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Original Research

Culture shock and student engagement

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This paper explores research into how to get foreign students studying overseas engaged with their work and how to deal with psychological difficulties in their new environment which can affect the quality of their studies. The paper is based on a presentation to HEURO (The Association of Higher Education European Officers) at a conference on the topic of Re-imagining Mobility for the Post-Pandemic World. The paper discusses how our understanding of international cultures needs to change, the difficulties faced by foreign students settling into another country, the impact of culture shock and how to deal with it and how to manage when faced with reverse culture shock when returning to your own country.

KEYWORDS: *culture shock, student engagement, cultural due diligence, study abroad, intercultural awareness*

1. INTRODUCTION

We are living in a new world in which all the world's cultures are open to us. As Wilber (2007) points out, because of breakthroughs in global telecommunications and social media, knowledge is now global – knowledge, experience, wisdom, and reflection are open to study by all. However, students are still pursuing their university studies abroad and experiencing the difficulties of adapting to their new environment while completing their studies successfully (Mouhoubi-Messadh & Khaldi, 2022). Living in another country has been made more difficult by the pandemic, climate change and by international disagreement affecting visas and ease of travel but a new paradigm has opened. Faced with the threat of climate change and world pandemic and with the huge spread of in-

ternational communication via social media and information and communications technology, we are entering a new paradigm (Tkachenko & Khukhlaev, 2022). We are inhabitants of one planet, members of one species with diverse expression, facing common problems which eventually will determine our survival. How do we incorporate this new cultural paradigm into our teaching?

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
2.1. A new cultural paradigm

First, what is a paradigm and how does it apply to culture? Kuhn (1962), in his ground-breaking and influential work into the structure of scientific thinking defined a paradigm as *'an epistemological world view that assigns and limits the accessibility of theories, concepts,*

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models and methods of enquiry' (Kuhn, 1962, p. 33). Bennett (2020), the cultural studies writer and trainer, stressed the importance of a new constructive paradigm in cultural studies recognising the importance of humility (one culture is not better than another), tolerance, respect, awareness of what brings us together and areas of difference and empathy, seeking mutual understanding. He compared this constructivist paradigm with what he described as the cultural conflict of our age between the Newtonian universalist paradigm and the Einstein relativistic paradigm. The Newtonian universalist paradigm, named after the British scientist Isaac Newton, who discovered the principle of gravity, posits that facts exist objectively and focuses on objective evidence of what happens and encourages balanced objective reporting. The universalist paradigm conflicts with the Einstein relativistic paradigm. Named after the discoverer of relativity, it posits that fasts exist only in context, and focuses on narrative, the manipulation of arguments to create a powerful narrative and the proliferation of what we describe as 'fake news' and 'disinformation' depending on the subjectivity of the narrative (Bennett, 2020).

How does a constructive paradigm apply to the study of culture in language learning and training? There are five key points.

2.2. Perception and harmonisation
As researchers and teachers in intercultural studies, we need to recognise what brings us together, not the differences that might drive us apart. We need to recognise our tendency to see the world through our own filters, and often we are not aware of what that filter is. Put a card showing the number 9 between two people. The person standing at the foot of the card will see the number 9 but the person at the top of the card will see it as the number 6. In other words, the same card seen from different angles may mean something completely different. If we can be aware of our *own* filters (how we see things) and also be aware of the *other's* filters (variations in the way others see things), we have a much

better perception and a better chance of harmonising our views and behaviours (Hanukaev, 2022). We need to recognise that we are one planet, one species with a diversity of beliefs and ways of behaving and we need to focus on what joins us together, not what drives us apart (Swallow, 2020). Too much of intercultural practice focuses on what keeps people apart.

2.3. People not cultures
As Dignen and Wollmann (2016) described it, you do business with people not cultures. This refers to the topic of essentialism, studied by Hua (2018). Essentialism describes the situation where everyone is reduced to their national cultural profile, which inevitably leads to the danger of stereotyping (Grigoryev, 2022). People are influenced by a number of factors which we can broadly describe as their nationality, their region, their job, their own social background, and their personal experience. We are all influenced by culture, but not just national culture, and our job is to break through the cultural differences to the person themselves and what they are like and having perceived that to find harmony with it. If we can teach that, we have achieved something important.

2.4. Concepts not countries
Much of intercultural training focuses on concepts evolved by theorists such as Hall (1960), Hofstede (1984), Trompenaars (1996), Lewis (2019) and Meyer (2014). Each of these has developed intercultural concepts of tremendous value to researchers, teachers, and trainers and each has attributed each concept to a range of countries. This is undoubtedly a useful shorthand, but it is no longer relevant. In a multinational community in a globalised economy, national differences are no longer definitive ways of describing individuals, if they ever were (Malyuga et al., 2016). The concepts, however, derived from the study of intercultural communities are extremely useful.

Let us take the example of Richard Lewis, Chair of Richard Lewis Communications, and author of When Cultures Collide (Lewis, 2018) as well as many other books. As a leading international intercultural trainer and language teacher he runs courses for international political and commercial organisations and has noted how being born into one nationality doesn't mean you behave according to the concepts applied to that nationality. The Lewis model divides people according to how they see their use of time (following the work of Hall, 1984). Lewis (2018) identified three key areas –

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linear-actives, multi-actives, and re-actives. Linear-actives do things according to timetable, deliver on time and plan ahead. Multi-actives focus on priorities (often personal) and their timetables can alter according to those priorities. They may do many things at the same time, which can lead to delays which are frustrating to partners, particularly linear-actives, until they understand the diverse principles at play and learn how to get the results they need. Re-actives are people who value silence and reflection before reaction. This means contact and agreement may take longer than elsewhere.

Lewis (2018) gave delegates on his courses a test before they began work to identify their dominant style. He found that even in courses with people from the same nationality the course delegates represented different styles and attitudes, some being linear-active, some being multi-active and some being re-active. In other words, your nationality does not define your values and attitudes or how you behave.

So, the conclusion is, use the concepts, which are useful observations of the diversity of human behaviour, but don't assume a French, or a German, or a Russian or a Japanese student will necessarily conform to a national attribution. A useful shorthand but not to be applied rigidly.

2.5. Do your cultural due diligence

Due diligence is an accounting term. It describes the assessment of the financial feasibility of a potential business partner prior to agreement to a joint venture or merger and acquisition. Lewis (2018) argues the importance of cultural due diligence, examining the expectations and operational management of a potential partner. This process can really develop the perception and harmony between new partners. Failure to do so can lead to disaster.

The features to study in the cultural due diligence process are the partner's/participant's expectations of the relationship, their communication style and how they manage themselves. Tomalin and Nicks (2014)

have broken this down into five categories under the acronym ECOLE: E = Expectations; C = Communication style; O = Organisation (time, team, and routines); L = Leadership style (management style, decision making and diversity management); E = Etiquette (how to show politeness, dress code, gift giving and hospitality). Our job is to identify our own styles, compare it with the style of the people we are dealing with and how to harmonise the relationship to get results (Tomalin & Nicks, 2013). This paper will suggest classroom activities for achieving this in Section 5.

2.6. Develop your multicultural qualities

It is not enough to think who 'we' are and who 'they' are. Our job is to think of 'us' as a unit with core interests in common and to manage diversity of expectations, communication, and behaviour to develop an agreed common approach. The European Union has taken a key interest in this and in 2009 published its INCA project research, developed by Professor Michael Byram of Durham University in the UK, a noted intercultural analyst. Byram (2014) developed his Intercultural Assessment profile at three levels – Basic, Intermediate and Full – each stage describing the qualities to be achieved at each level. In doing so he identified 6 key intercultural skills: (1) tolerance of ambiguity; (2) behavioural flexibility; (3) communicative awareness; (4) knowledge discovery; (5) respect for otherness; and (6) empathy.

These six pieces of advice can help improve your relationships with those you are dealing with internationally and for teachers of intercultural relations and language a useful classroom exercise is to ask which qualities participants feel they have developed and which they need to work on. These qualities can be defined as multiculturality skills and will be explained in detail and in Section 5.

2.7. Local language

One way to build empathy is to learn a few words and expressions in the language of the person you are dealing with. Even ten words or expressions, showing familiarity and appreciation of the language of the person you are working with, can improve relationships and is not difficult to do (Vishnyakova & Vishnyakova, 2022). However, our work with overseas students studying in university colleges in London in the UK has shown there are a few issues discouraging students from intercultural integration and affecting their commitment to and success in their university courses.

3. ISSUES OF STUDYING ABROAD

Based on our experience of teaching in the UK and in Europe we identified several issues faced by foreign students abroad. Some were language students, but others were university students or professionals living and studying abroad for periods from three weeks up to a year or more. The key issues identified were distance from the study centre, living with a family, mixing with others, understanding your teacher, not mixing with other nationalities, burnout, and culture shock. In this section we discuss each issue in turn and suggest solutions.

Distance. Some students overseas are allocated places in an educational establishment's hall of residence, but others may find themselves on the outskirts of the town where their college is situated. The difficulties of transport and the time it takes means students do not feel able to join with other students after class or to take part in student clubs or the student union and as a result they feel isolated and lonely and not part of the student community.

Living with a family. This ought to be a wonderful opportunity to get to know people personally and integrate the local community but sometimes the student just gets a room and meals but no real social contact with the family. Students sit in their rooms and on weekends are left on their own and feel very lonely.

I don't mix easily. As a result of the above many students don't socialise with their classmates or fellow students and they feel excluded.

I don't understand my teacher. This a common problem, addressed by Yuges (2020). Students speak and write the language to the required standard but have difficulty with the delivery of lecturers who speak very fast and in unfamiliar accents. They also use humour students don't understand and acronyms without explanations.

My nationality only. Where there are many students of one nationality they sometimes don't mix outside their group. Many students revise in national groups, sit together in class and experience difficulty in working with other nationalities.

Burnout. Burnout is common among students working extremely hard, leading to late delivery or non-delivery of assignments and poor marks in exams. Students suffering from burnout can withdraw from their studies altogether.

Culture shock and reverse culture shock. Culture shock is a state that occurs among students living abroad where they feel they don't fit in, they feel de-

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pressed, they miss their family and friends, and it affects the quality of their work. The stages and treatment of culture shock will be discussed below.

Despite the pressure of time, class size and curriculum, teachers need to try and find the time to address and respond to the needs of students overseas who need support. Just taking students aside during breaks can be an effective way of checking on what might be causing problems and holding them back. It may be helpful to consider referring them to the college pastoral officer or even the student representative if you feel they can help. Simply, showing personal interest and concern can often be all that is needed to restore students' engagement and commitment to their studies.

Another issue raised above was the teacher's classroom management. Using the four-point ARCS model for developing motivation (Keller, 2010), Min and Chon (2021) at Hanjany University in South Korea analysed student responses to their teacher's classroom management. ARCS stands for: A = Attention getting; R = Relevance promoting; C = Confidence Building; S = Satisfaction-generating. They devised a questionnaire based on the ARCS which they distributed to 246 high school students and 12 teachers in South Korea. The results are interesting. Many students referred to their teachers' non-communicative style creating 'sleep-inducing' conditions. Many felt that their teachers tended to focus on the more proficient students in their classes. As a result, lower-level students felt apathetic and demotivated. The authors suggest that knowing the students' personal motivations and giving them greater control of their learning may help weaker students. Another factor was that some students interpreted 'relevance promoting' differently to their teachers. There was a lack of 'motive-matching'.

The research showed that teachers tended to focus on academic motivation, achieving college entrance, while many of the students were focused on vocational goals. Students also noticed failures in attention-getting due to there being no changes in lesson presentation

style and content. The use of mixed media, using videos, pictures and print to illustrate lectures and offer a different approach that involves students is important as is personal interaction through pair and groupwork. Above all, where possible, invite students to share their own experiences, in relation to the topic being presented.

4. DEALING WITH CULTURE SHOCK AND REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK

Everyone living or spending time in another country is likely to experience culture shock at some point and students studying overseas are no exception. Culture shock refers to disorientation experienced when suddenly subjected to an unfamiliar culture or way of life. The term was attributed to Oberg (1960), who identified four stages in the culture shock process: (1) honeymoon; (2) crisis (complaining about the new en-

vironment); (3) recovery (wanting things to be like they are at home; and (4) adjustment. Honeymoon refers to the pleasure and excitement of a new venture in a new destination. But after a while, some things begin to go wrong. This leads to complaints about the new environment and the locals' different ways of doing things. This leads in turn to Crisis, a longing for home and what the student abroad is used to and where they feel most comfortable. Home, as Storti (1997) defined it, is *'the place where you were born and raised, where people speak of your native language and behave more or less the way you do'* (Storti, 1997, p. 10). Finally, the student overseas finds ways of managing the new environment, building good relationships, and getting good results (Recovery leading to Adjustment). Oberg (1960) laid out his four stages as a U-curve, with Honeymoon and Adjustment at each end at the top and Crisis and Recovery at the bottom (Figure 1).
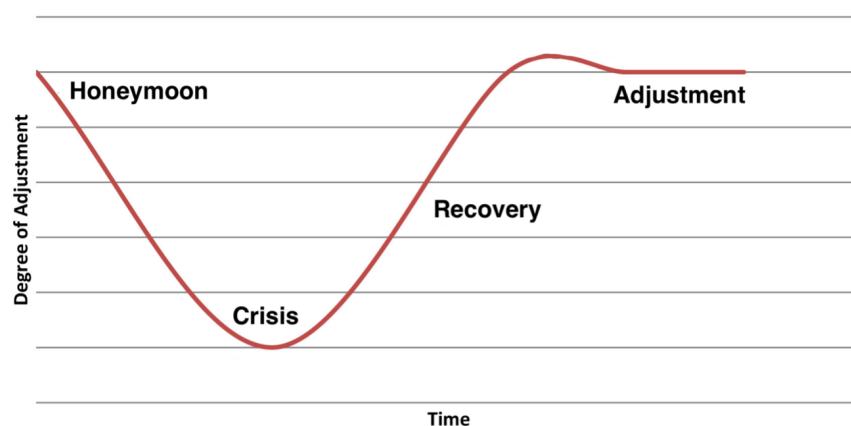

Figure 1. The culture shock U-curve

What happens during the culture shock process? When does it start and how long does it last? According to Oberg (1960), culture shock can take hold anytime from two weeks to six months in the new environment and the process can take six months to work through until a new equilibrium is established. It can start with something going wrong where you are starting, equipment not working, for example, and can progress into feeling there are too many things to learn and that it takes too long to learn them.

Culture shock can also be induced by loneliness, having no one to talk to about your problems, which can lead to rejection and regression until a new balance is established. It is a difficult and uncomfortable process with a noticeable effect on studies and on results.

In her book Breaking Through Culture Shock, Marx (2011) restated the stages of culture shock as Honeymoon, Culture shock, Recovery, Adaptation and Integration but said that each stage could recur many times. She presented Oberg's (1960) U-curve as a W-curve with each stage recurring (Figure 2). However, the dominant way of understanding the process of culture shock today is the paradigm called the DMIS Model presented by Bennett (1998). He introduced The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, DMIS for short, which presents culture shock as a process of development from ethnocentrism (being based mainly on our own culture and experience) to ethnorelativism (acceptance of and adaptation to the new environment). He divided the process into six stages and presented them in the paradigm (Figure 3).
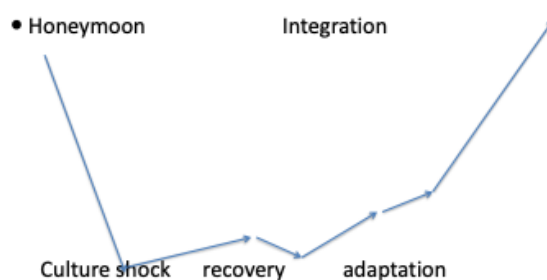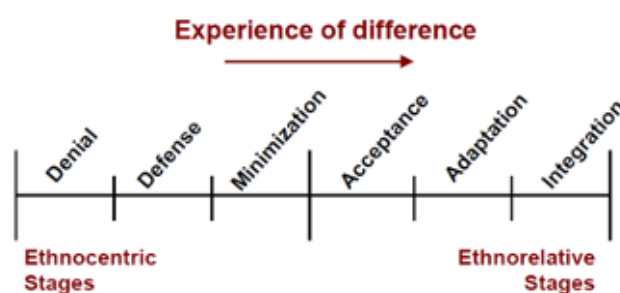
Figure 2. The culture shock W-curve

Figure 3. The DMIS paradigm

Stage 1, Denial, can mean you reject your new environment and embrace the environment you have left, or it can mean the opposite, you love your new environment so much, you reject your home environment.

Stage 2, Defence, is the stage where things begin to cause problems in the new environment and cause a withdrawal into yourself and your own home environment and your way of doing things at home. Alternatively, it can manifest as a love for your new environment to the degree that you reject contact with your home.

Stage 3, Minimisation, is the first part of the evolution process, refusing to accept any differences and just focusing what needs to be done and assuming everyone is the same and conforms to the same way of doing things.

Stage 4, Acceptance, is the breakthrough point where we accept the differences in expectations and the way people operate and is the first stage in moving from an essentially ethnocentric viewpoint to an appreciation of the new environment. This leads to a gradual process of Adaptation (Stage 5) and eventually Integration (Stage 6) into where you are living and working and feel like you belong.

Teachers and lecturers should recognise this process and help their students through the difficult process of adapting to a new environment where they can. But students can also be given preparation for what they might expect during their study period abroad and learn coping strategies to ease their adaptation.

First, teachers and lecturers can use workshops to explain what culture shock is and how it works and let students know what to expect. Secondly, they can advise students not to get too busy too quickly when they are abroad while they settle in. Also, it can help a lot if when students get depressed abroad, they can understand it's culture shock, like getting the flu. Tell them to take things a bit easier and not get stressed and if they need help, not to hesitate to ask.

While they are preparing to go abroad, get them to pack some favourite things, not just photos but maybe a duvet cover they like or a poster or favourite mug something else from their home that is easy to pack and gives them pleasure. When they are abroad, encourage them to find the equivalent of comfortable places in their own environment at home and visit them. Encourage them to do comfort activities and not to neglect any sports they play or regular exercise they do.

A lot of students, especially on language learning programmes abroad, cut off contact with their own country and language to immerse themselves in their new environment. Encourage them to network with home and friends, especially as Facebook, WhatsApp and other technologies have made it so much easier, quicker, and cheaper.

Finally, at an appropriate time remember to remind them that they will experience the same process once they return home. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students returning home from a study period abroad undergo even greater stress than they had going abroad in the first place, and this too can affect their engagement with their studies. Why? First, the student has changed. He or she has had new experiences, acquired new knowledge and finds it difficult to re-adapt even to a once familiar environment. In fact, depending on how long the student has been away the home environment may have changed – organisation and arrangements may be different and former friends may have drifted off in different directions while the student was away. Above all, students who have studied abroad for a while find people at home have little interest in their adventures abroad.

Reverse culture shock can be quite depressing, and students go through four stages. First is leave-taking and departure and second is the honeymoon stage, 'vacation land home' as Storti (1997) describes it. Stage 3 is the reverse culture shock stage when the student encounters difficulties he or she may not have expected on returning home and finally, the re-adjustment stage where they gradually re-integrate their home environment and learn to manage any changes in themselves, their environment and their friends and colleagues while they have been away.

Teachers and lectures can help the process of re-integration by advising students on how best to manage reverse culture shock. First and most important is not to lose contact with friends and family when abroad and equally to maintain contact with friends abroad after the student leaves. Taking the opportunity to say goodbye and to keep in touch is an important part of leave taking and departure. Also important is being in touch with family and friends at home so the student knows about changes and will be prepared for them on arrival. The honeymoon period is enjoying being home but also the student being aware that he or she may have matured by spending time abroad while those at home may not have. The key is to notice changes but not to judge. This is an important point for the teacher to emphasise.

Stage 3, the reverse culture shock stage, can leave students depressed and demotivated. They can feel marginalised. Therefore, it's important for the teacher or lecturer to give students who have studied for a time abroad an opportunity to share their experiences with their colleagues in class or in workshops. That way the students can feel their experience and opinions are recognised and they no longer feel marginalised and irrelevant. Giving students an opportunity to discuss their experiences abroad and to reflect on them is an important step in re-integration. Asa result, in the final stage of Re-adjustment the students feel they have achieved balance. They have re-established routines and adapted to new routines. Above all, they will feel engaged with their teachers, their friends and colleagues and their studies with a commitment to achieve better results.

5. ENCOURAGING INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS AND MAINTAINING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

In a global society all of us experience intercultural exchanges whether or not we have travelled or studied abroad. It is important as part of classroom activity to allow these experiences to be discussed, as they can support the students and increase their engagement with the course they are studying and get better results in their assignments or exams.

Using mixed media in the classroom. 'Open your books at page xx' is no longer sufficient to encourage student commitment, if it ever was. However, if you can find video clips to illustrate a particular point or stimulate discussion it will increase student involvement. Also, taking the opportunity to get students to research topics online using social media and discussing what they have discovered through mini-presentations or groupwork can really increase motivation (Smyshlyak, 2022). We live in an age of visual and social media. Bringing these into the classroom can create a livelier and more involving environment.

Using the critical incident technique (CIT). We all have experiences of intercultural diversity which can show misunderstandings which may happen in the way we communicate and how we behave. These encounters can be written down and presented to the class by the teacher or by students themselves as critical incidents. The critical incident can also be a photo, a newspaper headline or a video clip that promotes analysis and discussion. The Critical Incident Technique was introduced by a US psychologist John Flanagan in 1954. A written critical incident should be short – five or six lines and tell a story highlighting the difference the presenter wants to discuss. Here's an example.

X was living in France and was moving house. She needed some large cartons to store things for removal and went to her local supermarket and asked, 'Can I have some large cartons, please?' to her surprise and anger the response was 'Non' (no). She left and vowed

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never to shop in that supermarket again. The teacher or student reads out the critical incident and asks the class what they advise X to do and why. The class responds. At the end of the discussion the teacher or presenter can present their answer. In X's case the advice was simple. Don't just ask the question. Explain the situation. X understood, went back to the supermarket, and explained why she needed the empty cartons. The answer was once again 'Non' but followed by, 'But we have a delivery tomorrow so come back then and you can have all the empty cartons you need.' A simple misunderstanding resolved in a sentence. Collecting critical incidents should be part of teachers' and students' intercultural practice, allowing opportunities for presentation, analysis and increased engagement with the learning process.

The MBI process. A very important follow-up to the presentation of a critical incident is the MBI process. MBI stands for Map, Bridge, Integrate, a process introduced by Maznevski and Distefano (2000). Each has two stages. In Stage 1, Map, you observe what the other is doing and compare it with what you do in your own environment. In Stage 2, Bridge, you ask why they are behaving in this way and what they probably think of you. You use empathy to understand what is going on. In Stage 3, Integrate, you think what you need to change in your behaviour to get a successful result and decide what changes you need to make in what you say, what you do and what you think in future. The MBI process is an excellent technique to practise when using Critical Incident Technique.

INCA and multiculturality. In preparing the INCA programme, Byram (2014) identified six intercultural skills which promote international understanding and facilitate communication. The six skills are as follows.

1. Avoid othering. Be inclusive. Don't exclude people because you don't know them or because their way of communicating or behaving isn't the same as yours. Use the MBI process to show understanding.

2. Exercise patience. Be tolerant of ambiguity. If you don't know what is going on, stop and be patient. Don't react negatively. Give yourself time to appreciate the situation before you respond. Impatience is not a good way to get cooperation and build relationships.

3. Be flexible. Recognise that local solutions may be better. This is especially important as people from diverse backgrounds may have better understanding of certain issues than you do. So, practise to being open to alternative solutions.

4. Show empathy. Put yourself in the other person's shoes. This is important as it shows understanding and builds positive relationships.

5. Show interest. Show interest in your fellow student's experience and culture. Showing interest and asking questions can be an important classroom activity that helps build mutual understanding.

6. Local language. Learn a few words. If you are studying abroad, even if the course is being taught in English, learning a few words and expressions (say 10) in the local language is a great way to show appreciation, build confidence and encourage positive relationships.

In class, the teacher can explain the six skills and ask the students (or get them to ask each other) which skills they consider themselves good at and which they need to improve. Get them to write down their conclusions and encourage them to work to improve the ones they feel less good at. It is a good idea to encourage the students to identify a 'buddy' (friend) in the class who they can compare notes with at regular intervals to monitor their improvement. Once again, this personal interest will increase students' intercultural skills but also their engagement with the academic programme they are following.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper has explained how the experience of studying abroad can raise psychological issues through culture shock which may lead to depression and disengagement from the course they are studying and negatively affect course results. In doing so we have described some of the key issues that arise and how best to respond to them. Two of the key areas which cause problems for students studying abroad are often unrecognised until too late, culture shock and reverse culture shock. In describing these we have also suggested ways in which teachers and school authorities as well as the students themselves can understand what is happening and resolve specific problems that arise. Finally,

we suggested classroom activities that provide students with skills to develop their intercultural awareness and provide ways of resolving possible misunderstandings. In doing so we have emphasised the importance of using a mixed media approach to involve students in the learning process.

We recognise that teachers and lecturers are busy people, pre-occupied with time, the curriculum, setting and marking assignments and the process of knowledge transfer. But we feel strongly that the teacher is in the best position to recognise issues of disengagement from the learning process, raise them with the student concerned in the break or on an online zoom call and recommend solutions.

The results will be committed students, a livelier class and, more positive exam results during and at the end of the course. After all, we are all one species, on one planet with a rich diversity of communication and organisation patterns and beliefs. Encouraging mutual understanding is a crucial aim of education.

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