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Brief report

# Making sense of a foreign culture through technology: Triggers, mechanisms, and introspective focus in newcomers' blogs

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the blogs of newcomers to Canada to investigate the role of blogging in newcomers' efforts to make sense of a foreign culture. We describe the phenomenon of sensemaking in blogging and identify triggers, mechanisms, and introspective focus of cultural sensemaking in newcomers' blogs. Our study contributes to research on intercultural learning by supporting the argument that blogs are a promising site for intercultural studies. We also extend this discussion by demonstrating that sensemaking in and through blogging is an important phenomenon deserving study as a research subject and showing that (1) newcomers use blogs to make sense of discrepancies triggered by experiences, observation of patterns and temporal milestones, (2) newcomers make sense through self-debating, making comparisons to the home country, sequencing, and reflecting on information-gathering, and (3) bloggers focus introspection during sensemaking on their thoughts and emotions.

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## 1. Introduction

Individuals living and working outside of their home countries must adjust to different cultures (Farh, Bartol, Shapiro, & Shin, 2010). The Migration Policy Institute (2013) estimates that there are currently 232 million migrants worldwide, and Finaccord (2014) estimates that there are over 50 million expatriates. To adjust to their new environments and go about their everyday lives with relative comfort and ease (Farh et al., 2010; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008; Ward, Okura, Kennedy, & Kojima, 1998), these individuals must learn how to adjust to new cultures and competently interact with culturally different others (Gudykunst, 1998).

Intercultural learning, a critical component of adjustment, has long been the focus of study in the fields of intercultural relations and cross-cultural management (e.g. Taylor, 1994; Rosenblatt, Worthley, & MacNab, 2013). Scholars, educators and practitioners across various disciplines have increasingly focused on approaches for developing cross-cultural and intercultural skills (Eisenberg, Härtel, & Stahl, 2013) and there is a growing recognition that intercultural experience leads to learning only when learners are able to make sense of their experiences (Deardorff, 2006; Deardorff, 2011; Ng, Van Dyne, & Ang, 2009; Cseh, Davis, & Khilji, 2013). In this study, we build from research that suggests that introspective journaling

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facilitates sensemaking and learning (Nardon et al., 2015; Bolton, 2010; Gray, 2007) to explore cultural sensemaking in introspective blog posts by newcomers to Canada.

Reliance on communication technologies is changing the way individuals experience and learn about other cultures (Cox, 2004; Kim & McKay-Semmler, 2013; Ogan & Ozakca, 2010; Pfister & Soliz, 2011; Shuter, 2011, 2012). We explore how newcomers' blogging supported their efforts to make sense of a foreign culture and we identify triggers, mechanisms, and introspective foci in their narratives about intercultural experiences. Our study contributes to studies of intercultural learning by supporting the argument that blogs are a promising site for intercultural studies (Takeda, 2013) and demonstrating that sensemaking in and through blogging is an important phenomenon deserving study as a research subject.

## 2. Introspective narrative and cultural sensemaking

Intercultural learning requires that individuals make sense of ambiguous cultural experiences (Deardorff, 2006; Deardorff, 2011; Ng et al., 2009; Cseh et al., 2013), which arise from a lack of cultural knowledge (Gudykunst, 1998, 2005; Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008). Sensemaking organizes understandings of cause and effect, allowing individuals to construct interpretations of why things turned out differently than they expected and what should be done as a result, thereby influencing subsequent actions (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is often instigated by a discrepancy (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994) or a surprise (Louis, 1980) and involves asking, "What's going on here?" and "What should I do?" (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

Narrative has long been viewed as an essential component of sensemaking (Polkinghorne, 1988). As Weick (1995) explains, sensemaking is "similar to a good story that holds disparate elements together long enough to energize and guide action plausibly enough to allow people to make retrospective sense of whatever happens" (p. 61). Introspective narratives, stories that examine one's mental and emotional processes, are storied ways of knowing (Gergen & Gergen, 1997), through which stimuli and experiences are interpreted and allow newcomers to give meaning to their experiences with a foreign culture (Scurry, Rodriguez, & Bailouni, 2013). Research suggests that introspective journaling can help individuals cope with feelings of discomfort, unsettlement and confusion that emerge in intercultural experiences and facilitate a sense of coherence through organizing, clarifying and sequencing thoughts (Nardon et al., 2015; Bolton, 2010; Gray, 2007). This suggests that introspective narration in and through journaling may facilitate cultural sensemaking.

## 3. Blogging to make sense of foreign cultures

Communication technology has precipitated the emergence of 'public' journaling through blogs (Bell, 2007; Roldan & Shirani, 2009). A blog is a website or part of a website where people post writing and images on a regular basis, in a storytelling fashion, usually in reverse chronological order, and where readers can respond by posting comments and links to other blogs (Du & Wagner, 2006). Blogs typically provide narrative accounts of their authors' opinions, experiences and interpretations.

Observation and research suggest that newcomers are using blogging to communicate and access social support (Nardon, Aten & Gulanowski, 2015; Chu, Kwan & Warning, 2012; Takeda, 2013). Blogs provide a venue through which newcomers can give narrative accounts of their experiences and interpretations of everyday events, recording what they noticed and experienced as discrepancies. Research shows that blogging has facilitated adjustment to a variety of life transitions (Kralik, Visentin, & van Loon, 2006), including adjustment to foreign cultures (Chu et al., 2012). Unlike narrative accounts in private journals, blogs allow narratives and the processes and resolutions of sensemaking to be disseminated to a large, public audience, which can contribute resources to support further sensemaking such as information and interpretations (Nardon et al., 2015). Although research is limited, one study of students found that public blogs are more effective at facilitating learning than private blogs (Roldan & Shirani, 2009), suggesting that public blogging may provide even greater benefit than private journals for sensemaking and learning about foreign cultures. Research, however, has paid little attention to newcomers' blogging (Takeda, 2013).

## 4. Research approach

We explored newcomers' blog posts about the cultural surprises and discrepancies they encountered in their host countries. We focused on 207 posts in 17 blogs, which are a subset of a data set collected to understand how newcomers to Canada used blogging technology (Nardon et al., 2015). Table 1 summarizes our data collection and reduction steps. We began, in April 2012, with a key word search in [technorati.com](http://technorati.com)<sup>1</sup> resulting in 236 blogs. We then eliminated duplicates; non-English language blogs and blogs not related to living abroad (18 blogs). We then extended the data set; identifying additional blogs through a snowball search of the blogrolls (44). We then coded the "about this blog" pages and selected blogs that focused on the experience of living in Canada (24). We read the 24 blogs and collected 945 posts about living in Canada; immigration; and Canadian culture. We eliminated blogs with less than 10 relevant posts; blogs written prior to the bloggers' arrival and blogs that focused on providing personal information about the blogger; targeted to family members rather than the blogging community. We retained posts that focused on the bloggers' experiences in the foreign environment

<sup>1</sup> A now defunct search engine specializing in searches of blogs.

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