

Beyond “It Was Great”: Views From Returning Sojourners

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This paper builds upon ideas from E. David Wong in examining the use of “It was great” among undergraduates returning from study abroad experiences. Using student voices reflecting upon Wong and their own use of “It was great,” the paper argues that the phrase reveals more about student learning abroad than others have argued. By examining 100 student reflections, representative categories were developed to show the range of meaning student sojourners intended when using that one phrase. The categories demonstrate that “It was great” reflects significant student learning, as well as the need for students to have opportunities to make sense of their study abroad experience.

Keywords: study abroad, It was Great, returning sojourners, intercultural development

INTRODUCTION

In “Beyond ‘It was great’? Not so Fast!,” E. David Wong investigates “It was great,” that oft heard study abroad response to “How was it?” in the attempt to both understand what returning sojourners have learned from their study abroad experience and identify what they are attempting to communicate when consistently using the phrase. While agreeing with Engle’s assertion (2013) that many sojourners “struggle to elaborate” their claim that the experience was great, Wong (2105) points out

How we make sense of this struggle is important, though, as different interpretations lead to widely divergent implications for understanding, fostering, and assessing the study abroad experience. (123)

Recognizing what sojourners mean when using this seemingly simple phrase carries significant implications for how study abroad professionals evaluate the success of study abroad programs, as well as how we interpret the complex learning done by sojourners abroad.

To explore this struggle, Wong integrates a variety of ideas proposed by study abroad professionals, from assessments of competence, such as Deardorff’s intercultural competence (2011) and Hammer’s Intercultural Development Inventory (2003), to studies of student learning, mainly, the Georgetown Consortium Project (Vande Berg, 2009). While each are excellent tools in defining and measuring student learning, they are not designed to uncover the “struggle to elaborate” facing returning sojourners. In order to gain this understanding, we need to add student voices to the discussion, the ones consistently using “It

was great” to describe their individual experiences. What do they believe “It was great” says about their experiences, and why might they choose this relatively simplistic way to represent an experience they claim is transformative?

One small part of Elon University’s thriving study abroad program is a four-credit academic course entitled “Coming Home.” Open only to students who have studied abroad or away in either a semester, summer, or winter term program, the course provides a re-entry space for students to process their own experience and explore various models for understanding study abroad to enhance their learning.

Christina, a Strategic Communications major who completed a January 2018 Winter Term abroad in Vietnam and a semester abroad in London Fall 2018, was a student in the course for the Fall of 2019, the fall of her senior year. We began discussing this project during that semester, and I was eager to work with her given her positive semester abroad and difficult year of re-entry. We add her voice throughout the discussion to demonstrate how individual students struggle with reflection upon re-entry and perceive the conversations they have when they return.

Throughout my time teaching both this course and at Elon, I have heard student after student, year after year, respond “It was great” when asked about their study abroad experience. Wong’s willingness to question the intent and learning of students using the phrase encouraged me to collect student voices regarding their understanding of the phrase, in the hope the comments would provide insight into the students’ use of the phrase as it represented their learning abroad. In one assignment, I ask students to read Wong’s article and offer two responses in writing.

1. What does “It was great” signify about returning sojourners? Does it reflect a lack of development in returning sojourners? Or could it be something else?
2. What does “It was great” mean to the sojourners who consistently use it? Why is it used consistently by returning sojourners all over the country?

Not surprisingly, these students had much to say in response to Wong’s ideas and potential readings of “It was great. None of them argued that the phrase reflected a lack of learning or a disappointing experience. Instead, they consistently argued “It was great” reflected the complexity of their experience and their efforts to learn about themselves from those experiences.

For the purpose of this project, we examined approximately 100 student responses to the writing assignment above, completed over the course of four semesters. Christina also completed the assignment and participated in the class discussion surrounding the assignment. We looked for patterns between responses, and were surprised at how often students agreed as they responded to Wong, especially noting how frequently they described their feelings using similar language. Through our analysis, we identified six ways students consistently described their own use of the “It was great” phrase. In our discussion of the six, we quote students verbatim as often as possible. When necessary, additions and subtractions are made to clarify meaning. We hope that by listening to the student voices we can better understand the impact of study abroad experiences and improve the reentry experience for students struggling to understand the depth of their transformation.

How Are You? Fine.

Most sojourners understood questions about their study abroad experience, whether they came from family, friends, or study abroad professionals, as little more than attempts at polite conversation. Students returning from a fall semester abroad to family holiday gatherings repeatedly heard “How was it?” in the same way they were asked about a recent vacation or weekend at the beach.

As Christina summarized it

The common assumption among returning students is that people are asking the question to be polite or out of an obligation. And given that few ever ask additional follow-up questions, we quickly get the impression that the questions are not sincere. Additionally, it feels as though the question limits the responding student from going into depth about their experience.

Students quickly learn to respond appropriately. As one student put it

“It was great” became my de facto answer whenever anyone wanted to know how my time abroad was, and often the conversation did not delve much beyond that point.

This returning sojourner makes clear, though, that her response does not suggest that she has nothing to say. Quite the opposite. She recognizes the inadequacies of “It was great,” and how much she could say, but that any conversation that begins “How was it?” does not provide much space to do so.

I didn’t know how to sum up four months that were both overwhelming and amazing, and even now, a year later, I still struggle to find words to describe my abroad experience. I agree with David Wong when he says, “We cannot assume that students’ inarticulateness about their study abroad experience means they lack something to say” (Wong, 133). In many cases, including my own, it is actually quite the opposite—I have so much to say, so many memories and moments to share with those who ask for them, that the words tend to jumble in my brain, incoherent and overpowering, to the point that is just becomes easier to dumb it down into a three-word sentence.

Another student agrees that confusing the superficiality of the response with the experience would be a mistake.

There is so much more depth to my experiences than the word “great” lets on, but I never knew how to share that with others.

Clearly, for some, “It was great” masks a much deeper study abroad transformation that demands a longer, richer conversation than polite conversations will allow.

Students also reported using “It was great” to satisfy audiences that were unlikely, from the students’ perspectives, to relate or appreciate what the experience was actually like. As one student put it

“Great” allowed me to answer everyone’s initial question...and kept me from having to overwhelm myself trying to figure out how to explain study abroad to someone who had never been.

Said another

... people who ask me how my experience was cannot relate to what I would say if I were to elaborate beyond the “It was great.”

Many noted that early attempts at “explaining” their study abroad to those asking “How was it?” led to glazed eyes and inattentive listeners. This reaction may again reflect that returning students are likely talking with people who do not have a shared experience to draw upon. Whatever the reason, students quickly learned to satisfy “How was it?” without much explanation.

Finally, some students suggested “It was great” might also construct a wall that protects the sojourners who would prefer not to reveal much in the conversation. They proposed that sojourners themselves might be hiding behind the phrase, using it to short circuit any conversation about the significance of the study abroad experience and its details, a conversation they may not be ready to have. One student claimed

“It was great” is an easy out for students who do not wish to discuss the hardships they faced abroad.

It makes sense that students struggling to come to grips with their own experience would want to avoid having to reflect upon that experience. By satisfying their audiences with “It was great” instead of a more meaningful conversation allows students to delay confrontation with the changes they need to process, yet may be resisting. This “processing,” even of a short-term experience, may be quite perplexing for students accustomed to knowing who they are. As this student points out,

[The phrase is] not intended to simplify my experience, but rather, there is not enough time in a day to articulate over and over how I am changed.

Clearly, we are wrong to assume that while “It was great” offers little substance in the context of a specific conversation it means little has occurred to the returning student. Students recognize even as they consistently use the phrase that the phrase in no way adequately represents their study abroad experience. To gain a clearer understanding of what students mean when they use the phrases, we must uncover what the students are thinking when choosing to use such phrases.

At the same time, these student responses indicate the existence of an important space where study abroad professionals may influence how students process their experiences in the early weeks after their return. We could intervene during this time to help students recognize that while most people who ask about their experiences will rely upon a set of simple questions in the vein of “How was it?” and expect little in return, processing the meaning of their experience takes careful analysis on a much deeper level.

In 2018, when returning with students from service projects in Zambia, I asked them to develop two responses to “How was it?” One was an elevator speech, designed for those asking “How was it?” in the same way they would ask “How are you?” The second was for people they anticipated wanted to know more, even if they asked “How was it?” Students created responses designed to engage these audiences in more significant conversations. Preparing students for the kinds of conversations they could expect upon their return helped them think about the message they wanted to communicate to other people, beyond “It was great,” and how they could communicate this message clearly and effectively. In creating these responses, students recognized there are richer questions than “How was it?” and responses than “It was great,” helping them begin processing these overwhelming experiences.

Does Anyone Really Care?

Six years ago, the first time I taught the Coming Home course, I had a frank discussion with the students enrolled. I explained that I knew my purposes in teaching the class, but not why they had chosen to take it, especially when they had so many good alternatives. To a person, they responded that they wanted to talk about their study abroad experience, a conversation that had eluded them since their return, and they wanted this conversation with those who truly wanted to listen to all they had to say. Successive classes have agreed, making clear that whether returning from short or long term abroad experiences students have much to process and are desperate to find someone willing to listen.

The students know many will ask about their experiences. But they consistently reported that people asking lost interest if the student offered any response beyond “It was great,” and seldom appeared to care about any details.

Discussions and conversations with family and friends about my experience were usually a brief short conversation almost used as small talk to then flow into a different topic. ... [W]hen articulating the ins and out of my experience and going into depth it became evidence the other person lost interest... and did not really care.

Said another

... the lack of attention or care of the person asking ... ultimately leads to a scripted elevator pitch that starts with “It was great...”

And again

... the majority of people who ask about our study abroad experiences don't actually care about what you have to say so we feel obligated to keep it short.

One student wonderfully represents the spirit of many returning students when confronted with an audience who has none of the passion they possess for their study abroad.

It is incredibly deterring to not see a shared sparkle in the eye of your audience when speaking of something you absolutely fell in love with, something that made you into the individual that you are...

Those of us involved in study abroad programs must recognize that our returning sojourners lack the audience they need to process their experiences. The people in their lives do not want or do not know how to engage with the sojourners about the significance of the experience. Most are eager to look at pictures of the experience, and some will even have short discussions about what it was like in Paris or Prague. But returning sojourners want [and need] to process their transformation. And they struggle to find anyone to listen.

Christina's experience reflects this struggle.

Although I was constantly supported by my family throughout my abroad experience, I struggled to have meaningful and reflective conversations upon my return. It was difficult to capture the many parts of my experience, especially the challenges, and when my family struggled to understand, I found it easier to suppress my experiences.

Returning to school didn't help, either, as there was no place to reflect and no audience eager to listen. While I had many opportunities to prepare for studying abroad, I felt a lack of support when returning home. The overall assumption was that everyone would return into their home lives seamlessly, which is unrealistic. If I tried to process this transformative experience, I felt as though people were bored with the constant reminders of my experience abroad. This challenge to verbalize my transformation left me isolated from friends and family.

It wasn't until Coming Home that I was able to fully reflect on my abroad experience, a year later. During that time, I was able to interact with my peers about the issues we were facing upon returning. We were able to share memorable and significant moments of our experiences, recognizing that we were not alone in these experiences. The class established a small community of students that gave people the freedom to talk about all aspects of their experience; the challenging, happy, difficult, and thrilling. It was a place of support and comfort for students to build off one another and consider different ideas. Additionally, it allowed students to build relationships and discuss ways in which they had grown as an individual, which they were unable to pinpoint without some direct guidance.

Really? "How Was It?"

Many students noted that while they recognized "It was great" was not the best response they could offer, "How was it?" is not much of a question, certainly not the question that would initiate an engaging discussion about the experience. They agreed that if people truly interested in sharing their experience would ask a better question, they would get a more forthcoming response. As one student put it

I use this response [It was great!] with people who I know won't be interested in listening to my response for more than 15 seconds. It is hard to fit 4 months of experiences into a response. Instead, students who partake in a study abroad experience should be asked more meaningful questions besides "How was study abroad?"

Agrees another

I do not believe the response "It was great" is the problem. I believe the question along the lines of "How was abroad?" is the underlying issue. This broad and bland question will lead to a broad and bland answer.

They argued that meaningful study abroad discussions required an active listener who reflected this interest in questions that encouraged complex conversations that demand time.

Certainly, study abroad professionals attempting to assess individual students have grappled with this very problem. As any good interviewer quickly learns, the quality of the question influences the quality of the response. When students admitted to using the "It was great" phrase more often than they could count, they noted they did so when asked a narrow range of questions about their experiences, most notably "How was it?" This flat question came at them often, from family, friends, and study abroad professionals, so often that they equated it with a lack of interest in their study abroad experience. One student observed that "no one has ever asked about 'the outcome' of my experience," noting that "vague, throwaway questions merely glimpse over the outcome of [her] experience."

Few students could recall any questions attempting to uncover significant experiences while abroad. With time, close family members or friends might finally ask more meaningful questions that would potentially lead to extended conversations. For most part, though, the processing of the experience languished until they discussed it in our class. Our class readings, nearly always research from study abroad professionals, posed interesting questions for the students [Had they developed sophisticated intercultural competence? What problems with re-entry plagues them even today?]. These questions gave them a context for investigating their experiences that questions such as "How was it?" did not provide. Students were ready to talk about how much their identity had changed and how their views of the global community and their own life had shifted. Yet they needed better questions and more engaged audiences to create the space that would help them develop their reflection.

Christina agrees that pushing for better questions will not only lead to better discussions, but also richer processing of the experience by students.

If study abroad professionals are truly curious about study abroad experiences, they must lead with a different question such as "What were your courses like?" "What was the transition like when you first arrived in country?" Another way to initiate engaging conversation is by trying statements like "Tell me about your favorite trip," or "Tell me about what it was like traveling independently." These kinds of questions and statements ensure that the responding student has more freedom to give insightful responses.

Then someone must be willing to listen. It is so important for a student to feel that their audiences want to engage in a conversation. I would not have been able to evaluate my own personal growth without the support of peers from Coming Home. Their support enabled me to see the ways in which I became more independent and globally mobile with more intercultural competence.

The Transformation, in Ten Words or Less

Whether a study abroad experience lasts twenty-five days or six months, students undergo significant personal and cultural changes (King and Baxter Magolda, 2005). More often than not, we expect them to sum up their experience in brief snippets of conversation. Returning students quickly recognize that the

forums available to help them process their experiences fall far short of what they require for expressing their continuing understandings. Some students responded that they were asked to “review” their study abroad as they might a movie. But while they found the questions superficial and shallow, their “It was great” response often helped them realize that they had much more to say. Those who took the time to reflect on their own about the experiences recognized how complicated it was to communicate the depth of this experience to others. As one student put it, “Talking about study abroad is one of the most difficult things to do when you return.”

Students found it difficult to find words to express their transformation and space for allowing them contemplate this transformation. One frustrated student complained

There isn't a place to share a genuine account of the time abroad.

Others needed language they did not possess to begin telling their story. As one put it,

I began to realize how impactful the semester had been, but could not figure out how to express it to others.

Said another

Although the experience that I had was great at times, it was so much more than that and I felt as though I could not even put it into words.

One student went further, claiming his

study abroad experience has been so impactful and so profound that it is nearly ineffable.

Once again, they recognize the significance of their experience.

The amount of history, knowledge and culture that I was exposed to, both in and out of the classroom, was life changing and yet my response is still “It was great.”

Yet they struggle to find the sophisticated language they need for all they want to express.

Christina expresses it this way

Many of us report feeling more culturally aware, globally agile, and interculturally competent as a result of our abroad experience. Unfortunately, these factors are not identified or discussed when we arrive home by sojourners or their families. Many of my peers said that only after an extended period of time at home were they able to share stories with others, that they were able to acknowledge the personal growth that they had obtained. We need time beyond that spent in our host countries to comprehend such complex experiences. I recognize that my peers and I have experienced a wide range of developments. It took me almost a year to understand the ways in which I had changed. In order to facilitate and support this type of process, we must respect how students discuss their experiences, while considering ways we can best support these students so that they can find a way to reflect on their experience without it feeling forced.

Unintentionally, the Coming Home course has often provided sojourners with ways of examining and discussing their experiences they did not possess and needed in order to investigate their experiences meaningfully. Looking at various intercultural competence definitions or discussing aspects of culture shock and reverse culture shock not only helped students recognize that their “individual” experiences could be understood systematically as a shared experience with others in the class, but that a language

existed that would enable them to label their experiences in important ways. Once they could place themselves on the AAC&U Intercultural KNOWLEDGE AND COMPETENCE VALUE Rubric or Hammer's DMIS, they could understand what experiences abroad shifted their ways of knowing, and how to talk about these shifts. This language proved useful as they attempted to understand how much they transformed abroad, a transformation they earlier downplayed when frustrated trying to express it. Few students came into our class recognizing how much they had been transformed. Only as the course progressed did they develop different ways of seeing and discussing their experience, enabling them to recognize how much they had changed.

No Effect or Delayed Effect?

Wong and many other researchers question the assumption that we can assess a study abroad experience shortly after return (Wong, 2015, Gray, 2015, Marx & Moss, 2015). They wonder how long students need in order to process a "particular experience," such as study abroad, and if this experience "affects the nature of subsequent experiences" [124], how long before we can effectively assess the effect on the sojourners?

Once sojourners return home, they are faced with many questions that demand immediate evaluations of the experience. How was it? What was the food like? Did you get to travel a lot? What did you get to see? Yet the impact of the experience, the shift in identity, self-confidence, and cultural understanding, may remain below the surface for some time. So while immediate assessments may prompt reactions from sojourners, often surface reactions, they are likely to miss the significant growth and learning expected by Engle and study abroad professionals. Occasionally, a parent or close friend may recognize changes in the ways students behave shortly upon return, and question that specific change. But most changes will be developmental, taking time to manifest in the ways the students see and act in the world.

Once students come back to campus, another "evaluation" begins, this time from friends and classmates. Students will face many of the same questions from friends, roommates, and others on the campus, but these conversations are not as trivial as the ones that might occur with distant relatives at home. On campus, their responses will influence important social relationships and status. Too often, students again rely on their practiced responses, choosing not to risk revealing much about the actual experience.

Sadly, this return to their academic context does not do much to help students process what they experienced, either. They have much to juggle when returning to campus. How they will get along with old friends? Where will they fit in the university? Will they be happy back on campus? Should they expect to become their "old" self upon return, or should they expect problems integrating this "new" person that they may barely understand, with the routines the "old" person had on campus? None of this promotes processing their experience abroad.

If students are not provided the space to process their time abroad, we should expect to delay their understanding of that time even longer. If students have had a transformative experience, and we do little to help them process that experience, when can we expect them understand and verbalize this transformation? Immediately upon their return? In a semester or year? How long should we expect it to take twenty-year-olds to understand and express the impact of any transformation before we begin judging the impact of the experience? (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005).

Too often, our short-term assessments reflect the limited time students are available to us on campus. Perhaps, in this period, we may be able to ask students to evaluate living arrangements and other technical aspects of their experience. However, if we use the time needed to process other transformative life events as a guide, we cannot expect students to offer insights much deeper than "It was great" without significant help processing. Most students in *Coming Home*, some of them a year or more from their study abroad experience, express frustration with their own inability to verbalize their experience that long after their return. They note that no one helps them understand how long it might take them to process their experience so that they can effectively express what they experienced, and they find it frustrating not to be able to do so.

One student speaks for many

[W]hen I arrived home from study abroad, I couldn't immediately share with people who asked me what exactly about the experience changed me or how exactly it was so formative for me... it takes time after the experience to re-adjust and be able to reflect on the whirlwind that is study abroad.

Frequently, students used the phrase "articulate" when attempting to express this frustration.

I have found it difficult to clearly articulate my experiences with friends and family. I believe that many people do not know how to articulate their experiences abroad... It can be very hard to know where to start and what would be the best way to communicate those experiences...

One student even

Made a photo album of my experience in India so that I could show people snippets of my experience and prompt questions about it because I find it extremely difficult to articulate my time there without questions or pictures as guidelines.

Too often, though, no one promotes time for processing and articulating the experience. Upon their return to campus,

Students are expected to fit back into the molds we have carved out for ourselves, but little value is given to the personal and social changes that occurred during the semester away.

Before they depart for their experiences, we are good at overwhelming them with information relating to course work, traveling, and safety. Upon their return, Wong notes "very little attention was given to outcomes related to academic knowledge, language skills, and intercultural competence." Or as one student put it,

No real efforts have been made to gauge my growth or assess my experience.

Christina argues

Our response to any assessment differs dramatically depending upon if the assessment occurs directly after arriving home or in the months following. The inability for sojourners to properly articulate their experience is common among many upon returning home. The individual is still attempting to comprehend everything they have experienced, therefore, they need time to process it before they can convey it to someone else.

Ultimately, it took me a full year to fully reflect on my abroad experience. I believe that it would have been beneficial for the university to offer some sort of workshop, peer group discussion, or re-entry forum during the early stages of my return. Otherwise, we have no way of knowing what returning students are thinking and processing in a systematic way. I am not arguing for mandatory intervention measures. But having a way for peers from certain abroad programs to come together regularly upon return would provide a campus support system and cement the ongoing connection many developed while abroad.

How Do I Not Sound Ungrateful?

In order to effectively process study abroad experiences, students must get away from seeing only the “great” moments in their “great” experience. Too often, they explore the “great” things that happened to them, until any listener might assume that, in fact, the entire experience was “great.” Yet the students know that they experienced homesickness, frustration, loneliness, and illness. So why would they not discuss these aspects of their experience, especially since processing these events may lead to a richer understanding of the experience?

Students quickly learn there is little reward for discussing those challenging, often disappointing moments they experienced abroad, and develop a “reluctance to address negative aspects” of their experience. Students reported that negative responses to “How was it?” [“It was hard adjusting to life in Barcelona.”] were met with sarcasm or derision [“It must have been hard spending a whole semester in Europe.”]. They learned to be cautious sharing difficult experiences to avoid the reactions, even if discussing these experiences helped them to reflect and grow. Given the study abroad assumptions held by their audiences, no one wanted to hear how it rained in Madrid, or what it was like getting terribly lost in Bangkok. Their audience expected to hear the “how great it was” stories, and showed little patience for the struggles involved.

Christina puts it well

There is also a common feeling of shame surrounding those of us who go abroad and encounter challenges, whether it be the language barrier, overall discomfort, or lack of familiarity with the local culture. These issues are commonly overlooked upon our return, and often we do not disclose these issues with family members or friends due to the fear of feeling “ungrateful.” This undermines the process of reflection for the returning sojourner. The inability to share such experiences will often cause sojourners to feel isolated as they often make the assumption that other sojourners had a seamless experience.

Returning sojourners also feel conflicted about sharing negative experiences due to the judgments they often receive from family and friends, and anticipate hearing from others. In one conversation, I began to explain how transformative my study abroad experience was due to significant challenges I faced along the way. Immediately, I got sarcastic remarks like “Oh please, you’re really telling me abroad was hard?” or “You can’t complain. You travelled to so many places.” Such responses lead me to resist mentioning any hardships I experienced. Many peers shared similar stories with me when relaying the challenges they had speaking with friends and family.

Those of us in study abroad programs recognize that every study abroad experience provides many highs and lows. But like all good educators, we hope that sojourners find many challenges in the experience. We expect them to be frustrated, angry, sad, and homesick. Reflecting upon and processing these moments will be far more meaningful to a student’s growth than recounting a “great” time in Paris. Effective assessment of a study abroad experience means uncovering these moments, and enabling sojourners to reflect upon the value of such experiences. If we fail to provide a supportive environment and audience for sharing these experiences, we limit sojourners ability to learn as much as they might from those experiences.

CONCLUSION

While “It was great” may not tell us specifics about study abroad experiences, the phrase represents rich, complex experiences often little understood by returning sojourners. As study abroad professionals, we need to be careful “reading” the phrase and what it tells us about the individuals who use it. Our sojourners recognize its simplicity and contradictions. They may use it to “be nice” or reflect their own

inability to articulate. Nevertheless, as we continue to assess the experiences, we must remember that transformative experiences, when they occur, are complicated, and assessing growth from such experiences may require long-term methods that do not match the structures of our institutions. For these students, as for Christina, the experience was “great.” Determining how much growth occurs from this “great” remains to be seen.

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