences during the YA "Sprechstunde mit dem Professor" (Office hours with the Prof.). Here more collaboration between Language Courses and the YA preparation module are needed.

To help students make the academic adjustment to the new learning environment and differences in course and university structures, information presented in their course prior to the YA needs to address these aspects. This will ensure that students feel prepared for the differences in the German university and educational system. This information can be easily integrated into culture and language courses in Year II of the degree.

Finally, students' multimedia practices and frequent trips home created a barrier to fully experiencing their YA. In order to raise students' awareness of this problem, they will be challenged to think about the use of their time after their university day and encouraged to reflect about their online language practices. Students will be encouraged to switch the language of their multimedia practices to German and to write a diary or log in German. Furthermore, specific information on jobs and placements with agencies in Germany and Austria will be provided to motivate students to spend their holiday seasons in their host country.

The findings in this study indicate that certain aspects of the curriculum were beneficial enough to merit expanding their use in preparing students for their YA. In particular, students noted the benefits of adopting social psychology and cross-cultural psychology pedagogical techniques to deepen their understanding of German culture prior to their YA. The Arts students particularly noted the value in using of culture-specific novels and short stories to analyze behaviors and narratives from a German cultural perspective. Analyzing the role of culture on behavior gave students an opportunity to reflect about the idea of behavior modification when abroad, and the analysis of particular situations provided an opportunity to understand that there are many ways of constructing meaning. There was some resonance with Strümper-Krobb who argues that such texts give the student the opportunity "to question their own view(s) of the foreign text and culture" (Strümper-Krobb, 2000, p. 214) and also help them realize that there are different ways in which the foreign culture can be understood (see Strümper-Krobb, 2000, p. 215). Therefore in the wider context of using literary texts as a pedagogical tool for promoting cultural and intercultural learning, this approach achieves its learning outcomes and can be continued for Arts students' preparation for the YA.

While much of the existing YA curriculum for YA preparation was endorsed by Arts students, overall feedback shows that students need to be divided into separate classes in preparation for the YA with different focal areas and conceptual emphasis. This will allow for tailored approaches to

teaching intercultural learning and make it easier to implement curricular changes such as grading online participation, as Business students failed to take it seriously without formal assessment metrics.

Other Curricular Changes to be Made During the YA: Drawing on Teaching and Learning Knowledge

Whatever YA goals students set for themselves (which can vary depending on what the student feels he or she is capable of), a main objective of this curriculum revision is to help instil in students a sense of individual ownership[10] of their learning experience during the YA. Hopefully this process will help students go on to be reflective learners and self-authors of their individual learning paths. Helping students realize that certain behaviors will need to be fostered once abroad to gain in language fluency and cultural knowledge is important. The "Zone of Proximal Development" (Vygotsky, 1978) will facilitate this on a conceptual level, aiding students towards self-authoring their YA goals. Known widely in SoTL circles, this defines the gap between individuals' unaided achievement and their *potential* achievement with the help of a skilled partner (discussed below). On a practical level, the steps to effective YA goal implementation will be aided by such a partner. These steps were suggested by Myron H. Dembo and Helena Praks Seli in 2004, and I adapt them here to the YA context to help students move towards self-regulation.

The first step in the process is goal setting and strategic planning. Students ask, "What are my YA goals?" Following a discussion of YA literature findings and CIs, students identify both online and in discussion with their lecturer what individual goals they wish to pursue. In a follow up online entry, students reflect on what strategies they can implement to address issues that will distract them from their goals. Therefore, they think about and write about their goals in Academic, Cultural, Linguistic,

[10] This idea of self-ownership is conceptually similar to the notion of self-directed learning already used in connection with the YA. At the 2010 conference on YA Assessment at the University of Bath, Coleman discussed how self-directed learning can support the YA experience and how technology can facilitate and enhance self-directed learning. In a similar vein, *The Common Framework of Reference for Languages* emphasizes developing learner autonomy reflection and pluri-culturalism in foreign language teaching. It proposes a comprehensive action-oriented notion of communication based on the language user's underlying existential competence, whereby the learner is seen as an autonomous person and a social actor who forms personal relationships in social groups (see Intercultural Competence through Experiential Learning: The Common Framework of Reference, CEFR, 2011).

and Professional terms (Opper, Teichler & Carlson, 1990, p. 38), and about the Intercultural and Personal benefits (Coleman and Parker, 2001) associated with the YA.

As mentioned, an overall aim of this curriculum is to create a sense of self-ownership of the YA and self-authorship of specific YA goals. This requires purposeful or intentional learning. Self-ownership is aided in the choice of curricular choices; self-authorship is managed with a skilled partner to help students reach their potential. This idea has been translated as a 'cultural mentor' elsewhere (Berg, 2009), namely a person who will accompany students on their YA path and help them design their own learning. In light of this, providing a cultural mentor from the home university is recommended to help students follow through on their pre-identified YAGs and to make adjustments in their behaviors where necessary. For example, students might be challenged to set aside social patterns of meeting with home nationals, and to seek out contact with host country nationals.

To achieve the steps to self-regulation and to help students change behaviors, two further steps are adapted from Dembo and Praks Seli (2004). These steps are Strategic Outcome Monitoring and Overall Assessment.

Strategic Outcome Monitoring asks students to reflect on how well they are meeting the YA goals they set for themselves. Online journal entries and the act of writing will prompt students to reflect on their time abroad and help them check for the presence or absence of certain factors. These factors include time spent with host country nationals, average time a day spent listening, speaking, reading and writing German, cultural reflection, and more. Students are encouraged to question if any changes need to be made while they are abroad. The cultural mentor suggested above will help students monitor their progress.

Overall Assessment asks students to reflect more generally on their YA. While abroad, students consider if changes made have improved the qualitative experience of their YA. Questions here include thinking about what strategies were the most and least effective. What changes are still needed for the remainder of the YA?

On returning home, students fill out post-YA language self-assessment form. In addition, the EU LOLIPOP-ELP will be given to students to measure intercultural competence (available online at http://lolipop-portfolio.eu).[11] Students submit their credit points and write a YA reflection on what they

[11] This scale ranges from A1 to C2 where C2 means "I can interpret and evaluate people's behavior based on many different cultural theories I have encountered and experiences I have gained and can

learned both from within the university setting and outside the university, integrating their linguistic development.

These reflections put the tools into students' hands to help them realize their pre-identified goals while abroad. The proposed curriculum has of yet only been tested in part, with aspects integrated into the YA preparatory course for the outgoing YA class, 2013-2014.[12]

Review and Conclusion

This study proposes an academic curriculum specifically to prepare Irish students to go on ERASMUS to Germany, but the ideas of fostering a reflective learner, and identifying and authoring individual goals during the YA resonate with other mobile groups. The findings of this study, various snapshots over a nine-year period of Irish students in Germany, and the barriers identified to learning, are not unique to this group of students, but have been found in other empirical studies analyzing the YA experience – particularly concerning the social and language patterns of students when abroad. A longitudinal research design would best suit this type of study in that this would facilitate the evaluation of students' learning outcomes following the proposed curriculum. This is something I hope to do in the future. For now this research design has taught me what works well for what academic cohort, and with the help of SoTL, it has given me a new perspective on how important it is to make learning tangible and real to students to counteract a possible lack of motivation towards culture and intercultural learning. I assumed for a long time that students should know what and how to learn when abroad, and that they should automatically perceive the learning relevance of course materials, but this journey has thought me this is not necessarily the case. This revelation bears some resemblance to Schulman's argument that "the nature of our work habits and conditions is so unreflective that we even forget some of the understandings that we have achieved in the course of our practice" (Schulman, 2004, p. 505). By engaging in empirical research of what students were actually doing and thinking about their YA, and how they were interacting with course materials, I was challenged to examine the relationship between teaching relevance and learning motivation. The Intercultural Anchored Inquiry (Kammhuber, 2000) was suggested as conceptual tool in the

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reconcile sometimes conflicting world views. I often seek out the role of an impartial intercultural mediator".

[12] Unfortunately, the division of Business students and Arts students into separate classes has not yet been possible due to staffing considerations.

establishment of a new curriculum for the preparation of YA students as it integrates both cognitive and experiential aspects of learning in an intercultural context.

There are a number of caveats in the curriculum approach suggested. In the classroom one must bear in mind that "teaching and acquiring intercultural competence cannot be product-orientated, as there exists no definable end-product" (Witte, 2011, p. 103) and

> The teaching and learning process has to be carefully planned, not only for each single class, but also for the overall learning sequences. The learning must be provided with a rich experiential and constructionist learning environment, *tailored to his/her particular interests and needs*, in order to lay a foundation to develop her increasingly complex and dynamic third places, in spite of the reductive drawbacks of the artificial classroom situation. In this context it is obvious that the *teacher does not assume responsibility for the learning process alone* [emphasis added]…[and] the ultimate responsibility for the learning…lies with the individual learner (Witte, 2011, p. 103).

That the teacher does not assume responsibly for the learning process alone is an important point: Coleman (2010) reminds us that the outcomes of the YA depend on many factors, only some of which can be influenced by institutions and program coordinators. Individual motivations, attitudes, preparation, curriculum, integration, support, tasks while abroad, debriefing on return, assessment and L2 maintenance are all influencing factors (Coleman, 2010).

As OECD figures show that student mobility is on the increase, issues of teaching and learning and academic curricula will become more topical as time goes on.[13] Bracht et al. (2006) provide a differentiated view on what ERASMUS – the program sponsoring all the students in this study – in particular will need: more intensive preparation, more academic, administrative and financial support for the students while abroad, closer links between higher education and the employment system, and stronger efforts to make the benefits visible. The authors conclude that "the ERASMUS programme will have better chances in the future if it becomes again more ambitious as far as the *quality of the experience abroad* [emphasis added] is concerned" (Bracht et al., 2006, p. xxiv). Apart from the insights above gained by using SoTL, this lens applied to existing preparatory courses and teaching pedagogy has shown a number of needs which have to be addressed. Tailoring

[13] Over the past three decades, the number of students enrolled outside their country of citizenship has risen dramatically, from 0.8 million worldwide in 1975 to 4.1 million in 2010, a more than five-fold increase. (http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/oecd-eag-2012-en.pdf, accessed, 12 October, 2013).

content to specific cohorts, grading previously voluntary online exercises, and encouraging students to reflect on their learning progression in relation to their own specific YA Goals while abroad with the tools suggested (including cultural mentor and self-regulation questions from previous T&L studies) means that they will have an opportunity to be challenged and to modify any behaviors to maximize learning potential before they return home. This in turn should influence the quality of the experience abroad and lead to greater learning outcomes.

Based on an analysis of what obstacles actually prevent optimal learning goals during the YA, I hope that the phased and interdisciplinary approach to curriculum suggested here will spark the development of more reflective students. The Teaching and Learning approach suggested here will have achieved much if students themselves reach the conclusion that Goethe once did (after spending three months in Italy in 1786), “Nothing above all, is comparable to the new life that a reflective person experiences when he observes a new country. Though I am still always myself, I believe I have been changed to the very marrow of my bones” (Goethe, 1816-17/1970, p. 147).

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