

7 The words to say it: student-led exploration of students' written responses to the year abroad experience

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Abstract

This chapter examines a student-led internship project to repurpose a Residence Abroad (RA) reflective survey in order to achieve better meta-cognitive self-analysis and more productive communication between outgoing and returning students and staff. Evidence from the project and from scholarships pointed to the limitations of free-text reflective reports in prompting effective articulation of lifelong learning skills, despite the RA being viewed as transformational. The interns, recent RA returnees, became peer researchers, analysing survey data and consulting staff experts (a careers consultant, learning technologist, RA co-ordinators, and pastoral care co-ordinators) to produce a more user-friendly and pedagogically-helpful questionnaire. The project permitted an effective two-way sharing of stakeholder needs and allowed the voice of student experience (itself becoming progressively insightful in the course of the project) to critique staff assumptions. New, more cognitively-demanding question sets tied explicitly to employability, wellbeing, intercultural awareness, and personal motivation are now producing much more usable data for staff and students.

Keywords: questionnaire, reflective peer learning, collaboration, employability, year abroad.

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1. Introduction

In 2017, the University of Warwick School of Modern Languages and Cultures created an extensive online RA questionnaire hosted by our virtual learning environment to promote student self-dialogue and peer dialogue. The questionnaire covered every aspect of the RA experience (not simply the year abroad, but all vacation placements undertaken across three years of study). Students responded to questions on practical aspects of their stays (merits of place, accommodation, activities undertaken, etc.) to gather data for the benefit of outgoing students, and reflected on their personal journey via a 500-word report. The report was compulsory (along with other written tasks) in order to progress to the next year of study. Analysis of the questionnaire's first iteration revealed that the practical data gathered from RA returners was too detailed to be meaningfully transmitted to future students, and that many reflective reports lacked coherence. Perhaps we were asking the wrong questions. We turned to the Warwick Student Internship programme, appointing two summer interns who had themselves undertaken an RA (a finalist – Jonathan Cook – and a recent RA returner – Michela Day, who has subsequently co-authored this paper) in order to consult student voices (Bourke & Loveridge, 2018)³.

2. Methodology and values

The interns were encouraged to consider themselves in co-creative leadership roles on the project. They were furnished with training in Moodle (the virtual learning environment used at Warwick), data collection, and the Qualtrics survey platform by Warwick IT Services, and given an overview of recent theoretical frameworks relating to personal development and RA. We drew attention to the conception of the RA as a liminal space for personal, social, and intellectual growth within the higher education curriculum (Hampton, 2016), stressing its importance in the context of current pedagogical endeavours to nurture a “personal epistemology” in students (Ryan, 2015, p. 9), which is viewed as a core feature of critical and

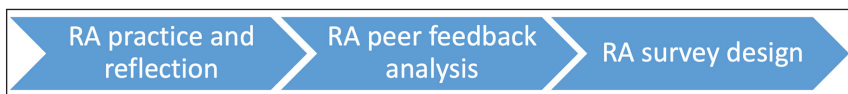
3. In the UK, most RAs take place during the third year of a four-year degree. A variant of this that operates at Warwick is the possibility for ab initio students to undertake RA in the second year in order to consolidate language knowledge.

lifelong learning skills fundamental to 21st-century graduateness – defined in Wharton (2017) as “scholarship, moral citizenship, lifelong learning and reflective thinking” (p. 2). This is set in the context of the current marginalisation of modern foreign languages as a discipline in schools, particularly in the state sector (Hampton, 2016). In a “world of the boundaryless and protean career” (Lengelle and Meijers, 2014, p. 52), we discussed the notion that students need more than ever to recognise the potential of RA, to galvanise the cognitive insights produced by its disruptive nature, and to communicate what they have learned to themselves and others. Academic staff hoped that the interns, with their recent RA experience, would examine the questionnaire as both respondents and researchers. Through interrogating their own reactions to the questions posed, we anticipated that they would approach the data with different eyes to academic staff. We were particularly keen to know how far they considered the reflective reports to have demonstrated RA students’ capacity to interrogate “their own capabilities and motivations *in relation to*, and *as a response to* the changing social conditions and expectations of the[ir] work or learning environment[s]” (Ryan, 2015, p. 3), and whether they discerned barriers to meaningful reflection that we could not see.

3. The intern experience: Michela Day’s analysis

This section of the paper reflects on the project stages through Day’s eyes as she moved forward through the processes below (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Project stages



In her words:

I came to the internship keen to advocate for my fellow RA students and to improve the experience of future outgoing students. There was

a great deal I wished I had known more about before embarking on my RA, and ways in which I felt I could have been better prepared. This, and the greater maturity and cultural awareness that I felt after the RA (Tracy-Ventura, Dewaele, Köylü, & McManus, 2016), had given me the confidence to apply for the position. My vantage point as a student or ‘insider’ (Wharton, 2017) meant that I was able to recognise the importance of a more effective dialogue between stakeholders. Our initial aim was to create a more complete feedback cycle: the School wanted to gain better quality reflection from students for pedagogical reasons and to better prepare outgoing students; my goal was to make students aware that the School had taken their responses on board.

Cook and I analysed 94 reflective reports, organising data under the following headings, chosen in consultation with School stakeholders (careers consultant; senior and personal tutors⁴; RA co-ordinators; outreach and widening participation officer):

- wellbeing;
- employability and careers;
- personal development;
- academic and linguistic development;
- cultural awareness and internationalisation;
- outreach.

In the process of analysing the reports, I observed that most reflections revealed students’ needs to ‘get something off their chests’ in a personal and sometimes sensitive way. It became clear that students’ expectations and needs were diverse: some students felt over-supported, and others not supported at all. The difference often seemed to lie in how students reacted when faced with adversity and difficulties abroad.

4. At Warwick, the senior tutor and personal tutors oversee the pastoral care of students. Each student has a dedicated personal tutor.

I also came to realise that every student reflection was only a snapshot, if that, of many RAs; my response included. When I was answering the questionnaire, my responses barely touched the surface of my ten month RA: there were many other experiences I could have recorded. The knowledge that students made choices about what and what not to include was key to understanding that these responses were not necessarily a comprehensive, once-and-for-all picture of their RA (Fairfield, 2017; Tamas, 2014)⁵. This made me question whether the reflective reports could really capture the value of the RA as a rite of passage.

We were also tasked with reviewing the questionnaire structure as a whole. With over 300 possible questions in a format which was not user friendly and which did not direct respondents to give sufficiently structured answers⁶, many responses were not coherent or detailed enough, particularly in qualitative questions. There was also a danger of questionnaire fatigue (Ben-Nun, 2008). To tackle these difficulties, we spoke to a learning technologist (to consider question design), and the School careers consultant and senior tutor (to consider question content). The learning technologist encouraged us to opt for a question style which would provoke more reflective responses (Tamas, 2014). So, the following:

- were you happy with the university you went to? YES/NO; and
- comments/recommendations about your institution (with a free-text box for the answer);

was replaced with:

- please rate your [...] institution out of six (one being very poor and six being excellent); and

5. Typically, students wrote more negatively just after the completion of their RA. However, upon returning to Warwick, I witnessed my peers sharing more positive narratives than in those captured in the questionnaires, highlighting how distance from such experiences may change the process of reflection.

6. The questionnaire had a display logic, so students were led to question sets that applied to their RA pathway.

- please briefly explain your answer to the previous question (with a small free-text box).

Requiring respondents to give a numerical value was intended to focus their judgement; giving a choice of six values makes it impossible to ‘sit on the fence’ because they cannot pick a value exactly in the middle of the scale; asking respondents to justify their response increases the likelihood of a more reflective answer.

Our discussions with the careers consultant revealed that returning students are often quite poor at articulating the graduate skills developed during their RA because they do not deduce the relevance of the softer skills they have had to build to survive the year. The consultant introduced us to the Context – Action – Result – Evaluation (CARE) methodology⁷ and suggested that the reflective reports could be structured in a way that encouraged students to use these criteria in their responses. Our discussions with the senior tutor revealed his desire to develop students’ resilience in relation to challenges rather than seeing their problems as something the university has to solve. These conversations led us to the decision to break down the reflective report into smaller questions and responses as below.

- Think about a challenge from your time abroad. How did you overcome it and what did you learn from it? Use the CARE framework to articulate your experience.
- How have you changed as a person over the course of the year?
- To what extent has your year abroad made you more employable? Please name some of the skills you gained and explain how they will be useful.

7. The CARE criteria in question are a variant on the STAR technique outlined here: <https://help.open.ac.uk/using-star-technique-in-a-job-interview>

- How did you immerse yourself in the culture of your host country and what were the results?
- Describe a moment in which you had to take a risk on your year abroad. What did you learn? Use the CARE framework to articulate your experience.
- As a result of your experiences this year, would you consider living abroad in the future? If so, why?
- Is there anything more Warwick could have done to support outgoing students? If yes, what?
- What could you have done to improve your year abroad experience?

The 2018-2019 RA cohort will trial this new questionnaire format. Finally, drawing on personal experience, we warned the School that using returning students to present the RA to outgoing students is not without problems. We found a mismatch in the accentuation of negative or worrying elements in many reflections and the overtly positive selling of the RA as ‘the best year of your life’ in preparatory meetings. To enable students to better anticipate and deal with challenges, and to increase their awareness of how to tap into improved support systems, we worked with the senior tutor to redesign personal development review forms so that the questions personal tutors put to students before and during the RA are more targeted in order to provoke reflective answers and effective dialogue.

4. Conclusions

The collaborative efforts between the interns and the Warwick RA team to create a dynamic, co-designed feedback and feedforward cycle for RAs has

built particularly on [Tracy-Ventura et al.'s \(2016\)](#) research showing growth in the emotional stability personality trait following the RA. Our reflective reports also showed that facing emotional challenge was the most pressing concern of RA students, but our interns found that the ability to move from emotion-focused descriptions of experiences to critical engagement with them eluded students. Their findings echoed closely [Wharton's \(2017\)](#) study of the language choices made by students tasked with writing personal reflections, who readily discuss “a hurdle which they have overcome”, but tend to present their transformations as “to do with behaviour” rather than as “transformations of ways of thinking” (p. 12).

The interns' decision to replace the free-text reflective report with scaffolded questions relating to tangible actions offers the promise of increased metareflection according to current thinking on the use of reflective tasks. [Ryan \(2015, p. 6\)](#) describes the need to make the “deliberations” of the learning journey “more visible and self-conscious” and to “foreground performative self-analysis” (p. 8); [Lengelle and Meijers \(2014\)](#) link “insight” with “clearly structured exercises” (p. 57). To date, 36 of 159 students have completed the new questionnaire. Whilst at this stage observations can only be anecdotal, three positive elements stand out:

- the questions on risk and challenge, perceived by one respondent as an ‘unusual question’, have pushed students to ‘dig deep’ for ideas (‘the best example I can think of is...’), and this cognitive effort has produced a rich array of responses;
- the CARE criteria have helped some students classify their reflections more systematically (using a ‘job application’ style and lexis, for instance); and
- the highly searchable nature of the new platform produces targeted data that speaks much more precisely to the requirements of individual RA co-ordinators working in nine different languages, as well as wellbeing, careers, and skills and widening participation officers.

Mindful of Day's concerns that students should present a rounded picture of the RA to their peers, we introduced a poster presentation exercise at our year abroad fair (Autumn 2018), asking students to provide images and a short text under such headings as 'main challenges and what they taught me' and 'my advice for students: how to prepare/what to expect/what not to expect/dos and don'ts'. This in turn led some students to develop their poster message into short videos in which they spoke directly to the camera about proactively building a positive RA mindset ('be fearless' 'take risks', 'it can feel daunting [being away from friends]; if you don't do anything about it, it will stay daunting').

Of course, it is impossible for either staff or students to construct narratives about the RA that offer 'failsafe' guidance. As Day's image of the 'snapshot' reminds us, distilling the experience is a labile process contingent upon context, audience, memory, and many other things. In honing our questionnaire, we wanted to increase the chances of purposeful reflection, in the interests of returning students – through transformative self-analysis – and outgoing students – through hearing a more considered viewpoint from 'near peer learners' (Murphey, 1998). On both fronts, this has entailed finding a way to help students notice the stages that reflection passes through (Fairfield, 2017) in order to help them develop a greater awareness of whom they are writing for and why they are writing. Through the internship, Day developed a kaleidoscopic perspective on stakeholder needs – she moved from a student-focused emotional response to a multi-stakeholder-focused critical response. That was very useful for our project, but for her lifelong learning skills, her ability to articulate the cognitive shift she underwent is paramount. We hope that the new questionnaire will help students to re-examine the transformative potential of the RA in the same way.

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