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Book review: Diary of a French girl: Surviving intercultural encounters

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BOOK REVIEW


What if we were privy to the innermost thoughts and feelings of one of our international students? What if we could read what she wrote home to her Mum and Dad and her best friend? What if we could read what she dared not even tell them, revealed only in her diary? What would she say about living in Australia? What would she say about the people she met? What would she say about the university and about our teaching?

Now we can, and it is very revealing. In 2003 Marie-Claire Patron began her studies into the social and cultural aspects of intercultural exchanges in Australia by French student sojourners. She published this research in 2007. It is through this research that Marie-Claire met Natalie, a 22 year-old girl from France, spending a year of her business degree studying at a university in Sydney. Marie-Claire was entranced by Natalie’s complex personality and her profound insights into Australian life as an international university student. Natalie gave Marie-Claire access to her diaries and her email correspondence and participated in multiple interviews and conversations. Marie-Claire subtly interspersed her extensive knowledge about acculturation and repatriation, helping the reader to interpret Natalie’s writing.

The result is an approachable and compelling phenomenology of student life as a French citizen in Australia. Marie-Claire organised the book into chronological order thereby illustrating key features of the international student’s psychological and social adjustment to living and studying in Australia and then returning to her home country. Marie-Claire inserts verbatim excerpts from Natalie’s diary and emails, translates them into English, creates a narrative thread that serves to string together these metaphorical beads, and interweaves higher education theory.

This book should be mandatory reading for international students as they: prepare for their sojourn in Australia, cope with cultural dissonance and homesickness, and readjust to life back in their home country. This book should also be compulsory reading for higher education administrators and teaching academics. Reading the hopes, dreams, fears, and traumas of an international student will inspire teaching academics to understand, if not to act, to ensure quality education for students with diverse needs.

This book makes a unique and important contribution to the literature as it conveys direct and unfiltered perceptions as to what it means to be an international student in Australia. While numerous books are emerging that present internationalisation from the university’s point of view (e.g. Jones and Brown, 2007), Marie-Claire writes with, rather than about, an international student. Diary of a French Girl is timely and socio-culturally relevant. From May through July of 2009, the treatment of international students has received a great deal of
bad press from the media (e.g. Waters & MacBean, May 29, 2009, for *ABC News*; Millar & Doherty, June 1, 2009, for *The Age*, & Carlisle, July 27, 2009, for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s *Four Corners*). Critique of Australian university policy and treatment of international students have come from within the academy as well (e.g. Brown & Jones, 2007; Brown & Joughin, 2007; Davies & Harcourt, 2007). Researchers such as De Vita (2007) list the significant problems commonly experienced by international students (e.g. communications and culturally specific academic standards), and Natalie’s experiences in *Diary of a French Girl* resonate with each of them.

*Diary of a French Girl* gives the reader insight into what it is like to be a French international student – a growing student population in Australian universities that is under-represented in the higher education literature. Natalie’s observations and insights help the reader to understand that it is not just Chinese students (Gerbic, 2005; Gu, 2005; Skyrme, 2005 & Thorpe, 2006) who have trouble reconciling their culturally-informed conceptualisation of teaching and learning with what they experience in Australia. In interpretation of Natalie’s diary entries about the behaviour of Australian university students, Patron wrote,

> Classroom practices of the French and the Australians are highly contrastive. French students rarely raise their hand to participate in class, for it is simply not part of their academic culture, whereas Australian students are encouraged to be more interactive, as it is usually part of their assessment. In France the ... Lecturers are seen as tantamount to Gods. They stand on their pedestal imparting their wisdom and knowledge and promptly leave the lecture theatre afterwards with no interjection from students and rarely know their names. (p. 220)

Although the intent and the tone of Patron’s book are not didactic, she does intersperse lessons to be learnt about how universities might support international students to thrive in the midst of such cultural dissonance. Six lessons can be gleaned from Patron’s book. First, provide a pre-excursion cultural orientation at the home institution for outbound students and follow-up with an early orientation to the students once they have arrived in the country of study. Second, support students to address practical, logistic details of living in the host country. For example, provide orientation information as to the location of banks and how-to information for opening accounts and making bill payments. Third, encourage students to seek and maintain extra-curricular social activities that will enable them to practise conversational language beyond the university campus and student population. Fourth, expose students to opportunities for experiencing the culture beyond the campus and the city or town in which the university is located. Fifth, help students to maintain a light-hearted and spirited sense of humour in perceiving cultural challenges. Sixth, transition students’ return to their home cultures by sharing information and resources with sponsoring organisations and sister universities.

Patron’s book presents a deep inquiry into one person’s experiences as an international student, and as such, a glimpse into the intercultural aspects of Australia and France. This book will not suit the needs of readers who are looking for comprehensive, academic theory
or frameworks, but will serve as an in-depth experiential view of higher education internationalisation.

References


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