



Case Study 15

Exploring acculturation through a postcards home approach

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What did you aim to do with this work?

This small-scale project sought to explore the acculturation experiences of short-term sojourner transnational education students. During their initial six-month immersive and intensive stay in the UK, the experiences of eight international students were captured using arts-based methods, with the aim of better understanding how to support students on such visits.

What led you to this project?

Acculturation and adaptation into a different country, educational culture, and programme of study is challenging. In this project, the intensive visit, at the beginning of the programme, allowed participants to engage with the programme within its own context, before returning to their own country for the next programme phase. It was important to understand the impact of that visit, both for that cohort and for future cohorts, although Covid did, ultimately, impact significantly on the subsequent shape of the programme.

How were creative approaches used?

The production of weekly postcards formed the main arts-based approach. Participants were invited to draw, photograph or source an image for a postcard reflecting their experiences each week. On the back of their postcard, they were asked to add some text to support that reflection. Focus group sessions, at the middle and end of their visit, brought participants together to review their postcards. They developed a collective mapping of their experience, using string lines, to show the ups and downs of their group experience. Finally, participants used their postcards, within individual interviews, to recall personal experiences of their study visit.

Why did you take this approach?

The use of the postcard-home approach is a relatively novel data collection method, which researchers have found useful for recording 'noteworthy experiences' (Millman, 2013: 13). It seemed fitting as the participants were away from home. The approach was designed to be fun, and not time intensive. It was open and enabled the participants to choose the experiences that they wanted to share. The capturing of these experiences each week allowed for a kind of reflection-in-action, while the reviewing of postcards, collectively and individually, provided a stimulus to revisit particular experiences, and to see them as part of their wider journey.

What impact(s) or outcomes has using a creative approach had on the project?

The approach was light-touch and participants seemed to enjoy it. It enabled us to better understand their experiences, and what participants saw as important (and were happy to share). Some noted how the approach enabled them to reflect back on their own journeys, seeing things differently through that reflection. The approach also gave them the opportunity to experience new data collection methods, as a participant, which was helpful in terms of their own development as researchers.

Any brief reflections?

Although invited to draw, photograph or source an image for their postcard, those who did provide an image, drew it themselves. While not everyone drew a picture, or drew a picture on every postcard, all wrote a summary of their week, which perhaps shows a privileging of written text.

Additional or further reading

Millman, Z.K. (2013) 'Photographic Postcards as Research Tools: The 'Postcards from the Cut' Study.' Graduate Journal of Social Science. 10(2) pp. 54-75.

