

# 9 The year abroad – a process of reflection

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## Abstract

The Year Abroad (YA) is one of the most valuable parts of our language degree programmes. Here we discuss some of the elements that constitute the assessment Nottingham Trent University students carry out to earn a YA diploma. More specifically we compare the two elements (blog and dossier) that we think contribute most to reflective practice, by analysing examples from students of French, German, and Spanish. Although at this point the analysis remains impressionistic, we compare which of these two elements helps students to reflect more deeply and meaningfully while achieving the YA objectives. The main findings indicate that both types of text help students to reflect on their experience and consequently to develop their Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Notably, the use of the target language does not appear to determine the level of reflection while the intended audience plays an important part in the style and accessibility of students' work.

**Keywords:** year abroad, reflection, intercultural communicative competence, blogging, dossiers.

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## 1. Introduction

The YA experience is a key part of the modern language provision at UK universities and sets modern language graduates apart from many of their peers both during their studies and after they graduate. There is the expectation within our institution that reflection is a very important element of student development, particularly during the YA. The more students reflect, the deeper their engagement with the host culture is and the better their ICC develops. In the context of ICC, both [Ushioda \(2009\)](#) and [Dervin \(2011\)](#) stress the importance of students' ability to reflect about themselves and their experiences. This paper will discuss a project undertaken at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) to analyse the process of reflection during the YA. Specifically, it will report on an impressionistic comparative analysis of dossiers and blogs written by French, German, and Spanish students during the academic year 2017-2018.

## 2. Presentation of the project

The project examines how blogs and dossiers, which form part of our YA assessment, encourage a reflective culture, by helping students move from simply 'recording unexamined experiences' to 'shifting perspectives' ([Savicki & Price, 2017](#)).

### 2.1. Theoretical background

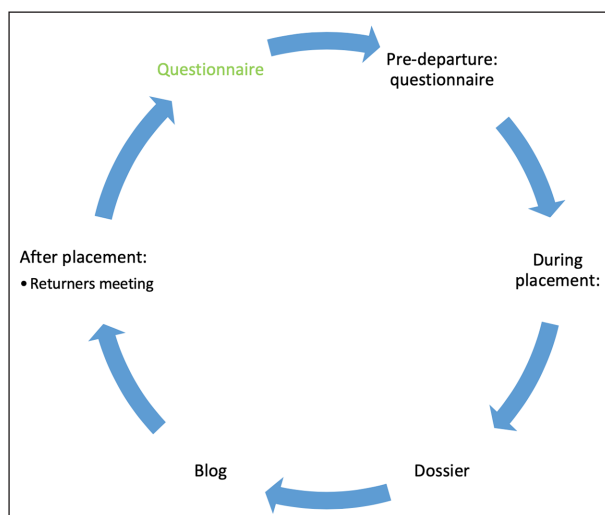
There are two main concepts that underpin the learning process during placements abroad: ICC and considering students as 'liquid strangers' ([Dervin, 2011](#)). Although there are many definitions of ICC and different research models based on it, for this research project we took our inspiration from [Jackson's \(2012\)](#) and [Ushioda's \(2009\)](#) understanding of the concept, as it encompasses clearly how students are engaged in a process of reflection. They see "ICC as a process based on and at the same time conducive to dialogic engagement, cultural bridging, reflection on cultural action, and whole-person development" ([Gutiérrez, Durán, Beltrán, & Martínez Abad, 2016](#), p. 339).

In this process, students are bound to become “self-reflective, intentional agents [immersed in a] fluid and complex system of social relations, activities, and multiple micro- and macro contexts” (Ushioda, 2009, p. 20). This is also complemented by Dervin’s (2007) understanding of students abroad as “liquid strangers”, “strangers in a new culture who should be given the opportunity to look at themselves and others, as well as to reflect on their own discourse and attitudes” (p. 120).

## 2.2. Context: NTU circle of reflection on YA

Below we present the different activities students going on the YA are invited to participate in, with the aim of helping them develop a reflective attitude (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Circle of reflection on YA



The **questionnaire** is the first opportunity that students have to think about their own communication and intercultural skills. It offers a framework for reflection but also appropriate vocabulary for the later items.

Students submit a 5,000-word **dossier** by the end of their YA. This is a dynamic document which allows them to reflect on past and present experiences but also take those reflections forward in both their final year and in post-graduation employment. We want them particularly to reflect critically on challenges and achievements during the year. Dossiers must be completed in the target language, to ensure that they maintain their writing skills, develop the specific vocabulary in the target language, and appreciate their own progress.

Students should also reflect in a **blog**, which is a public document and a useful resource for future students. Students have the choice of writing this in the target language or in English and the majority choose English. The blog may also form a valuable piece of evidence to show to employers or tutors in the future.

When students return to NTU they are invited to a **meeting** where they can discuss their experiences with their peers and members of staff. At the meeting they are given a **questionnaire** to fill out.

### 3. Discussion of outcomes

#### 3.1. German

Student 1, who was a teaching assistant near Düsseldorf, completed the assignments to the bare minimum standard. The blog was patchy, and the student noted that it was completed at the end of, rather than during, the placement. As such, the reflection was almost entirely externalised, focusing on the placement and how it fitted the student, rather than on how she had had to adapt. There is little evidence here of [Jackson's \(2012\)](#) 'dialogic engagement'. In her dossier, there is more reflection. It would seem in this case that the structured questions of the dossier prodded the student to reflect in more depth. The student admitted to having grown up during the YA, but even this was a little superficial: although she writes about maturity, challenges, and finding things out about herself, the writing lacked examples and a deeper investigation of how this helped her develop.

Student 2, on a study placement, achieved a much higher standard of reflection. The blog was regularly updated, with at least one new post every month, and each post was long, personal, and visually interesting. There were posts about the university, travels, cultural experiences, and the student's own personal journey. Stylistically, she also directly addresses her reader – the student approaching the YA – and starts a dialogue about the initial concerns and fears and how they have been overcome:

“You will become more compassionate and understanding towards other people and cultures when you come back home, that's for sure. [...] But I never really considered what people must go through when they move to another country, with limited or barely any language skills and managed to cope in a foreign place by themselves – that was until I came to Germany” (Student 2).

This student discusses her changing perception of the world and recognises that the experience may have taken away her sense of ‘permanence’, but that it has also imbued her with compassion, understanding, and an appreciation of her own achievements. This student's dossier is similarly reflective, discussing how the experience has made her a different person.

The student who engaged most with the tasks was the one who displayed the most characteristics of substantial reflection on and critique of personal development over the course of the YA.

### **3.2. Spanish**

One of the two Spanish students did a full year placement at the University of Valencia, the second student a placement at the Universidad Chileno Británica in Santiago de Chile followed by a work placement in Spain. Both students engaged in the dossier and blog in very reflective and engaging ways, although with very striking differences in their choices of style. Both students emerge as the ‘liquid strangers’ previously mentioned and in the process of reflecting they develop a deeper sense of their ICC, although in different ways. The use of the

target language did not seem to be a barrier for their reflection. For example, Student 1's dossier is mainly about the new culture (her engagement with Spanish friends, with the university, with the modules, and with the town), but it is also about herself (about how she was changing, her linguistic, personal, and intercultural learning and about her feelings and emotions). Her blog is very different. She is one of the few students who chose to write in Spanish. She made it very clear that her blog serves a clear purpose. It is her purpose and the perceived audience that dictates the style of the blog. There is no reflection. It is completely descriptive, with advice, very much like a tourist guide. The text is accompanied by very attractive photos.

Student 2's dossier is personal, she reflects on herself and her own culture and how she needs to adapt to the host culture, clearly developing her ICC while she engages in a dialogue between the target culture and her own. Following this emphasis on the personal, her blog is very much about her, for a clear intended audience, written in very informal language showing more evidence of her fluid sense of identity. It takes the form of a story with titles for every entry, like a TV series with episodes, *Friends*, with her being the main character: 'the one where Rachel gets on the plane', 'the one where Rachel goes back to work'. The tone is intimate and reflective:

“leaving Chile was only the first of many big decisions I have done so far this year, the second being that I have decided I want to study medicine” (Student 2).

“this is the kind of learning that makes me want to get up in the morning... So, to actually set alarms in order to learn something new about a part of the body is a totally foreign concept to me and I LOVE IT” (Student 2).

### **3.3. French**

The two students were undertaking teaching placements, and therefore in France for a whole year.

Both students seemed to have difficulty engaging with the dossier and the blog simultaneously, and their engagement with each exercise varied throughout the year. Student 1 did submit the ‘formative’ sections of the dossier (in October, February, and June respectively), but then they had relatively few blog entries. Two of the five entries were in March. Student 2 seemed much more engaged with the blog earlier in the year, with many entries until the end of February, when that work suddenly ended. The dossier was not completed in a formative way, but the final submission was received, and the dossier seemed in Semester 2 to have taken over the main role of reflection and replaced the previously strong blog work.

Each piece of work feels quite different. For Student 1, the blog certainly included more about feelings and emotions. The audience was different, written for future students (‘you’). It was a more multimedia piece of work (photos). It was more colloquially written (‘I was never down for’, ‘#’) and a good mixture of topics (learning and teaching; but also transport, Sundays, etc). The dates of entries make what is being considered and compared, and when, clearer. It was encouraging to see this student write a blog about her time in La Réunion. The final blog entry is particularly reflective, concluding and summing up learning and development from the year. The dossier included more about professional life and followed the structure we recommended: objectives and strategies, progress, and successes. The dossier improved as it developed, both in terms of content and language.

For Student 2, the blog was very creative and seemed to dominate work in Semester 1. Again, there is very colloquial language (‘coming back a baller’<sup>4</sup>), multimedia (video, gifs, photos, music, mood boards). Interestingly, there are comments on this student’s blog from followers, which makes it quite an interactive piece of work. Although Student 2’s dossier lacks structure and has no sections, it does cover a wide range of issues, almost ‘taking over’ from the work of the blog in Semester 1. Perhaps here, too, professional rather than

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4. A very competent, successful person.

personal life has a greater place. The language is more formal and scholarly in the dossier.

“If you had asked me before I came to France what my life here would be like, I probably would’ve been imagining living it up in the hotspots of Paris with the young and sexy but that really isn’t exactly how it has turned out. The kinda ugly truth is I haven’t made a crazy amount of friends as was promised on the YA tin. I touched upon this issue in another post and it’s not a woe is X kind of situation; I think for me, this experience has been focused around my independence and self-growth which has been amazing” (Student 1).

#### **4. Conclusion**

The main conclusion we arrived at is that by giving students the possibility of writing these two types of text we are maximising the opportunities that they have to reflect and to develop their ICC. Each type of text complements the other in giving students the best chance to help them reflect and in that process develop a better sense of who they are in relation to both the host culture and their own culture. More specifically, in their journey towards their development of ICC, we found that while the use of the target language does not seem to constrain the students in their reflection and expression, the audience, whether real or perceived, does seem to be one of the deciding factors in the style and accessibility of the text produced.

There are a series of limitations that make these results difficult to generalise. The small sample size is the most important one. However, this project does open opportunities for future research: for example, it would be interesting to investigate the impact that the reflection during the YA has on a final year reflective assessment and on students’ own personal development in the future. Further investigation into the creation of a ‘persona’ in the blogs within the model of the ‘liquid stranger’ would also be interesting. Future research with a larger sample size will further investigate the link between reflection and



development of ICC and will particularly look at the role of motivation in student engagement.

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