Promise and Problems of Fostering Transformative Learning for Adults in Short-term Study Abroad Programs

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Abstract

International educators stress the transformative potential of study abroad experiences, suggesting the promise for professional and personal growth. We report on how adults make sense of a seven-day study tour program to the United Kingdom. The results suggest issues that need to be addressed to foster transformative learning in adult study abroad programs.

In the introductory chapter to a recent text on international education, Selby (2008) writes, “It has become cliché to promote study abroad as a ‘life transforming’ experience” but, he goes on to say, “I am not sure any of us understand what we mean by the expression ‘life-transforming’ or even if students know what they intend” (p. 1). If we are going to argue for international experiences as potentially transformative, he suggested, we need empirical evidence to support this claim. Many graduate programs in adult education now feature international study tours or short-term study abroad programs. Lyons (2002), Taylor (1994), and others (Savicki, 2008) suggest that such cross-cultural experiences can be transformative or lead to change in motivations, attitudes, values, meaning perspectives, and self-identity. However, few studies have systematically examined the experiences of adults participating in such programs, particularly short-term study abroad experiences. Given the life contexts that adults bring to such experiences and the fact that these programs often represent a component of graduate study or professional development, there is reason to question the applicability of findings from studies that have focused primarily on undergraduate study abroad programs. The purpose of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of adults who participated in a short-term study tour experience as part of their graduate studies or professional development. We sought to describe how they come to understand the meaning of this experience.

Background

The workings of a global economy are becoming increasingly real and local for ordinary citizens who are losing their jobs to outsourcing or foreign competition, who are placing calls to customer service and reaching help desks located half-way around the world, or who are seeing their neighborhoods and communities transformed by immigration from Asia, the Middle East, and Central and South America. Even the geopolitics of a world increasingly comprised of deeply interconnected societies often manifests itself within neighborhoods, communities, and educational systems. These dramatic changes at the international level have prompted calls for institutions of higher education to foster among students cross-cultural or inter-cultural awareness or competence (Savicki, 2008). Study abroad currently represents one among a number of different substantive internationalizing efforts in many universities and colleges across the United States. For the most part, however, these efforts at the graduate level have been limited to specific disciplines, such as medicine and law.

Adult education, however, has reflected an international focus for many years. Our professional meetings and research conferences represent a rich mix of scholars, practitioners,
and students from around the world. A number of graduate programs in adult education have also consistently offered study tours or international trips as part of their curriculum. However, we know relatively little about how these experiences are perceived by their participants or how they may be fostering deep or transformative learning. In this study, therefore, we focused on how adult learners participating in a graduate-level, short-term study tour of higher and adult education within the United Kingdom perceived and made sense of their experiences.

**Theoretical Perspective**

We conceptualized the process of potential change in short-term study abroad experiences within the theoretical perspectives of self-work and self-formation (Chappell, Rhodes, Solomon, Tennant, & Yates, 2003; Clark & Dirkx, 2000; Tennant, 2000). Similar to multicultural education (Dolby, 2000), the ideas of self-identity and difference have emerged as important concepts in studies of international education and the development of intercultural competence. Our study builds on those few studies that suggest short-term study abroad experiences may precipitate self-identity work (Brender, 2006; Dirkx, Jessup Anger, Brender, Gwekwerere, & Smith, 2007; Dolby, 2004; Hopkins, 1999) and may have an impact on participants’ intellectual or personal lives. For purposes of this study, we regard self-identity and difference as expressive of social relations and as constructed and re-constructed within particular discourse communities (Chappell et al., 2003; Dolby, 2000).

We conceptualized the process of self-work and change from the perspective of transformative learning theory. Although several different theoretical perspectives on transformative learning have been elaborated (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007), most of these perspectives reflect an emphasis on a fundamental shift in one’s sense of self or one’s relationship with the broader world. That is, one’s frame of reference or particular way of making sense of some aspect of one’s being in the world is, in transformative learning, fundamentally altered (Cranton, 2006) through implicit or explicit participation in some kind of discourse community. In this study, we explored the extent to which the kinds of self-work precipitated in adult learners by participation in short-term study abroad represented transformative learning.

**Methodology**

This study focused on a seven-day study abroad experience that was part of a graduate-level course on comparative and international experiences in higher and adult education, offered through a large, Midwestern university in the United States. Nine of the course participants agreed to participate in the study. They were all graduate students, some just beginning and others preparing for dissertation research. They also differed by age, gender, race, nationality, and prior international experience. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted prior to and following return from the study tour. The pre-tour interview focused on eliciting information on participants’ expectations for the study tour experience and present understandings of themselves relative to their British hosts. Central to the post-tour interviews was the critical incident process, in which we solicited specific incidents of the tour that held particular meaning or importance for the participants and through which they seemed to learn something about themselves. One of the researchers with previous study tour experience conducted the interviews and observed participants during the tour, taking field notes and recording reflections in her log. Interviews were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Participants also agreed to allow their reflective papers, capstone project, and journals to be used as additional sources of data. The reflective papers were five to seven pages in length.
and focused primarily on observations and reflections participants made of their international experiences within the context of the course readings and their own experiences. The capstone project was a more formal library research experience that was intended to deepen their knowledge and understanding of questions within their particular areas of interest or practice. Finally, journals focused on the students affective or emotional dimensions of their experience; with the course overall, the study tour, and interactions within the tour; and experiences with one another. The interviews, field notes, class papers, and course journals were subjected to a combination of phenomenological, ethnographic, and grounded theory analytic methods.

Summary of Findings

The narratives participants created around their study abroad experience revealed different ways in which they made sense of their experiences. All participants reported enjoying the experience and deriving considerable professional benefit from the study tour. For the most part, however, participants did not construe this experience as self-work (Chappell et al., 2003; Tennant, 2000), and their reports are not consistent with our understanding of the transformative learning that can occur within international contexts (Lyons, 2000; Savicki, 2008; Taylor, 1994).

The meaning of participant experiences was largely mediated by three central issues: (a) their expectations of the experience, (b) role of prior experiences, and (c) relational issues within their group. Participants held expectations for the experience that were both academic and personal, but they varied to the extent in which these two forms of expectations were emphasized in their study tour experience. Some participants expressed clear and specific goals for the experience related to their dissertation research interests or to work-related concerns. These students held very high expectations for the academic outcomes of this experience. They viewed the experience as an opportunity to learn more about their field of study within a new context, and to have first-hand experience at applying what they were learning from the “classroom” portion of the course. Lauren described how the knowledge she gained from the study tour was going to help her be a better teacher. Others expressed their goals in more personal and subjective terms, such as developing a new awareness of themselves or their values and beliefs with regard to certain issues that emerged within the study tour. For example, Dusty said she wanted to “learn more about myself, and how I am thinking of issues and the whole question of myself.” She explained how she believed the study abroad experience would help her have a broader view, “I want to continue to make connections to other things.” Lauren indicated that she learned she could be more independent than she had ever been. In general, those with vague academic intentions tended to express more openness to new experiences on the tour, while those with specific academic intentions reported less interest in new experience. Few participants expressed personal growth as an expectation of the study tour.

Prior international experiences also influenced how participants construed the meaning of this particular international experience. Participants with prior international experiences tended to frame and make sense of this study tour within the context of these prior experiences. For example, in making reference to the structure of the educational systems in England, Nora referred to her previous international experience: “When I studied in Germany I figured out that things were different there.” Nora further reflected that the English system seems to be “used in a lot of other countries, so I have a better feel for what it’s about.” In contrast to those with less international experiences, their narratives tended to be more intellectual and analytic. The narratives of the less experienced participants were more subjective and suggested more emotional engagement with their experiences. Prior to this trip, Lauren had not traveled
internationally. In discussing her initial homesickness, Lauren remarked, “It was the first time I really traveled without a family member or my husband with me. It was the first time I had ever gone somewhere I’d never been and not had anybody related to me there and I think it was just a combination of being 24 hours straight and being exhausted and being on the other side of the world and not being able to call home. Like that hit me at really weird times.” However, she adds “I just had a fabulous time. I came back and made different connections in the work that I do here and you know thinking about some of the people that I work with and their struggles as teachers in the U.S. and how that compares to struggles of teachers in Great Britain.” Those with prior international experiences tended to more directed and influenced by these prior experiences, while those with less experience seemed more open to whatever the tour may offer.

Finally, relational issues within their peer group influenced how participants made sense of the study tour experience. They talked about emotional issues arising within the group itself and associated with its dynamics and relations. As a result of the group experience, some participants realized new aspects about themselves with regard to their social interaction needs. They varied, however, in terms of their perceptions of the importance of the group to their experience. At one end, Dusty described strong needs for connectivity and felt others were “selfish” when they spent time independent from the group. Nick and Kevin, however, preferred to spend more time alone, and Nora commented on how being part of the group constrained things she could do. She remarked, “I love walking, part of what I do, everywhere between sites. That was one regret of being with a group so much that sometimes I could have done more of that.” While some said they needed more alone time for reflection, others insisted that the group experience was paramount to the study tour experience.

Most of the participants on the study tour expressed some discomfort associated with interpersonal dynamics of the group. The resulting disequilibrium prompted reflection that was apparent in the interviews. The emerging self-understandings suggested a growing awareness of individual differences within the group, including differing expectations, prior experiences, cultural backgrounds, and differing learning styles. They expressed awareness of how these differences were being expressed within interpersonal interactions and also affecting group relations. Participants began to see first hand how such differences within the group influenced and shaped the meaning they were deriving from their experiences. It was less clear, however, how these emotional issues were being integrated within an ongoing process of self-work.

Implications and Conclusion

Short-term study abroad represents an enjoyable and academically meaningful experience for adult learners. For younger students, however, the experience is perceived as “overwhelmingly personal” (Chambers & Chambers, 2008, p. 148) and their learning is construed as heavily experiential. Their sense making is deeply connected with their own identity, and seen within their own frames of “personal needs desires, hopes, fears and objectives” (p. 148). For graduate students in education, who are typically older and more experienced than traditional undergraduate students, the sense-making process reflects a complex relationship between academic or professional goals and self-formative processes that seem inherent to adult learners participating in formal education (Chappell et al., 2003). Complicating the potential for transformative self-work on a short-term study tour was the lack of time for reflection. Reflection represents a critical component of transformative learning (Cranton, 2006; Merriam et al., 2007) but the seven-day study tour didn’t allow for sufficient time for formal, systematic
reflection. Although traveling from one site to another provided opportunities for informal and spontaneous reflections, participants described little reflective conversations during these times.

Studies of undergraduate study abroad experiences also report powerful emotional issues among participants (Chambers & Chambers, 2008). As with undergraduate students, relational issues represented a potentially important location for deep learning (Chambers & Chambers, 2008) among the adult learners participating in this study tour experience. Most of these issues, however, arose from the dynamics and relationships within their peer group. Few participants reported emotion-laden experiences associated with the host site, people, or culture. This finding suggests that learning to work across difference may be more of an issue with the study abroad group itself than with difference perceived between participants and their host culture.

This study provides insights into the transformative potential of international experiences represented in short-term study tours, but a potential that requires careful planning and facilitation (Selby, 2008). What these experiences mean to participants are clearly mediated by their expectations for the experience, as well as prior experiences and knowledge of international contexts. Given the tendency for humans to frame new experiences in light of prior frames of reference or schemas (Bradford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Merriam et al., 2007), facilitators of short-term study tour experiences should attend to ways in which the study tour is making problematic assumptions, beliefs, and values associated with these frames of reference. Such problematizing should occur within the context of more formal and systematic reflective periods. Even with a crowded itinerary, it is imperative that such programs use formal reflection, during which participants are asked to make explicit and reflect on beliefs and assumptions that may be implicitly framing their understandings of their international experiences.

In addition, relations within the group and among its members represent one of the more emotionally powerful dimensions of the short-term study-tour experience. Small learning groups, communities, and teams represent potentially powerful contexts for transformative learning (Boyd, 1991; Dirkx & Smith, 2009; Kasl & Elias, 2000). For this reason, facilitators need to be more cognizant of this dimension of their international programs and help participants become aware of and to learn from the emotional dynamics that inevitably develop and characterize such group experiences. It is often what is beneath the surface that represents powerful opportunities for self-work and transformation (Stapley, 2006).

References


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