# Transformative Learning in International and Multicultural Education

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Overview of our position

- Quality learning experiences in study abroad are intended to deeply engage the self of the learner

- Transformative learning theory:

    - Informs the design and facilitation of these learning experiences

    - provides theoretical framework for identifying and measuring learning outcomes

Need for international/intercultural experiences in higher education
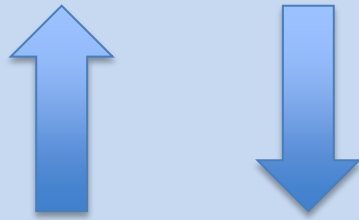
Arise from perceived needs
in society and among learners

. . . We have to go beyond, far beyond, the veneer of rationality which . . . is an illusion in any case . . . We must go on a journey deep into the human mind and heart – and blaze a new path . . .

Charles Hopkins, 2016
From the forward to
*Making Sense of Beliefs and Values:
Theory, Research and Practice*

Desired outcomes for global learning

- Increased global or intercultural competence, social responsibility, and readiness to act

- Increased awareness of self, self-understanding, and self-other relations

- Reconstruction of one's self identity

- Development of change agents – e.g., Contribution to UN's Sustainable Development Goals

Learning theory and assessment

- Assessment of learning outcomes implies a theory of learning

- Transformative learning is a theory that can guide assessment of learning outcomes in study abroad and and international education

Two brief stories
of student experiences in study abroad

Thomas

Younger, undergraduate student, not married, majoring in agricultural economics

Hannah

Mid-level manager of IT in university, doctoral student, married, mother of three young children

". . . what students describe as 'life-transforming' is, at root, the experience of seeing themselves, their culture and values, in some new way, perceived through the lens - that is, feedback, of the host culture"

Selby, 2008

Learning and change in study abroad:

- Challenges our existing frames of reference – the beliefs, assumptions, and values we hold about ourselves, others and the world

- Often evokes potentially powerful feelings and emotions within the learning experience

- May result in dramatic shifts in our sense of self and self-other relationships

Transformative Learning Theory:

A way to better understand the meaning of these experiences

Focus of transformative learning theory

". . . . how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others – to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers."

(Mezirow, 2012, p. 76)

Defining transformative learning

- More than just learning something new

- More than change

- Dramatic and profound shifts in one's sense of self and world view

Early work

- Paulo Freire (Late 1960s, early 1970s
  - Focus on development of critical consciousness and awareness of oppression through critical self-reflection

  - Understanding of self and self-other relations

- Jack Mezirow (mid to late 1970s)
  - Focus on transformation of meaning perspectives through critical self-reflection

  - Analysis of assumptions about self, knowledge, and social and cultural contexts

Influence of developmental psychology

- Robert Kegan (early 80s - present)
  - Identifying and naming hidden commitments

  - Focus on the self-transforming self

- Laurent Daloz (mid 80s)
  - Focused on developmental transitions in learners negotiating these developmental shifts

  - Restoring meaning in life through new ways of being in the world

Influence of developmental psychology (continued)

- Robert Boyd (late 80s, early 90s)
  - Bound up with processes of individuation or realizing our authentic selves

  - Developing consciousness

- Others –mid 90s to present
  - Mary Belenky et al – Ways of knowing

  - Tisdell – cultural spiritual realizations

  - Dirkx – imaginative engagement or work with emotional-laden experiences

  - O'Sullivan – planetary consciousness

- European developments (2000 – 2019) ESREA Network on transformative learning

Running through this tradition are two primary stories of the self

The critically reflective self

- The self as critically reflective of itself, its experiences, and society

    - The self as a meaning making entity

    - (Mezirow, Cranton)

The expressive imaginative self

- The self as an expressive, imaginative creative entity involved in the elaboration of a story or myth for one's life

  - The self as expressive of inner, often unconscious relational and emotional demands

  - Struggle for authenticity

  - (Boyd, Yorks & Kasl, Dirkx)

These various stories demonstrate a deeper dimension involved in transformative learning

Expansion of consciousness through transformation of basic world views and specific capacities of the self

Engagement with emotion-laden experiences and images

Facilitated though conscious[ly] . . . receiving symbolic content and critically analyzing underling premises

Adapted from Dean Elias, 1997

Goals of transformative learning

- 'Foster a deeper sense of self-awareness and self-understanding

- Establish Increasingly authentic relationships with one's self and the "other"

- Gradually transition from a more individually oriented sense of self to a more transcendent or communal sense of self

Process of transformative learning:

- Calls into question one's beliefs, assumptions and values

- Implies an ongoing meaning-making process - construction, and reconstruction of one's sense of self and self-other relationships

Study abroad environments informed by transformative learning help students:

- Identify and critically reflect on beliefs, values, and assumptions that are problematic

- Constructively engage and work through powerful emotion-laden experiences that can arise in international education

In summary – process:

- Study abroad experiences can disrupt our ways of making sense of our selves, others, and the world around us

- These experiences often evoke powerful emotions, affect, and images

- Working through these experiences involves processes of critical reflection and imaginative engagement

In Summary – outcomes

- Expansion of consciousness – greater awareness and understanding

- Transformation of basic world views – beliefs, assumptions, values – perspective shifts

- Transformation of capacities or structures of the self – becoming who one is intended to be

Summary - outcomes

Meaning perspectives that are more:

- Open

- Inclusive

- Discerning

- Reflective and

- Emotionally capable of change

In other words, a profound shift in our:

Sense of self

Being in the world

Conclusion

- Self as central construct in transformative learning theory & global learning

- More holistic theoretical understanding of the self and its transformation

- Transformative learning represents powerful learning theory for conceptualizing outcomes of global learning

So,

- Our theoretical understanding of a transforming self has evolved

- We need empirical studies of transformative changes in the self

Beliefs and values are at the very heart of why we humans do what we do – and who we say we are – to ourselves, others, and the world at large. [It is vitally important that we understand] the complex interactions (e.g., among affect, cognition, context, culture, and development) that culminate in a unique constellation of beliefs and values for every human being. . .

Shealy, 2016