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THE ASTONISHMENT REPORT:
A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL
TO ASSIST STUDENTS IN LEARNING FROM THEIR
INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

INTRODUCTION

This article describes a pedagogical tool that we have developed to help our students learn more effectively from their international experience in a university or company abroad. We require our students to write a reflective assignment, called an “astonishment report,” to enhance the value of their mandatory study or work in a foreign country. We have designed this learning tool as part of our work as faculty advisors at ESC Clermont Graduate School of Management in Clermont-Ferrand, France. The programs at our business school are driven by a mission statement that incorporates internationalization as a core vision for our students: “We educate students to be competent, open-minded, and responsible managers, to take risks, to innovate, and to work in a borderless context.”

All students in the main Master in Management degree program at ESC Clermont must reach a satisfactory linguistic competence level in English and one other foreign language. We have previously demonstrated how language learning is embedded into our curriculum (Bryant, Sheehan, and Vigier). In addition to taking business language classes on the home campus, all students must spend at least six months abroad either studying at a partner university or completing an internship in a company. Few students actually complete an internship abroad, mainly because companies post their vacancies with relatively short notice. For practical purposes, most students, therefore, prefer to study at a partner university for one semester for academic credit transfer or for one year to obtain a second Master’s qualification from the host university. The school has built a network of over a hundred partners in order to ensure that only small numbers of students, usually up to five maximum, study on the same campus at the same time. The aim is to facilitate local integration and combat the tendency to find comfort in spending time with other students from their home campus.

Students must complete the international experience using one or more of their foreign languages. This requirement of the degree program is recognized

as an essential part of educating future managers to work in a global context, to be able to cross borders, and to operate successfully in a foreign language in environments that are culturally different. This objective corresponds to numerous calls to ensure that management education produces graduates with the necessary human skills for the challenges of doing business in the new century (Porter and McKibbin; Bikson and Law; Pfeffer and Fong, “End” and “Business”; Friga et al.; Mintzberg; Bennis and O’Toole; Marschan et al.).

In recent years, concerns have also been expressed about what is actually happening in the experience abroad (Grünzweig and Rinehart). In some cases, students consider the study abroad experience as little more than an extended vacation period. As sophisticated consumers, they expect their home university to manage every aspect of the foreign stay, including the academic program, travel, housing, and insurance. And yet, with the rapid expansion of new technology and easy global communication, students may never actually leave their home environment while abroad. Through e-mail, the Internet, and cheap telephone calls such as Skype, students remain at home “virtually” and never really integrate into the host culture.

Given these sociological dimensions of our students’ behavior, mindset, and expectations, we have attempted to address the issue of learning abroad by developing a specific framework to facilitate significant learning. The aim is to transform the international experience by requiring students to complete the astonishment report assignment as a tool for guided learning. Before describing our approach, we will explore some of the literature on learning models, experiential learning, and intercultural competence.

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND LEARNING MODELS

Learning takes place in various educational settings, which, according to Michael Byram, are characterized by three different categories whereby both learners and teachers have different roles and relationships to one another. He refers to these different educational “locations” as the “classroom,” “fieldwork,” and “independent learning” (65–71) and depicts these locations in a model that indicates the involvement of both the learner (l) and the teacher (t) (73; see Figure 1).

classroom t and l	fieldwork (t) and l	independent learning l
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Figure 1. Byram’s learning model.

In this article, we limit our discussion to fieldwork, which best corresponds to the international education experience. For Byram, fieldwork is characterized by pedagogically structured activities that take place outside the classroom under a teacher's guidance and supervision. In our present research, this refers to periods of study or work abroad, where the contact with teachers is minimal. In this context, students develop their skills of interaction leading them to "discover and interpret new data" (68–69). When this process of refining data can be extended to the development of a new system for generalizing experience, true learning has occurred. What is important is not so much what has been *taught*, but what has been *learned*.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

For true learning to occur, the learner needs to go through some form of transformation. Amy Hunter, inspired by Jack Mezirow's (*Transformative*) theory of transformative learning as a meaning-making process, distinguishes between developing *meaning schemes* and *meaning perspectives* in the context of international education. *Meaning schemes* include specific attitudes, beliefs, and values while *meaning perspectives* encompass broader philosophical viewpoints (Mezirow, "Contemporary"). Learning implies normative and transformative development. Normative development comes about when a student integrates information from a new experience into an existing *meaning scheme*. On the other hand, transformative development occurs when learners are confronted with an experience that leads them to review their worldviews, thereby altering their perspectives. Transformation in an individual's *meaning perspective* therefore takes place when there has been a shift in the underlying philosophy behind one's principles, beliefs, and attitudes, and when one's assumptions have been re-examined (Hunter).

The Transformation Process and Otherness

The transformation process begins with a *disorienting dilemma* (Hunter; Mezirow, *Transformative*) such as a problem to solve, an issue to deal with, or a challenge to confront. The international experience places our students in such a situation. In normative developmental learning, this process takes place gradually and learners may not necessarily be aware that this growth is occurring. In contrast, transformative learning requires a conscious effort on the part of the student to react to the dilemma in such a way as to provide a learning experience. Individuals' transformative learning experiences have been referred to as *constructive engagement with otherness* (Daloz 110), *trigger events* (Janet Bennett 19), *disequilibrium* (Savicki, "Experiential" 88) and

disorienting dilemma (Hunter 95, adapted from Mezirow, *Transformative*). When we meet people from a different culture, we are also confronted with “the hidden assumptions” of a “person’s worldview” (Shaules 90–91). Milton Bennett (“Development” and “Towards Ethnorelativism”) has conceptualized a phenomenological model that describes a “successful learning outcome in terms of how a traveler’s worldview is modified by coming into contact with other worldviews” (Shaules 91). Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) describes a series of stages that learners go through as their own worldview is adjusted after coming into contact with new phenomena (Milton Bennett, “Development” and “Towards Ethnorelativism”). The six stages of Bennett’s intercultural sensitivity model move from ethnocentric to ethnorelative: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. Milton Bennett and colleagues (Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman) expanded on this approach to create a psychometric instrument, the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), which attempts to measure the level of intercultural sensitivity of a particular individual. Robert Selby discusses the transformation process of international education in terms of individual development and a questioning of one’s own core values and identity, while Byram uses the term *le regard croisé* (66).

INCORPORATING TRANSFORMATION INTO INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

In our business school we prepare students to become global citizens who can better interact with the rest of the world. Hunter suggests four different philosophical orientations toward student learning that she believes should be included in pedagogy to ensure the highest potential of transformative development: humanism, behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism. Out of these four models, constructivism is the most relevant for our present purpose. In the theory of constructivism, learning is an active social process by which individuals construct meaning from their own experiences (105). As students incorporate their new experiences into their existing internal representations, learning will reframe the way students view the world. Selby contrasts didactic instruction with experiential learning that “tends to ground one’s perspective somewhere else and provide external feedback, enabling one to see things, even oneself, through the eyes of others” (4). Experiential learning is a continuous cycle grounded in experience. It is a holistic process in which one adapts to new environments and worldviews. With a concrete experience as the starting point, individuals move through different phases in which they observe and reflect, form generalized concepts, and test these concepts in new situations (Kolb).

Hunter suggests three components to include in educational curricula to help prepare students for transformative learning: critical reflection, discourse, and action (98). She distinguishes between three types of reflection: “content reflection” refers to remembering the details or the chronology of an experience, while “process reflection” concentrates on solving a problem or handling feelings or emotions. The type of reflection that is the most critical for transformation is “premise reflection” (98). Inspired by Mezirow’s (*Transformative*) theories, she argues that “[p]remise reflection requires learners to evaluate and explore their long-standing, culturally constructed attitudes, values, and beliefs in the face of new and unfamiliar experiences” (98–99). Discourse, the second component of transformative growth, enables students to engage in a specific type of critical dialogue involving discussion about the world around them in “a nonjudgmental way” (99). Finally, within the action component of transformative learning, Hunter elaborates on the concepts of *conscientization*, or *consciousness-raising* proposed in 1970 by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Hunter argues that “transformation occurs as learners participate in an ongoing cycle of reflecting, acting on one’s insights from reflection, then critically reflecting again on that action” (99–100).

APPLICATIONS TO ENHANCE GROWTH AND TRANSFORMATION IN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Several approaches have been suggested to help students reflect upon their experiential learning abroad (Deardorff’s OSEE Tool, and Hess’s “Action-Reflection-Response” pathway using Kolb’s findings). Given the research findings on learning from experience, and more particularly, learning from international experience, we have introduced a pedagogical tool to assist students in their learning. This is based on Janet Bennett’s DIE model (Bennett, Bennett, and Stillings), which provides a structured approach to learning from experience. The DIE (Description-Interpretation-Evaluation) process involves first a description of an event in an objective way, followed by an interpretation of the possible reasons for the new experiences students encounter. They are then expected to make a personal evaluation of their reactions to the various cultural differences from a cognitive, affective, and behavioral perspective.

STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES IN THEIR INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

We have set several objectives for our students in their international experience. On the cognitive level, they learn about new cultures, new ideas, new management practices, and new ways of learning. On the affective level, they

develop their intercultural managerial skills to enable them to transcend borders and face the challenges of global business. They are given opportunities to enhance and improve skills such as flexibility, adaptability, and empathy. Through this international experience, students undergo considerable personal development. On the behavioral level, they improve their competence in communication, teamwork building, and interacting with people of diverse backgrounds. They also improve their language fluency, which is an important objective since languages are an integral part of the business studies at the French *Grandes Écoles de Management* (Bryant).

However, as we have noted above in the literature review, learning does not just happen: it needs structuring. We therefore require all students who study abroad to submit an assignment that we call an astonishment report—in French this is a *rapport d'étonnement*.

THE ASTONISHMENT REPORT

In some companies, the human resource management departments ask newly recruited employees to write a report after their first few weeks at work. In this way top management uses the newcomer to get a fresh perspective on how the company is operating. The outsider's view can enable the insider to see things differently. More importantly, the company management also aims to develop the employee's curiosity and capacity to be surprised. Successful companies build on a culture of continuous improvement where quality is not a goal, but a process (Goldratt and Cox).

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Japanese used a similar tool when they sent their executives out to explore new markets. These expatriates were told to collect information on different, exciting, and unusual aspects of the new culture where they were living. They were required to write a report on everything that had surprised them during their stay abroad. The resulting astonishment reports helped companies prepare their strategies for entering new markets. Through this process of observation and reflection, companies developed new products and new services for markets that they recognized as very different from their home environment.

At our university, we decided to use the astonishment report format and the DIE approach for our students as part of the academic requirements of their study or work abroad. This assignment has turned out to be a very useful exercise to encourage students to move from the cognitive stage of observing and recognizing new phenomena in their host environment towards a deeper reflection on their experience. Before going abroad, students are given clear

instructions on what is expected in an astonishment report. They must provide personal reflection on any aspect of their experience that has provoked surprise. In order to avoid a purely descriptive account with little personal analysis, students must write and submit early in their stay abroad a short practical guide of one or two pages. This mini-guide deals essentially with practical information for future students to improve their integration into daily life in the foreign environment. It includes advice such as adapting to campus life, dealing with academic issues, finding housing, and opening a bank account. In contrast to the mini-guide, the astonishment report needs to be approximately 2,500 to 3,000 words in length, although quality is preferred to quantity. The report must be written in the language of the host country or in the language in which the courses are delivered. Students are required to wait until the latter part of their international experience before handing in their report, which is then graded at the home institution. Evaluations are based on content and form, and academic credit is earned toward their final degree. In order to harmonize the academic assessments, we have developed a detailed list of rubrics for the astonishment report (see Appendix 1), which are distributed to the students before they go abroad. In this way, we ensure that our expectations are clear. The assessment criteria reflect the requirements for each grade in terms of language, intercultural awareness, and personal analysis.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

The astonishment report is intended to provoke curiosity. Students are rewarded for being inquisitive and for reacting to their environment. Through their descriptions and observations they develop a keen eye for distinctive features and customs in the host country, since we do not want our students to be satisfied with superficial and face-value observations. Therefore, we ask them to question their observations and do further research. They are encouraged to interact with the local population and try to understand the phenomena they observe. This also helps them to integrate into the local culture. Marjorie Gerber has developed a model that identifies the links between initial isolation, interaction, and integration. Students can overcome some of their feelings of isolation by meeting and interacting with local people while undertaking research for their astonishment report.

Students also develop a deeper awareness of their own experience as they work on their report. They gain better understanding of the new culture in which they are studying.

“I think I found a pretty good reason in order to explain why the people are so cool and easy going in Australia compared to people in France and more generally in Europe. People in Australia are always looking to the future....” (student in an internship in Australia)

They make a positive attempt to understand and interpret their observations.

“Who are the Americans? Comparing the two countries is difficult, mainly because there are various ‘France’s’ like various ‘US’s.’” (student on study abroad in the USA)

As they reflect on their observations and experience they learn to take a personal standpoint. They understand their own culture better and in this way their self-awareness increases.

“I was the ‘black’ person. It was the first time I had been in the position of being part of a minority. While I was in France I had never had this feeling before; it had never crossed my mind. Now, I really know more about myself and the French culture.” (student on study abroad in South Africa)

“From an academic point of view, I discovered a more problem-oriented and practical method of learning. From a social point of view, I realized that each culture had its assets and liabilities; yet I understood that a good mix of all these cultures could enable us to reach something higher.” (student on study abroad in Finland)

These sample quotes show that we are beginning to achieve one of our main objectives: to help students transform experience into learning and develop a new behavior toward “otherness.”

SOME ACHIEVEMENTS

By introducing the astonishment report as a compulsory assignment for all students during their international experience, we have improved the overall value of the learning process. Students realize before they leave home that they will have to do more than just bring back academic credit. The astonishment report helps them focus on observing and reflecting on their new environment during their entire stay at the host campus or in the company abroad. In this way, students become better integrated because they are required to interact with the local population, including academics, fellow-students, co-workers, and others.

As we expanded our international partnership network to fulfill our aim of sending only a few students to one campus, we were confronted with the problem of assessing the workload abroad. It became difficult to estimate the true worth of courses in a variety of different countries and at different levels of higher education. The astonishment report provides a single assessment measure for all students wherever they have studied. As a result, our own management faculty members have become more understanding about accepting academic credit obtained abroad through the international experience. Furthermore, there is a requirement put in place by our business school accreditation agencies to demonstrate how we are meeting our stated learning goals. As part of our future research, we intend to analyze the reports in more detail, with reference to the rubrics, to measure how far we are contributing positively to the program learning goals.

The astonishment report provides the basis for class discussion among students when they come back to our campus. We organize special debriefing sessions so that students have a forum where they can share their experiences with fellow students and with faculty members. Students can use the contents of their reports to transfer some of their experience to others and, more importantly, to discuss and defend in an oral format the ideas and reflections that they have already presented in written form.

Finally, the astonishment report plays a role in the students' professional business education. The observations and comments made by the students demonstrate how this exercise assists them in making sense of their experience. They cope better with the challenges of crossing into new territory and they learn to take advantage of the opportunities offered. They become better future managers, ready to do business in a global, borderless context.

APPENDIX 1 ASTONISHMENT REPORT

GUIDELINES FOR STUDENTS

Le rapport d'étonnement

Votre rapport écrit doit être structuré de la manière suivante:

- **Description objective** des choses qui vous ont étonné (maximum 600 mots).

- **Interprétation** sur le « pourquoi » de ces événements; **vous devez juxtaposer votre propre point de vue avec celui des gens du pays que vous connaissez.** Allez parler avec des membres de la famille d'accueil, des amis, des professeurs...
- **Recherche personnelle** pour mieux comprendre les enjeux (environ 1000 mots).
- **Évaluation et réflexion personnelle** (environ 1000 mots).

Structure du rapport:

1. Page de garde officielle
2. Sommaire
3. Introduction
4. Description objective
5. Interprétation
6. Évaluation et réflexion personnelle
7. Bibliographie et sources

Groupe ESC
CLERMONT
GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF MANAGEMENT



Rapport d'étonnement
Semestre d'étude à l'étranger
2008 / 2009

Annexes éventuels

TITRE DU RAPPORT

Réalisé par : Prénom Nom étudiant

A noter pour la mise en forme:

- Page de garde obligatoire (voir format de la Scolarité ci-joint)
- Pagination
- Nom en bas de chaque page
- Pas de photos

Université d'accueil :
Date du séjour :
Tuteur école :

Déposé le :

Longueur et langue:

- Entre 2500 et 3000 mots maximum, annexes à part.
- Dans la langue du pays ou dans certains cas dans la langue dans laquelle vous avez suivi les cours (aucun rapport en français, sauf pour ceux qui effectuent un semestre dans un pays francophone, par exemple le Maroc. Dans ce cas, vous devez obligatoirement joindre une page en anglais – un « Executive Summary »).

APPENDIX 2
RUBRICS FOR GRADING USING THE
EUROPEAN CREDIT TRANSFER SYSTEM (ECTS)*

GRADE	RUBRICS
A	<p>In-depth personal analysis of “what?” “why?” “how?”</p> <p>Interesting observations with interpretation</p> <p>Student has stood back and reflected on experience</p> <p>Pertinent comments</p> <p>Positive attitude</p> <p>Reasonably good use of English (clearly expressed for the most part, pleasant style)</p>
B	<p>An attempt to step back and reflect on experience and to understand foreign culture</p> <p>Personal account with interesting anecdotes</p> <p>Interesting observations although sometimes too descriptive and factual, not fully developed</p> <p>Not enough personal analysis provided</p> <p>Basically well written in English</p>
C	<p>Interesting comments and information</p> <p>Little or no personal analysis and/or interpretation of experience</p> <p>Too descriptive with factual points and statistics</p> <p>Good job in assimilating materials taken from outside sources</p> <p>Topical issues dealt with, but what is the link with the student’s own experience?</p> <p>Fairly well written in English</p>
D	<p>Insufficient in either language or contents, but not necessarily in both</p> <p>Either: a personal account with some reflections about experience but very poor use of English</p> <p>Or: satisfactory use of English but comments too descriptive with no personal analysis of observations</p> <p>Little interpretation of experience, little attempt to give personal reflection</p> <p>Perhaps not always written in student’s own words</p>

GRADE	RUBRICS
E	Borderline in language and contents Too descriptive: some downloading?? Minimal personal comments Student seems somewhat detached from the experience Points not developed from a personal point of view Personal observations and comments only alluded to, the rest remains more like a research project
Rewrite	No personal reflection or analysis Downloaded passages Poor use of English

* European Credit Transfer System (ECTS)

ECTS Grade	Definition
A	EXCELLENT - outstanding performance with only minor errors
B	VERY GOOD - above the average standard but with some errors
C	GOOD - generally sound work with a number of notable errors
D	SATISFACTORY - fair but with significant shortcomings
E	SUFFICIENT - performance meets minimum criteria
FX	FAIL - some more work required before the credit can be awarded
F	FAIL - considerable further work is required

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