



Alien at home: Adjustment strategies of students returning from a six-months over-sea's educational programme[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses German students' adjustment strategies after a six months expeditionary learning programme on high seas with intercultural encounters in Cuba and Costa Rica. A postal survey ($N = 128$, global response quote $r_g = .44$) has been conducted with students having returned from four separate learning expeditions from 2008 to 2012. The students reports were coded in five categories, i.e. (1) reintegration narratives (RN), (2) perception of schooling (PoS), (3) self-perception (SP), (4) perceived programme effects (PPE), and (5) social context (SC), which were also quantified on a 5-point Likert-scale. By means of principal components analyses (PCA) and polynomial interpolation (PI), we searched into underlying distribution patterns in the categories. No significant differences were found with respect to gender in the four groups in a one-way ANOVA. However, significant differences with respect to (4) self-perception (SP) and perceived programme effects (PPE) can be referred to group 3. This accords well with the findings of the PCA and PI, which corroborate a U-curve with its apex after eight months at home. It can be shown that all four cohorts show symptoms of expedition reverse culture shock, which indicates that pedagogical intervention also after the cruise may be undertaken.

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1. The “KUS-Projekt”. A “classroom under sails”

1.1. KUS in the context of international student expeditions and exchange programming in Germany

In recent years, there had been a vivid discourse on international student exchange programming with special interest on intercultural learning in a globalized world. For example, a New Zealand based research group names “exposure to a different culture or language” and “the chance to see if you would like to live and work overseas” as the two predominant motives of students to apply for an international student exchange (Doyle et al., 2010, p. 479).

In the UK, international educational expeditions to promote science among students started in 1932 when the Public Schools Exploring Society (known today as British Schools Exploring Society (BSES)-Expeditions) ran its first expedition

[☆] Author sequence according to the “sequence-determines-credit” approach (SDC). The sequence of authors reflects the declining importance of their contribution, as suggested by previous authors (Hunt, 1991; Tscharnke, Hochberg, Rand, Resh, & Krauss, 2007).

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to Finland (Allison, Stott, Felter, & Beames, 2011). “In the UK, there are now more organisations providing educational expeditions for young people as school vacation or gap year experiences than ever before” (Stott, Allison, & Von Wald, 2013, p. 149).

In Germany, international adventurous expeditions have been run as early as 1925, when two teachers from Kurt Hahn’s boarding school “Salem”, Marina Ewald and Otto Baumann, took twenty pupils on a four week school expedition to Finland (Veevers & Allison, 2011). This expedition had no other goal than to master “a long and hazardous expedition” (Hahn, 1930, cited by Veevers & Allison, 2011, p. 11).

However, such international youth expeditions are not very popular in Germany any longer. The vast majority of international youth programming is organized as (1) student exchange with accommodation in guest families, (2) mutual youth-groups visiting programmes, (3) project-oriented cultural youth-exchange, and (4) multinational work-camps (Thomas, 2010, p. 20).

In a substantive survey searching into biographical long-term effects of such international student programmes Thomas, Chang, and Abt (2007) included $N=589$ questionnaires into their data processing. 51% of those students reported that the international experience was a “fitting piece in their biography”, described by the authors as a biographical “mosaic-effect”. For 31% of those 589 students, the experiences abroad gave even impulses for many more positive events and activities (“domino-effect”). 12% described no further effects, but found the experience valuable (“nice-to-have-effect”). Only 7% portrayed the experience as a turning-point, an escape from the known and familiar (turning-point-effect). Interestingly, none of those latter 41 respondents connotes negative consequences to their biographical break-over (Thomas et al., 2007, p. 132) and all claim a strong increase in self-competences (Thomas, 2010, p. 22).

In the following, we will present data from an international youth project, the “KUS-Projekt” (Dettweiler & Kugelmann, 2010; Dettweiler, Kugelmann, & Streifinger, 2011), an expeditionary learning programme on high seas, which was accredited as pilot project for an alternative “year abroad” by German school authorities in 2007.

1.2. Organizational aspects and the programme’s goals

Every year, the traditional sailing vessel Thor Heyerdahl sets sail as an educational institution for 32 boys and girls aged 14–16. The “KUSis”¹ are all German, most of them even come from the same area of the country, they all attend the same type of school (Gymnasium = high school), have nearly the same age and come from very similar family backgrounds, which is academic upper middle class. They have to cover the costs themselves, but there are possibilities to get stipends. With KUS, the youths follow the lead of great explorers like Alexander von Humboldt and Christopher Columbus. They sail from Germany via the Canary Islands into the New World. There, the youngsters explore countries of the Caribbean and the Americas during several weeks of layover, where they live with local host-families and attend local schools, but they never leave their “home-base”, the Thor Heyerdahl, longer than two weeks. The voyage home leads them back to Germany via the Bermudas and Azores where the focus lies on on-board schooling and personal development (Merk, 2006).

During their six months on board, the students responsibly participate in ship operations, explore foreign countries and cultures, and attend school on shore as well as at sea. On board, they follow a rigid regimen of watch duty and schooling. Due to the particular challenges on board and on shore, they develop personal and social skills (Dettweiler et al., 2011; Kugelmann & Lauterbach, 2011), since the voyage requires mastering new life situations that demand autonomous decision-making. The exceptional framework conditions of the project provide first-hand experience and adventure. The objectives of KUS are effective gender mainstreaming, to strengthen young individuals’ autonomy, initiative taking, and sense of responsibility, as well as to prepare the girls and boys equally for the demands of a complex and globalized world (cf. Dettweiler & Kugelmann, 2010; Kugelmann & Lauterbach, 2011).

According to the analysis of the students’ diaries and the board-logs, the four cruises, undertaken from 2008 to 2012, are very constant in their core objective parameters, such as pedagogical setting, crew number, general weather conditions, selection process of the students, travel route, etcetera (Kugelmann & Lauterbach, 2011). However, cruise 1 was conducted on another vessel, the Maria Maris, due to a delay in the wharf, and cruise 3 was accompanied by a camera team that produced a documentary television series, which was broadcasted nation-wide.

However, the programme ends with the return and there was no formal pedagogical concept offered following up on the re-entry phase has been offered to those students participating in our survey. Our findings challenge this *tacit* understanding of solely positive effects and support instead Kevin Gaw’s concept of “reverse culture shock” (Gaw, 2000, see below).

2. The concept of (expedition) reverse culture shock

2.1. U-curve vs. UU (W)-curve models or culture vs. reverse culture shock

The concepts of culture shock, respectively reverse culture shock, have been discussed as resembling U-respectively UU (W)-runs of a curve. Hereby, culture shock describes the outgoing phase including the return home (the “first U”), and reverse culture shock the adjustment phase at home (the “second U”, mostly referred to as UU-curve or W-curve).

¹ This is the term the students have given themselves.

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