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 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 through consciously... receiving symbolic content and critically analyzing underlying 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