
7-21-2020

“RIPSSL”: A New Reflective Inquiry Protocol to Lift the Lid on Students’ Significant Extra-Curricular Learning Outcomes from Study Abroad

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Recommended APA Citation

Reid, A., Slade, C., & Rowland, S. L. (2020). “RIPSSL”: A New Reflective Inquiry Protocol to Lift the Lid on Students’ Significant Extra-Curricular Learning Outcomes from Study Abroad. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(7), 1873-1889. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss7/9>

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Abstract

Education abroad generally has no overarching curriculum outside the formal study component. This paper presents the Reflective Inquiry Protocol for Surfacing Significant Learning (RIPSSL), a new approach for understanding and articulating significant learning from education abroad. Tests of RIPSSL show education abroad students use it to move beyond “it was great” when considering learning from their experiences. Our findings are important for educators and students as they work to recognize and articulate the value of education abroad. RIPSSL provides a reflective educational approach to evidence learning from life experiences by surfacing students’ significant learning in their own words.

Keywords

Significant Learning, International Study, Meaning-Making, Mind Mapping, Reflective Prompt Questions, Case Study

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Acknowledgements

We thank the students who participated in the trial of our interview protocol.

“RIPSSL”: A New Reflective Inquiry Protocol to Lift the Lid on Students’ Significant Extra-Curricular Learning Outcomes from Study Abroad

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Education abroad generally has no overarching curriculum outside the formal study component. This paper presents the Reflective Inquiry Protocol for Surfacing Significant Learning (RIPSSL), a new approach for understanding and articulating significant learning from education abroad. Tests of RIPSSL show education abroad students use it to move beyond “it was great” when considering learning from their experiences. Our findings are important for educators and students as they work to recognize and articulate the value of education abroad. RIPSSL provides a reflective educational approach to evidence learning from life experiences by surfacing students’ significant learning in their own words. Keywords: Significant Learning, International Study, Meaning-Making, Mind Mapping, Reflective Prompt Questions, Case Study

Students at university engage in a range of extra-curricular activities that have an associated experiential learning potential (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Dacre Pool 2017). Out-of-classroom experiences are valuable, as they often present students with complexity, challenge, and the risk of failure (Curran, 2007; Marsick & Watkins, 2018). Learning from life experiences, such as education abroad, is central to adult development (Merriam & Clark, 1993), but life experiences are usually beyond the realm of the assessed curriculum (Walsh, 2014). Therefore, questions remain around how the potential for student learning from such life experiences can be enhanced.

We identify a gap in education abroad discourses between the experience and evidence of learning, thus, we focus our research on helping students reflect on and articulate which parts of their education abroad presented significant learning opportunities. We define ‘significant learning’ as learning that has some personal meaning to an individual and an impact in terms of enhancement or development of capabilities and sense of self. This definition came from a seminal study by Merriam and Clark (1993) that linked experience to learning through the concept of significance. While Merriam and Clark’s work on significant learning continues to be referenced (see for example, Yang, 2017), the question of how students extract significant learning from life experiences, and in context, has not been recently explored.

In this paper we describe the rationale for the development of an evidence-based Reflective Inquiry Protocol for Surfacing Significant Learning (RIPSSL) that helps students identify and articulate their significant learnings from a life experience. This approach was tested with a group of recently-returned education abroad students and used with a case study group. The students unpacked a variety of significant learnings from education abroad using the RIPSSL approach. Importantly, these learnings largely depended on the unstructured, challenging, and sometimes chaotic nature of the experience. The catalysis for learning suggests that, rather than setting structured learning goals for study abroad, it is crucial to help students reflect and make meaning from their experience when they return home. Our findings and the RIPSSL approach are important for educators as they consider how to support students to recognize the value of education abroad.

Developing the RIPSSL approach

We first developed a conceptual framework that sets out the process of understanding and articulating significant learning from life experiences. We then used the framework's criteria to shape the development of an inquiry protocol to help learners reflect on life experiences and extract the significant learning from those experiences. By "extract" we mean "recognize, understand, and articulate."

The impetus for developing the inquiry protocol came from our work on learning from education abroad. Education abroad has long been characterized by its potential to be transformative (Perry, Stoner, & Tarrant, 2012). Despite research into the impact and outcomes of international study across a range of domains (Potts, 2016), researchers and practitioners are still divided over what students learn from the experience (Di Pietro, 2014; Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012; Wong, 2015). One reason for this quandary is that researchers often face surface-level responses, such as "it was great", when they ask participants what they learnt from the "life experience" aspect of education abroad (Forsey, Broomhill, & Davis, 2012; Vande Berg et al., 2012; Wong, 2015). The extant research led us to consider ways to move beyond "it was great" to support students as they uncover significant learning from their international study experiences and provide more meaningful responses to questions about what they learnt.

The Literature That Underpins Our Approach

If we accept the experiential learning proposition that learning stems from experience, then we need to consider how an experience moves the individual beyond the *act* of experiencing something to *actual* learning from it and how this process of movement might work. Our approach ties together current literature to produce a coherent picture that addresses these issues. This literature is discussed below.

Experiential learning theory. We used experiential learning theory (ELT) to underpin the conceptualization of our approach to determining significant learning. ELT is premised on the notion that experience is the basis and impetus for learning (Beard & Wilson, 2013; Kolb, 1984, 2014), and that life experiences, education and work are pivotal to the learning and understanding of new knowledge and capabilities (Fry, Ketteridge, & Marshall, 2009). Indeed, the fundamental role of experience in learning is central to understandings of adult learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). David Kolb (1984, 2015), the most widely known modern ELT scholar, theorized that learning is grounded in experience and is an ongoing process of knowledge acquisition which comes when an individual understands and intentionally transforms their experiences (HEQCO, 2016). Moreover, experiential learning "involves 'the whole person', through thoughts, feelings and physical activity" (Beard & Wilson 2013, p. 5).

Not every experience leads to learning (Beard & Wilson, 2013), however learning *will not result* without a process for individuals to recognize what they gained from an experience and translate those gains into something meaningful for future thought and action (Beard, 2018; Kuk & Holst, 2018). There are three inter-related elements that constitute experiential learning: experience; reflection (or meaning-making or interpretation) based on prior knowledge and experiences; and the learned experience that results (Kuk & Holst, 2018). While the role of the individual in the practice of interpreting experiences for learning is acknowledged, ELT theorists now also recognise that learning should be viewed as a product of wider social and cultural environments (Jarvis, 2010) because context shapes learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2013).

Meaning-making from an experience. ELT posits that *having* an experience is not the same as *learning* from it (Vande Berg et al., 2012). An experience in and of itself does not have meaning; the learner needs to interpret the experience for meaning to turn a potential

learning opportunity into *actual learning* (Boud & Walker, 1990; Merriam & Heuer, 1996). Meaning-making is dependent on the learner rendering the experience coherent (Kegan, 1982; Mezirow, 2000) and /or understanding the value or significance of the experience (Huta, 2017; Park, 2017). The value of an experience may not be recognized, or the experience may even be discarded altogether as a learning opportunity if personal meaning is not given to the experience (Merriam & Clark, 1993). Giving personal meaning is a “process of constructing a personal story to make sense of an event or of one’s life” (Wong, 2017, p. 86). Learning is more effective if we can become aware of our own ways of gaining new knowledge and capabilities (Coulson & Harvey, 2013). This meta-awareness helps with our understanding of how we experience life and learning and how we can apply newly-acquired knowledge and capabilities to subsequent experiences. Meaning-making, therefore, is fundamental to learning (Mezirow, 2000). Our approach to extracting significant learning from a life experience foregrounds the meaning-making process, where assigning value to the experience and understanding its impact are crucial for learning to be significant.

Experiential learning is a process of human cognition and of meaning-making that relies on the varying capacity and confidence of the individual to construct meaning from experiences (Fenwick, 2000). The idea that learners will make meaning from a learning opportunity assumes capacity for self-awareness and metacognition that is not inherent in everyone (Coulson & Harvey, 2013; Moon, 2004). Learners may need guidance around how to interpret their experiences (Coulson & Harvey, 2013). This need for guidance shaped the development of our framework and the RIPSSL approach.

Significant learning. We wanted to explore the questions in the literature around the educative value of study abroad and the difficulties that participants often face in articulating what was meaningful to them about their international study experience (Forsey et al., 2012; Wong, 2015). This led us to consider the type of life-experience learning that results in growth and development, which psychologist and educator, Carl Rogers (1951), first referred to “significant learning.” Rogers (1951) linked significant learning to personal development by asserting that it involves “the maintenance of, or enhancement of, the structure of the self” (p. 388). Merriam and Clark (1993) found that what makes learning significant is the personal impact of an experience, which catalyzes expansion or transformation of skills, capabilities, personal identity, or perspective on life. This expansion also better prepares students for future experiences. Impact may also be described as perceptions of growth or positive life changes (Park, 2010), the outcome of the meaning-making process, and the meanings that are made by the learner from interpreting an experience for its personal significance.

Merriam and Clark (1993, p.133) also propose that, if expansion or transformation is to occur, it must be valued by the individual by placing a “personal stamp on the experience” and “naming it as important.” Adult learning theorist, Peter Jarvis (2006, p. 13), also suggests that the result of learning is a “changed or more experienced person” through the transformation of experiences and integration of the “content” of those experiences into the “person’s individual biography.” The integration process suggests that transformation occurs where the experience has personal value, thus meaning-making for significance is influenced by the subjective value of an experience and its impact on the learner (Merriam & Clark, 1993).

We propose that these ideas around significant learning apply to education abroad, as there is potential for significant learning in the experience.

Individual influences on meaning-making for significant learning. We explored further Merriam and Clark’s (1993) idea of valuing an experience for significance to take account of what shapes the processes of understanding and articulating significant learning.

We sought theories around what shapes value and looked to incorporate these into the inquiry protocol using language that would resonate with students.

Mezirow (2000) contends that experiences are delimited by personal “meaning structures” (i.e., values, beliefs, norms, and expectations) which act as a frame of reference for interpreting experiences. Park (2017) proposes that these structures consist of global meanings (beliefs about self, the world, and others) and global goals (including aspirations and values). These structures influence situational meaning, or meanings made from particular situations that may lead to changes in the learner. Kegan (1980) also suggests that what he calls “meaning systems” have a significant impact on thought and behavior, given individuals generally do not act randomly or unsystematically (p. 380). Kegan (1980) proposes that these meaning systems play a vital part in structuring the way that we think, feel and act, even though we may organize these systems without an awareness of their exact nature. Indeed, Kegan (1980) suggests that meaning systems are something “we are” (p. 374).

Mezirow proposes that learning influences the development of the learner’s meaning system so that it is “more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change and reflective” (Mezirow 2000, pp. 7-8). The progression of the learner’s meaning system shapes the meanings made from future experiences (Greenaway, 2018). Similarly, new experiences often modify the meaning and significance of past experiences, where over time, the learner may attribute new meanings to those experiences from an “older and (maybe) wiser perspective” (Greenaway, 2018, p. 74).

This idea of an individual’s unconscious, almost innate, meaning structure or system has implications for the ways in which educators can support students to understand and articulate significant learning from life experiences. It may be a struggle for students to identify and evaluate their personal meaning systems, particularly when they are reflecting on their challenging experiences in an unfamiliar and potentially stressful environment, like education abroad.

We turned to the seminal work of Boud and Walker (1990), who contend that individual learning intent and “personal foundation of experience” are brought to and shape each new experience. Learning intent is both a rationale for why an individual engages in an experience and a perspective from which the experience is understood (Boud & Walker, 1990). Learning intent may be understood through its connection to motivation for learning (Gopalan, Abu Bakar, Zulkifli, Alwi, & Che Mat, 2017) which learners may bring to some life experiences such as international study. Personal foundation of experience is drawn from the sum of previous experiences; the learner may be attuned to certain things or may interpret aspects of the experience based on prior experiences (Boud & Walker, 1990). Previously, Knowles (1984) proposed that adult learners may be characterized by their “reservoir of prior experiences” that shape each new experience. This idea has become central to our understandings of adult learning (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

Boud and Walker (1990) suggest that both learning intent and personal foundation of experience may be unconscious or unarticulated, and it “may be difficult or impossible for a learner to give an account” of the way it has been shaped (p. 63). We proposed, however, that if individuals understand their learning intent, they may be able to appreciate the learning potential in an experience and effectively make meaning from it *in terms of their intent*.

Despite the possible challenges for students around articulating and separating all the influences on meaning-making, we included the concepts in our framework in recognition of the critical effect that “what an individual brings” has on a person’s lived experience and the meaning that is made from it. Our framework and inquiry protocol guide learners to recognize what they bring to an experience as they understand and articulate their significant learning from that experience.

RIPSSL: A Reflective Inquiry Protocol for Surfacing Significant Learning from Life Experiences

This paper is work from the PhD thesis of author Reid. Authors Slade and Rowland are the PhD supervisors. Author Reid is an experienced practitioner in curriculum design and development with a lifelong interest in experiential learning. This doctoral research stemmed from author Reid's work, in which she collaborated to formulate an institutional employability strategy. During this time, she led workshops with students who had participated in extra-curricular activities (such as study abroad and mentoring programs). Conversations with students during the workshops revealed the difficulties they faced in understanding what they had learned from their experiences. This work led author Reid to explore meaning-making for learning to uncover the kind of learning that leads to personal growth. Study abroad was selected for the study because of (i) the myriad of possibilities for personal growth from the experience of living in another country, (ii) the researcher's passion for travelling and for experiencing different cultures.

The development of RIPSSL (a Reflective Inquiry Protocol for Surfacing Significant Learning) arose out of a qualitative case study that investigates the phenomenon of surfacing significant learning using study abroad as the context for that investigation (this is the subject of author Reid's PhD work). This research is underpinned by the belief that, despite lived experiences being complex and carrying a range of meanings, it is possible to understand people's experiences through an analysis of the descriptions of those experiences (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). We took a case study approach to align with the constructivist paradigm that frames the study. This approach came from our desire to explore and understand the meaning of an experience (surfacing significant learning from international study) from the perspective of those who have lived it (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017).

We used a single case with embedded units design (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The units of analysis were eighteen students who participated in the institution's study abroad program during the bounded time period. Each student represented a data source on the phenomenon in context - the significance of the international study experience.

Development of a framework for conceptualizing the process of understanding and articulating significant learning. We began our work on RIPSSL with the development of a conceptual framework. The framework addresses the process of understanding and articulating significant learning (Figure 1). The framework allows us to consider the significant learning from experiences that do not have a formal educational and extrinsic "meaning" (i.e., they are not part of coursework for which a formal qualification will be awarded). Instead, the activities considered here are "real life" events, and the individuals must assign meaning to the experience themselves in order to extract significant learning (Merriam & Heuer, 1996).

The framework shows that learning is a process of transforming the content of an experience and integrating that transformed content as part of the learner's identity – these acts result in a changed or more experienced person (Jarvis, 2006). This overarching concept of learning is framed by meaning-making to surface significant learning. In this process the learner determines what was significant about - and how they were impacted by - an experience. They then assign value to an experience and its impact to identify perceptions of growth or positive life changes (i.e., significant learning) (Merriam & Clark, 1993; Park, 2010). Meaning-making happens based on what the person brings to each new experience, including their personal meaning system and prior experiences.

The framework shows the process of making meaning to determine significance. The RIPSSL approach includes prompts for reflecting on (i) what was significant; (ii) how and why it was significant; and (iii) how experiences and the meanings made from them are shaped by personal meaning systems and other influences. The 'what' and 'how' questions are

represented in the framework by the ‘Interpret experience’ step. The ‘why’ question is linked to the framework through the act of valuing an experience and its impact, and the learner’s meaning-making lens. The result of this process is significant learning, or perceptions of growth or positive life changes (Park, 2010).

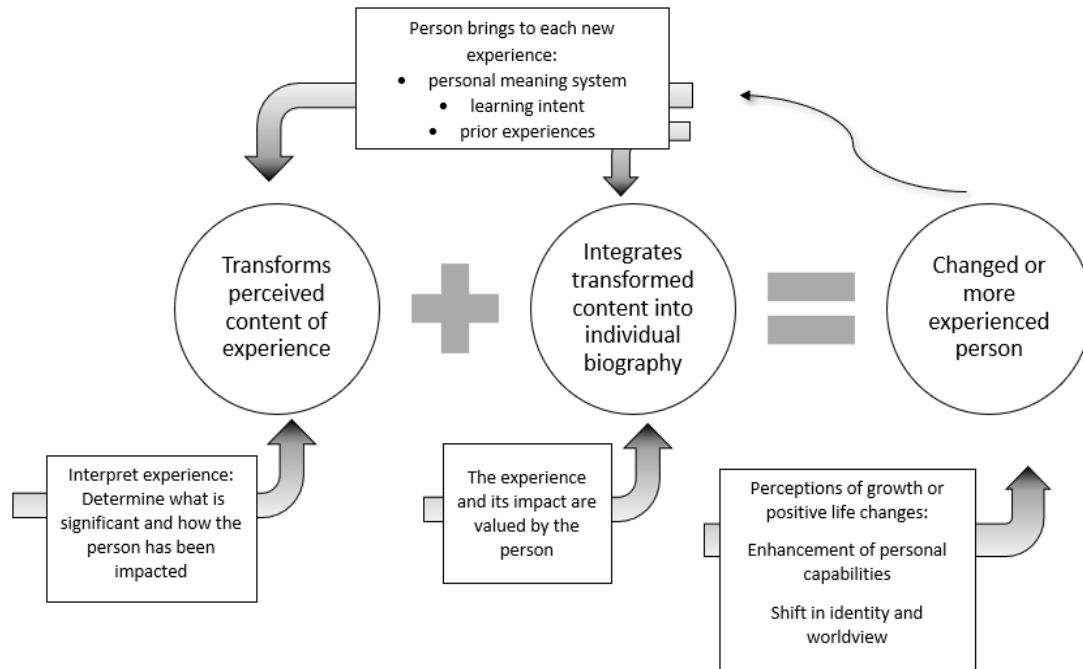


Figure 1. A framework for understanding and articulating significant learning from life experiences.

Use of the framework to shape data collection and analysis. After developing the framework, we turned to the problem of how to translate it into a way of working with students to both study and enhance their process of extracting significant learning from an experience. We realized that we needed a means of putting the framework into practice so we could collect and analyze the data from our study. We identified key elements in our framework that could be unpacked by students to extract significant learning and translated these elements into an inquiry protocol; RIPSSL is this protocol.

RIPSSL consists of a set of reflective questions that probe the processes associated with surfacing significant learning. The questions are accompanied by an initial request of the interviewee - we ask them to draw a mind map of experiences they “consider to be meaningful, significant or valuable” to help them focus the discussion and their reflections. A key principle of case study research is that data from multiple sources are converged, where each data source may be thought of as a piece of the “puzzle” that, as a whole, facilitates a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014). The mind map and reflective prompt questions (used during in-depth semi-structured interviews with the participants to uncover significant learning from their study abroad experiences) formed our two data sources.

To ensure rigor in our work, we trialed the mind map and question set with a small pilot group (n=4) of students who had recently returned from education abroad. We aimed to investigate their significant learning from this experience. Based on this trial, we reviewed and refined the question set before using it with another group (n=14) of students. These students were recruited as part of a doctoral research project, using an email approach and a purposeful sampling method (Merriam, 2009).

As already discussed, participants in international study programs often find it difficult to provide meaningful responses to questions around “what they have learned” from their experiences (Forsey et al., 2012; Wong, 2015). We, and others, suggest that this challenge may be due, in part, to the questions students are asked about their experiences (Wong, 2015). We propose that these questions may not (i) probe the processes associated with significant learning and/or (ii) be understood by the students who are answering. In contrast, the newly devised RIPSSL asks questions that map to the framework for significant learning and we have tested and amended the questions so that students can answer them in a meaningful way.

We discuss the RIPSSL mind map and reflective prompt questions in more detail below.

RIPSSL Stage 1: The Mind Map

Many life experiences are lengthy and somewhat unstructured; international study is no exception. Given the amorphous nature of the international study experience, we felt it was important to provide students with a way to unpack and record the elements of their experiences *before* we asked them questions about those experiences. In our own professional practice, we had seen students struggle to reflect on learning from an experience. We reasoned that when students are asked “what they have learned” from education abroad, they may give surface responses because they do not know where to start when interpreting such a complex experience.

We decided to ask students to draw a “mind” map so they could anchor their reflections in something relatively tangible. The mind map provides an unstructured way to visualize concepts, allowing for brainstorming (Davies, 2011) and the chance for the learner to “re-see” the significance of the experience” (Wilson, Mandich, & Magalhaes, 2016, p. 4). We decided to focus this map by asking students to address aspects of their experience that were significant to them, to help them to identify significant aspects of their overall experience and to provide a springboard for examining personal meanings made from an experience.

Trialing the mind map. In the trial of the mind map with returned education abroad students, we asked them to place items on their maps that were of personal significance or stood out as being valuable. In a research team meeting we initially tried reflecting on our own life experiences using “meaning” as a prompt (e.g., “Tell me about the meaning of your time abroad”). We struggled with this task and started asking each other about the meaning of “meaning.” We reasoned that participants may struggle to understand “meaning” as well. When we asked participants to create a mind map of the “significant” or “valuable” experiences, the students could place items on their maps without pausing and asking for a definition of either term.

Tests of the mind map with students demonstrated that it was as an effective interview tool (see example in Figure 2). Generally, we found the participants naturally chose and mapped abstract elements of their experiences, rather than specific events and activities; in the Figure 2 example the student chose the abstract high-level organisers “study,” “travel,” “fun,” “relationships,” “culture,” “learning,” and “experience.” The words were drawn within a map, of the United States, where the student spent one semester, and the size of the lettering used represents the “level” of significance to the student.



Figure 2. A concept map drawn by an international study participant. The map is presented in cartoon form to protect the anonymity of the student.

After participants identified each item on the mind map, we asked them about their experiences using the question set (Table 1). The questions ask interviewees to reflect on the key elements of our framework (Figure 1). We found that after placing the abstract ideas on the maps, participants were able to return to them repeatedly as conceptual centers for their narratives as we stepped them through the question set.

RIPSSL Stage 2: The question set for use in the semi-structured interviews. As we developed the question set presented here, we were aware that meaning and meaning making processes exist “at least to some extent, below awareness” (Park 2010, p. 262). This makes it challenging for both a researcher and the individual to provide evidence of meanings made and meaning making. Individuals may not be aware of meanings they made nor of the significance of their experience. They may also not be capable of articulating them, and they may be unable to comprehend why they made meanings or how those meanings may shape future thought and action (Park, 2010). It is also difficult to translate “rich theoretical conceptualizations to operational definitions” (Park, 2010, p. 267). It is unlikely that a typical undergraduate student will be familiar with the terms that underpin our framework or the complexity of thought that lies behind them. Our goal, with the question set, was to simplify these processes of meaning perception, articulation, and explanation for individuals. The question set is shown in Table 1. Each question is mapped to part of the Figure 1 framework. Importantly, however, the questions do not use much of the complex language found in the framework (and in the papers that underpin it).

Table 1. The RIPSSL Approach Question Set

Framework Element	Questions
Determine what is significant (what is significant)	Can you please draw a mind map of the experiences that you consider to be meaningful, significant or valuable?
Personal meaning system (why it is significant)	Q1: Can you tell me why you chose to put those things on the map?
Subjective value (why it is significant)	Q1: What is significant to you about those things? Q3: Why are those things important to you? Q4: How did you feel when you were having those experiences? What was your reaction to them?
Interpret experiences to determine personal impact (how it is significant)	Q1: I'd like to you to think now about the impact of your experiences. Did your experiences change what you can do or who you are? If you don't see the impact in terms of who you are and what you can do, how do you understand the impact? Q2: Can you think about the impact of your experiences in terms of future attitudes, perspectives or action? How will you take your experiences forward?
Learning intent (why it is significant)	Q1: What do you think is the purpose of study abroad? Q2: What were your reasons for undertaking an international study program? Q3: What were you hoping to get out of it? Q4: Did you have any expectations? If so, what were they?
Personal foundation of experience (prior experiences) (why it is significant)	Q1: Can you think of any ways that your experiences before you went on exchange may have shaped your exchange experience? Q2: Do you think your experiences before you went on exchange may have shaped what you got out of it? Q3: Do you think you were attuned to certain things because of the person that you are?

Trialing the question set. We began with a question set that took language directly from the framework, but the RIPSSL development process involved making several changes to questions' wording using an iterative process of trial and discussion. We made changes during the trial so that participants could understand the language in the questions without having to ask for clarification. We also made the changes so that we felt comfortable with the responses we received from the participants in terms of the depth of their answers and articulation of significant learning. We wanted to make sure that the questions were reflective of the intent of the framework. The changes we made were largely around questions of personal impact and personal foundation of experience.

As an example, we focused questions on participants' capabilities and sense of self to elicit responses about impact by condensing the multi-faceted questions on impact from the

literature to one simple prompt question: “I’d like you to think now about the impact of your experiences. Did your experiences change what you can do or who you are?”

A common response related to the student’s improved understanding of self or validation of their abilities. For example, student Harvey said “I’ve got a bit of experience of travelling by myself. It’s a bit daunting, but it didn’t transform me so much. It sort of reaffirmed that I’m very self-motivated or able to do things by myself.”

Most participants were able to answer the impact question easily, but some placed “snow” on their mind maps (which was not *obviously* linked to identity or beliefs). To help students articulate the impact of something like weather, we added an additional prompt, “If you don’t see the impact in terms of who you are and what you can do, how do you understand this impact?”

We also asked participants to consider impact in terms of future thought and behaviour. We asked the questions “Can you think about the impact of your experiences in terms of future attitudes, perspectives or actions? How will you take your experience forward?” Students responded to these questions by describing new plans or approaches to their lives. In the example below, the student articulates change in terms of proactivity.

Sarah (pseudonym): I guess it was challenging in the moments of, “Oh, I have to ask that person because otherwise, I’m not going to get on my train.” Am I more proactive about getting answers, moving things forward, and progressing? Yes, I guess it changed my future behavior in that way.

The trial interviews revealed that participants had clear reasons for undertaking the education abroad program, and the meanings they made from their experiences seemed to be largely shaped by these reasons. For example, one participant had strong religious faith; she used faith as a lens when she detailed her meaningful experiences. During her study she sought out activities that aligned with her faith. She ascribed meaning to these activities because they aligned with her belief system. She felt the impact of the experience as contributing to “faith-building” and the way that she embodies her faith. This example shows the influence of both learning intent and personal meaning systems on the meaning-making process.

Another student said her main learning intent was to develop her French language skills. One key meaning she made from her experience was understanding and appreciating the process and challenge of learning a second language. Again, her learning intent had a strong influence on what she experienced and what she deemed significant. These findings affirmed our inclusion of questions around learning intent in the interview protocol.

We found it challenging to devise interview questions that asked students directly about the influence of prior experiences, although we did find that the students made statements that implied it. This finding aligns with Boud and Walker’s (1990) idea that personal foundation of experience may be unconscious or unarticulated. Below is one such example:

Oliver (pseudonym): I started uni three weeks after a serious head injury. For me, a lot of first year was just keeping my head above water and not in that typical “first-year-of-uni” sense. It was quite a heavy year for me, but then it meant, by going overseas, I was able to do a lot of that kind of “welcome-to-uni” partying, getting amongst the—getting a lot of your peer relations, like friendships and that kind of thing formed, which for me, I guess, is why I put that in. Because it filled in what a lot of people would do in maybe their first year.

This student's personal foundation of experience shaped his time abroad due to the gap left by his experience of first-year university. When asked later whether his past experiences had influenced his international study experience, Oliver offered this comment:

Oliver: I was always striving to find something different [from my first year experience], which could be something that I brought to the table anyway - I'm like that in day-to-day life - I try to take every opportunity that's given. That would definitely be something I would have brought along. I'd just probably get in, give it a go, whatever it may be.

His reflection suggests he understood his interest in taking up opportunities (chosen on their own merits, or to make up for other missed opportunities), and that he brought this aspect of himself to the education abroad experience and the meaning that he made from it.

We proposed that personal foundation of experience has a key influence on meaning-making, and we needed to include interview questions on this element of our framework using language students would understand. We included "Can you think of any ways that your experiences before you went on exchange may have shaped your exchange experience?" We also asked about ways in which prior experience or personal identity may have shaped what participants got out of the experience or made them attuned to certain things. Note how these prompts do not use the terms "personal foundation of experiences" or "reservoir of prior experiences." We tried using these terms in the trial, but student responses clearly indicated they did not understand the question.

We developed and tested the mind map and questions with returned education abroad participants and we found that the language was appropriate for students in the higher education context and relatable to their experiences. Once we had trialed, reviewed, and refined the question set, we used the inquiry protocol with another group of returned education abroad students (n=14).

Implementing the RIPSSL Approach

With the second group of students, we focused RIPSSL implementation on the ways they articulated the personal impact and value of their experiences. We also sought to examine the influence of personal meaning systems, learning intent, and prior experiences on the meaning-making process. Significant learning is learning that makes a difference to the individual (Merriam & Clark, 1993). We found that students spoke about this idea of difference around self-realizations and perspectives on people and the world, of enhancement of existing capabilities, or of development of new capabilities through asking students about impact rather than "what did you learn?" Student Gretchen (pseudonym) said her international experience made her "realize how much I like responsibility and how much I need it." She added "It makes me feel accomplished. It makes me feel good about myself."

Another student similarly described his learning about himself:

Hussam (pseudonym): You're just doing your thing, and then you are transplanted somewhere else and you realize, "Wow, there are people everywhere else in the world also doing their own thing in their own space and we're all just coexisting at the same time." It's so interesting. You break out of your myopia.

As the students articulated their realizations, they also described associated changes in their perspectives on their capabilities. This finding is consistent with the ideas of Merriam and Clark

(1993) who found that the personal impact of significant experiences is tied to the enhancement of capabilities. These associated changes were an increased capacity to interact with people, enhanced independence, self-confidence or resilience, and improvement in workplace or study capability. As an example of increased capacity for interpersonal interactions, Laura (pseudonym) described impact around being more comfortable talking to people she does not know and in making new friends. Laura explained that she is more “sensitive to people in terms of where they’re from and what they do.”

Our findings on student reflections on the impact of their experiences on future thought and action also supported what we found in the trial of the question set. Students in the second group described their greater preparedness to deal with future life experiences as an increased desire to take up opportunities, a greater capacity to deal with challenges or be challenged, and clarity around future direction. One of the Nursing and Midwifery students in the group described the impact of being exposed to working in a different health system as reinforcing her desire to work with Doctors without Border in the future. The student offered this reflection.

Ariel (pseudonym): I always wanted to work with Doctors without Borders. I was always afraid that I wouldn’t be able to do it because it’s such a confronting kind of organization to work for. I think now it’s [the international experience] definitely made me want to do that more to help people who are in need...to go to places even though you may be afraid to do it.

Another student, Lydia (pseudonym), articulated impact on future thought and action from her experience of dealing with visa-related challenges in her host city by saying “I feel much more capable now—much more independent. I feel much more able to do really anything I set my mind to.”

Our findings also show how personal meaning systems influence what is experienced and the meanings made, particularly around learning intent and personal values and beliefs; these findings align with Merriam and Clark’s (1993) idea that valuing an experience and its impact is a key part of extracting significant learning. As an example, Olivia (pseudonym) placed “volunteering” on her map; she found meaning in working with underprivileged children while studying abroad. Olivia chose to engage in this activity as she had previously worked with children with special needs. She felt the impact of the activity as a greater understanding of her privilege and a furthering of her desire to volunteer with children in the future. Olivia’s reflection below shows the influence of her past experiences (and her personal values) on what she experienced and the meaning that she made from her experience:

Olivia (pseudonym): I went to a small Catholic school. We did so much more for everyone else. That whole level of selflessness was instilled in us one day one. I don’t know if it’s my upbringing or, yes, just the way I feel about volunteering. I definitely think it should be part of everyone’s life. You have to remember that there are other people out there who don’t have the same life situation as you.

Discussion and Implications

We have developed the RIPSSL approach, which addresses the disconnect between student self-reports of learning from education abroad and measures of outcomes and impacts of the experience (Vande Berg et al., 2012). The RIPSSL approach allows students to evidence what they experienced while they were studying abroad and explain why it was of value. Our RIPSSL approach steps learners through the process of making meaning to determine the

significance of an experience with prompts for reflecting on (i) what was significant; (ii) how and why it was significant; and (iii) how experiences and the meanings made from them are shaped by personal meaning systems and other influences.

The results from the students' reflections in our study support Wong's (2015) assertion that we should accept students' reports that their study abroad is indeed "great" (p. 133). Our findings also reinforce calls to hold realistic expectations about the depth, breadth, and rate of learning from education abroad (Forsey et al., 2012) and place greater worth on what students value about their experiences.

We need to better appreciate what "great" means when students describe a learning experience and accept that "great" for a student may be quite different to "great" for an experienced pedagogue. Although we may have "pre-designed metrics of academic success or economic benefit" for education abroad (Schroeder, 2016, p. 3), it is important that we remember the importance of immersion in a foreign culture, challenge, discomfort, and risk-taking. Through the use of the RIPSSL approach, students are able to articulate learning and development from their international study. They have clearly experienced personal growth, a changed sense of self, and a broadened perspective on people and the world. For young people who are still discovering who they are, and how they can make a difference, this learning is profound.

We acknowledge that the process of surfacing significant learning relies on the learner's point-in-time perceptions of an experience. In the case of international study, these perceptions are usually gathered soon after participants have returned home. As such, this research reveals those perceptions at the time they were captured for the study, i.e., within months of participants returning to Australia. Capturing those perceptions also relied on the ability of the participants to articulate their thoughts and feelings about the experience that was being examined in a single reflective event. Understandings of the significance of the experience may change over time, particularly as they are viewed in relation to subsequent experiences and enhancements to the learners' meaning-making systems. Indeed, Mezirow (2000) later revised his theory of transformational learning to capture perspective transformation in both an episodic way and as gradual change.

Furthermore, the findings relied on the perceptions of change within the individuals who participated in the research, not the tangible, observed outcomes that the international study field seems to crave. This in itself is both a limitation and a strength, as it demonstrates the complexity of evaluating learning from a life experience and the subjective nature of meaning-making from such experiences. We also acknowledge the study called for voluntary participation. Only a small number of students responded to the recruitment email out of the total number who study abroad in a given semester. It may be assumed, then, that those who did volunteer were motivated to talk about their experiences and felt they had something meaningful to say about them.

Developing the capacity to make meaning is crucial to ongoing growth and development in adulthood (Merriam & Clark, 1993), therefore it is important for students to be able to recognize the significance of life-experience learning and articulate how, what, and why they have learned from those experiences. The RIPSSL approach helps us understand and surface learners' *process* of extracting significant learning. As such, RIPSSL could be applied to understanding any learning experience outside of the classroom. Educators and program designers could use RIPSSL to support students' reflections as they recognize and extract what they have gained from their experiences. Formative and summative assessment items could be designed around the mind-map and the question set. Researchers could use RIPSSL to explore significant learning from a given life experience and to elucidate the value of such experiences.

A key starting point in RIPSSL is the request of students to draw a mind map of the elements of their experience that they found meaningful. The students can then be stepped

through the reflective prompt questions for each item on their mind maps. This process represents a potential change in practice; instead of asking students what they learned, or leaving it up to them to determine their learning, students should be asked to describe the *significance* and the *impact* of the experiences they placed on their mind maps. It is typical for international study participants to be asked what they have learned from their experiences (Forsey et al., 2012). Students often provide surface responses to such questions (Wong, 2015). Framing the meaning-making process using RIPSSL provides a foundation for understanding and articulating significant learning and for eliciting deeper meanings from an experience than just “it was great.” Moreover, this process enables direct links to be made between the type of experience and its perceived impact and to explore the range of different meanings assigned to the same experience. If we can develop a greater understanding of an educative experience (in terms of the meaning a person assigns to it and the individual translations of impact it affords), then we can gain a greater understanding of the learning potential of that experience.

Our RIPSSL approach serves as the basis for developing reflective processes to support students to extract significant learning from a life experience. The challenge for students is to recognize what significant things they have gained from a life experience when there is no curriculum to guide the learning process (Montrose, 2002; Strange & Gibson, 2017). In the RIPSSL approach, we have created a foundation for surfacing student learning from education abroad to elicit deeper reflections than “it was great.” Our study points to the importance of focusing reflections on personal impact and value and recognizing the influence of personal meaning systems, learning intent and prior experiences on the meaning-making process.

We recommend further implementation of RIPSSL to continue the journey towards understanding what “great” really means and to gain further understanding of the contributions that education abroad makes to participants’ personal growth. We also recommend use of RIPSSL to surface the learning and personal growth that arise from other life experiences that sit outside a formal curriculum.

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Acknowledgement: We thank the students who participated in the trial of our interview protocol.

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Article Citation

Reid, A., Slade, C., & Rowland, S. (2020). "RIPSSL": A new reflective inquiry protocol to lift the lid on students' significant extra-curricular learning outcomes from study abroad. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(7), 1873-1889.
<https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss7/9>
