

Study abroad beyond the usual ‘imagineering’? The benefits of a pedagogy of imaginaries

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

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 “postmodern 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. (2015) who present ‘dictatorially’ 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 (Demos, 2013; Erasmus Impact Study, 2014). 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 (Dervin, 2013). 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 (Angermuller, 2014). *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. Ballatore 2014; Machart & Lim, 2014; Abdallah-Pretceille, 2008) we would actually want to discard these empty signifiers, which have contributed to creating multiple discursive underpinnings of the benefits of study abroad. We argue that these elements create confusion amongst 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 5 million inhabitants, has been a very popular destination for study abroad over the last 10 years (Dervin, 2013).

We are also interested somehow in what the students learned, bearing in mind that when one deconstructs certain imaginaries, one reconstructs other shared discourses about a phenomenon *ad nauseam* (see Auger et al., 2009). However we argue that an awareness of Imagineering is already an important learning outcome for the students. Thus we won't pretend that our course was obligatorily successful in this article – 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 e.g. 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 (2014: 13)

Most study abroad preparations, prior, during and/or after, tend to concentrate on intercultural and/or language preparation (Kinging, 2013; Jackson, 2013). 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 (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1999; Anquetil, 2006; Dervin, 2013). 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 (Davies, 2003; Dervin & Badrinathan, 2011; Houghton & Rivers, 2013). The notions mentioned earlier such as *tolerance of ambiguity*, *openness*, but also *awareness of culture shock* and *reverse culture shock*,

have tended to be used as learning objectives for intercultural preparation (Machart & Lim, 2014). The overemphasis on cultural difference in this perspective has represented an ideological bias that is increasingly questioned by both researchers and practitioners (Holliday, 2010; Dervin, 2013; Dervin & Hahl, 2015). 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 (Beaven & Borghetti, 2014; Messelink et al, 2015), 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 e.g. 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 (Althusser, 1971) – 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. Erasmus Impact Study, 2014), 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 Dervin, 2008, 2011). 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 (Castoriadis, 1987; Taylor, 2004; Maffesoli, 1993; Appadurai, 1996) 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, the father of sociology, Emile Durkheim (1995) suggested that societies exist thanks to the sharing of symbolic forms that enable people to form collectives. Although he did not call them imaginaries, we feel that these forms

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 (1987) the imaginary corresponds to shared and unifying core conceptions. In a similar vein Charles Taylor (2004) 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” (ibid.: 23). The psycho-analyst Jacques Lacan (1977) 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 (González-Vélez, 2002: 349), for others imaginaries represent the oxymoron of a “dynamic substrate”, i.e. background imaginaries that are constantly changing (Maffesoli, 1993). 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 (2012: 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 (2011: 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. 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 2. Objectives for working on imaginaries as a way of preparing students for and during mobility.

The table below describes the imaginaries shared by many students about their time abroad (Dervin, 2008; Ballatore, 2014). The imaginaries are divided into 1. Behaving, 2. Learning, 3. Post-sojourn benefits. The first category relates to the relationships between the students and their ‘same’, i.e. people who share a same passport and first language. 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’. 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”. 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 (Holliday, 2010). 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.

Category of imaginaries	Contents of imaginaries
Behaving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - interacting with people from one's own country while abroad must be avoided - speaking one's own language must be avoided
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - other cultures, exclusivist and differentialist approach - interculturality - oneself, one's (personal/national) identity - speak like a native speaker
Post-sojourn benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - become cosmopolitan – “citizen of the world” - better employability - better person, more tolerant, less – see – no stereotypes - respect diversity

Table 1. Categories of imaginaries in relation to stay abroad

When we planned our course on imaginaries we started with the above categories to determine a certain number of ‘renewed’ learning objectives. As table 2 shows four main objectives were determined:

Renewed objectives	Contents of studied imaginaries
Awareness of one's own imaginaries about study abroad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - review (impossible) goals - ideologies about study abroad (cosmopolitan, lead to respect and tolerance, etc.)
Awareness of others' imaginaries about study abroad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - culture/interculturality - over-emphasis on difference - language – learn to speak like a ‘native’ - myself and others - sociality abroad

Preparing for return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - dealing with the potential lack of interest in one's stay from family and friends - reflect 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 stereotype") - facing what we consider as 'silly' questions about stay abroad
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Table 2. Renewed objectives

The general pedagogical approach to imaginaries finds some echoes in Rivzi's (2011: 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 1.

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" (Salazar & Graburn, 2013: 2).

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 are discussed through e.g. the flawed idea of cosmopolitanism. It is important for the students to reflect on their position as 'privileged' movers. Calhoun (2008: 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' course (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. 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-hour face-to-face sessions during which 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 e.g. 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. 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. Angermuller, 2014) to analyse the data which consisted in total of four session recordings (120 minutes 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 (Durkheim, 1995; Rizvi, 2011). Their imaginaries were also similar to the findings of our previous study on Finnish exchange students (Härkönen & Dervin, 2013) 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	e.g. 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	e.g. to have a new perspective of life, become open-minded towards other countries, to develop personality
A career boost	e.g. exchange means a lot for future career prospective, employees probably take the one who has done exchange
A ‘must’ for my generation	e.g. 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 here the kind of global and circulating imagining of student mobility mentioned earlier (see also Salazar, 2012: 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 (2006) found similar results in her study on an action research that she led in Italy on study mobility.

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 e.g. 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 e.g. *finding their*

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

true self and *changing their life during their exchange* (two very common imaginaries, see table 1 above, see Dervin, 2008; Machart & Lim, 2014):

(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 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 (Abdallah-Preteille, 1999). However some other imaginaries were not so easily agreed upon. The students discussed e.g. their behaving during their exchange time and their need to avoid people from their own country and speaking one’s 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 (2008) 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, other exchange students. Students are not totally blind towards Imaginering and many course participants were aware of at least some of it even before attending the course. E.g. 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 practice 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 culturalising practices within study abroad (Ballatore, 2014):

(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 a bit himself 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 the stay abroad will prolong the study time, even though 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 (2008, 2011) 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 (Anquetil, 2006; Jackson, 2013). 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 (Holliday, 2010). Study abroad is also a context of such misuse and abuse of the word (Anquetil, 2006; Dervin, 2013). 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, e.g. "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’ (Holliday, 2010).

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 (Dervin, 2008). 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 (e.g. about their co-nationals and local cultures of teaching) 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 (Dervin, 2008).

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, often, students 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 (Machart & Lim, 2014). 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 exchange 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 (potential empty signifiers) found in studies by e.g. Demos Helsinki (2013) or the Erasmus Impact Study (2014).

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 (Härkönen & Dervin, 2013). 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 one 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:

(21) “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.”

(22) “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.”

(23) “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 Dervin, 2011). 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:

(24) “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.”

(25) “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’ (Machart & Lim, 2014). 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 Dervin, 2008). 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 (Claessens, 2013) 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 (e.g. 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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