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Study Abroad Programs: A Mirror for Adult Learning and Perspective Transformation

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Abstract: This pilot study qualitatively sought to examine how study abroad programs in Third-World countries provide a means of fostering perspective transformation in adult learners. A diverse group of students and faculty from four cooperating universities participated in a six-week study abroad program in Africa. It examined the concepts of perspective transformation, transformative learning, and critical reflection.

Study Abroad in Africa

In May of 1999, Langston University, Langston, Oklahoma, sponsored a six-week study abroad program to Gambia and Senegal, West Africa. Four graduate students, nineteen undergraduate students, and three faculty members from four cooperating universities (Langston University, Northeastern State University, Oklahoma State University, University of Oklahoma) participated in the program. The group was culturally diverse and ranged from 18 to 58 years of age, with the majority being non-traditional students. Twelve Black-Americans, two Native-Americans, one Mexican-National, eight Caucasian-American students, and three faculty members -- one African (a professor who fled Nigeria and is living and teaching in the United States), one Black-American, and one Caucasian-American -- participated in the study abroad program. This complement of maturity and diversity provided a variety of life experiences and cultural dimensions to the study abroad program.

Reflection on Africa Study Abroad

American students confront unique problems of personal adjustment when they elect to study in Africa. For the White-American student, it becomes his/her first very real experience of being a visible minority, in contrast to the Black-American student who experiences "what it means to be in the majority" (Fugate, 1987, p. 14). Because the familiar cues that traditionally support cultural assumptions were no longer available to the students, non-academic counseling proved to be essential in helping students process experiences while grappling with their own heritage and history (Fugate, 1987; Madden & Powers, 1971).

Participating in a culture that seemed one hundred years behind in technology, city and state governance and infrastructure, transportation, agriculture and industry, and available health/medical services can be extremely disorienting. Every convenience one knows and takes for granted, as well as one's cultural assumptions, signs, and symbols of social intercourse are stripped away. "He or she is like a fish out of water. No matter how broad-minded or full of good will he/she may be, a series of props have been knocked out from under him/her" (Gordon, 1992, p. 1). Any orientation to prepare students for study in a developing nation must address the issues

associated with the profound culture shock as opportunities for personal growth and development (Fugate, 1987; Gordon, 1992).

Experiencing the Gambian culture affected each individual and challenged the way each perceived, understood, and felt about his/her own world and culture. It was an experience of self-examination and, for some, emancipation. The educational value of the Gambia study abroad program primarily occurred in the affective, social, and emancipatory domains of learning, which include values clarification, attitude change, personal development, and social maturity (Habermas, 1971; Immelman & Schneider, 1998). This dominance fostered transformative learning (Taylor, 1998).

Perspective Transformation

Perspective transformation is described as "the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships" (Mezirow, 1981, p. 6). When an individual encounters a new situation, it is filtered through his/her meaning perspective in order to interpret and give meaning to the new experience. If the experience is congruent with one's perspectives, it will then be assimilated into the meaning perspective. However, if the experience is radically different and incongruent, then, it will either be rejected or the meaning perspective will be transformed to accommodate the new experience (Taylor, 1998).

Study abroad programs provide an ideal opportunity for individuals to develop a greater capacity to adapt to and act upon prior knowledge and experience through critical reflection (Taylor, 1998). By their very nature, university study abroad programs foster transformative learning. As a result of adapting to new experiences, perspective transformation often takes place.

Pilot Study: Purpose and Procedure

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspective transformation of students participating in the 1999 Gambia and Senegal, West Africa study abroad program. Pre and post-interviews were given to a sample of the undergraduate students before and after experiencing two historical, West African slave trade ports: Fort James, located inland on the Gambia River, and Goree Island located near Dakar, Senegal. The focus of the pre-interview (conducted during the second and third weeks of the six-week study abroad program) was to capture the individual's expectations, framed by cultural assumptions and presuppositions that influenced the meaning given to experiences, prior to visiting slave ports. The post-interview (conducted at the end of the six-week program) focused on capturing the individual's revision of long held meaning structures that have shaped his/her assumptions as a result of seeing and experiencing the slave ports of Fort James and Goree Island. The participants were representative of the undergraduate study abroad group in terms of race, gender, and age (See Appendix A). A semi-structured interview technique was utilized. This paper, focusing on individual's critical reflections of pre and post experiences at slave trade ports, examines the pivotal experiences that enabled transformational learning.

Thoughts and Conclusions on the Pre-interviews

The pre-interviews indicated that all of the respondents were experiencing a disorienting dilemma to their existing assumptions, challenging their pattern of responses and behaviors (Mezirow, 1981). Each pre-interview asked the respondents to examine their reasons for coming to Africa, to discuss their perceptions of the Gambian culture and people, to discuss any perceptions that were different from their expectations, and to discuss any issues within the study abroad program. The ideas and concepts that emerged from the interview data clustered around seven themes.

A summary of the conclusions from each theme are: **Theme one: Reasons for going to Africa:** the respondents chose to go to Africa to experience another part of the world and its' culture, for the excitement of travel, and the majority felt they were drawn to Africa spiritually or ethnically. **Theme two: Initial perceptions of Africa:** the respondents' initial perceptions of Africa ranged from what was expected, based on the orientation sessions, to being shocked at the level of poverty. Most felt ill equipped to handle the realities of Gambia. **Theme three: The differences between oppression and being disadvantaged:** many of the respondents raised the issue of the differences between being an oppressed people or a disadvantaged people and wondered where the Gambian people fell. Some saw the plight of the Gambian people as one of oppression, while others saw it as one of being disadvantaged. **Theme four: The role of the Gambian government:** all of the respondents expressed confusion regarding the role of the Gambian government and its' relationship to its' people. Many saw the government as oppressive and unresponsive to the needs of the people. **Theme five: Most Americans lead a privileged life:** perhaps, one of the most profound realizations of the respondents was that of what a privileged life they lead as Americans. The respondents felt that Americans could learn a great deal from the people of Gambia. **Theme six: Reactions to the Gambian culture:** the respondents were touched by the values for community, family and extended family, children, and respect for elders evidenced within the Gambian culture. **Theme seven: Racial tension:** all of the respondents felt a racial tension within and among the members of the study abroad group. None of the respondents felt racial tension from the Gambians.

The pre-interviews indicated that the study abroad program provided new experiences, which caused the respondents to either organize or reorganize the meaning of their experiences. For some, (Respondents 4, 5, and 8), assumptions and experiences were interpreted and easily integrated into their existing cultural and psychological assumptions. For others, (Respondents 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and 9), the experiences were incongruent and stressful, causing the respondents to critically reappraise their assumptions (Taylor, 1998). The centrality of these experiences (each respondent experienced the same Gambian culture) created opportunities for critical reflection and rational discourse for each respondent (Mezirow, 1990).

The most compelling challenge to the respondents' assumptions were the issues of prejudice that emerged within the group. Initially, none of the respondents, regardless of race, viewed themselves as prejudiced, yet, many of their comments suggested otherwise. The White respondents' experience with race related prejudice was limited. Confused about the discrimination they were feeling from some of the group members, the White and Native-American respondents reexamined their personal assumptions regarding interracial relationships. By ignoring, or excusing, the prejudicial behaviors of others, the White and Native-American

respondents found a comfort zone in which to live with the group. For many of the Non-Black respondents, the experience of discrimination was disorienting and painful.

The Black respondents referred to the reverse discrimination that existed, as a result of the unresolved 'issues' or 'baggage' of some of the Black group members. In general, the Black respondents identified the underlying assumptions that Black-Americans hold about White Americans as the trigger for prejudicial behaviors. The Black respondents assumed that White people exhibited an attitude of superiority and imposed their ethnocentric views on other cultures/races. They attributed that assumption to be the primary cause of Blacks being prejudiced toward Whites. The Black respondents also held an assumption that the White members of the group were, for the first time, beginning to understand how it feels to be considered, and treated, as a minority. As the Black respondents reexamined their reactions to their assumptions, some of the Black respondents found themselves exhibiting prejudicial behaviors without realizing they were being drawn into that way of thinking. Others found that Blacks, and Whites, often misinterpreted the verbal and nonverbal communication between the two races, creating false assumptions about each race. All of the Black respondents resolved to remain uninvolved in the prejudicial behaviors exhibited by some members of the group.

Visiting the Slave Ports

The students' understanding of the historical perspective of James Island and Goree Island was extremely limited. They were not given an appropriate orientation to prepare them for what they were going to see. The students visited the exhibition 'Voyage of No Return - The Atlantic Slave Trade and the Senegambia' at the old trading post village of Albreda. Albreda is within sight of James Island. The fort on James Island was used as a holding tank. Slaves were packed into the small cells prior to being shipped to Goree Island and then overseas (Davidson, 1965). While the exhibition showed pictures and estimated the number of slaves traded, nothing could have prepared the students for the visual assault on their senses of seeing the cells on James and Goree Islands. One could almost smell the blood and taste the sweat. It was after the students visited these slave ports that the post-interviews were conducted.

Results of the Post-Interviews

The post-interviews indicated efforts on the part of each respondent to critically reflect upon his/her beliefs and assumptions in order to make sense of his/her disorienting dilemma. The interviews also indicated that most of the individuals were in a process of "transforming the structures of one's assumptions" (Mezirow, 1981, p. 8). The post-interview data produced five dominant themes.

The ideas and concepts that emerged from the post-interviews clustered around these five themes. **Theme one: the respondents felt overwhelmed by the experience** and felt that the new knowledge they learned, as a result of visiting the slave ports, led to an increased understanding of the issues surrounding slavery. Visiting the slave ports significantly impacted the respondents and served as the disorienting dilemma, as evidenced by the following statements:

. . . I was brought up to believe White people should be treated differently. We received family instructions on how "to be" with White people. . . I know I have prejudices, but I am looking beyond them to see everyone as an individual (R1). I cried more at James Island than I did anywhere. . . When I went down into that little dungeon. . . just overwhelming sadness, and that made me upset for the people in our group (R2). . . I could not believe the Portuguese, Dutch, English, and Americans could do what they did. What was their socialization and psychological processes that told them that slavery and inhumane behavior was acceptable (R3). . . Africans were treated horribly, but because of the racial tensions, it made it harder for me to have much empathy. . . I wanted to. . . I wanted to feel what they were feeling (R6). . . My tears for the Blacks in our group were genuine, despite all of our differences during the trip (R9).

Theme two: the respondents became increasingly aware of the role different peoples played in the promotion and perpetuation of slavery. Respondent one's view summed up what most of the group felt. "Basically, all people are heathens. We all played a role in slavery".

Theme Three: many of the respondents experienced **a transformation in their assumptions** as a result of visiting the slave ports. The following are some of the responses:

. . . There was a lot of opportunity to deal with issues of racism. . . we were a diverse group, but we should have left Gambia as a close group of people and we didn't (R1). . . I learned more than what I anticipated about myself, the people in Africa, and the people in our group. I learned that I know very little about slavery and that I had many false beliefs about Blacks. . . on this trip, I found myself doing some of the very things I hate (R2). . . I think it was very sad how my forefathers were brought to the United States. . . If they had never come to America, I would be back in Africa. . . I wouldn't want that. . . (R5).

Theme four: prejudice and racism became intensified as a result of the slave port visits:

I thought I lived above prejudice. . . I think what really made me see my personal prejudices was the night [she] called you guys f---ing white crackers. Up until that point, I was buying into the racial crap that was taking place within the group. I was defending some of the Blacks' attitudes when I should have been telling them they were wrong. . . (R1). . . at Goree, when we were separated (White/Black [by lead professor]), increased the animosity, the feelings of racism. . . I am tired of Black-Americans going off on me because I am White. . . That is pure racism (R3).. Once those few troublemakers surrounded themselves with followers, it (prejudiced attitudes) grew like a brush fire. . . There was a direct order on what to do or not to do with the Whites. . . Once, I was even threatened. . . That scared me a little. . . I'm not a prejudiced person, but I also was too afraid to confront some of the issues. . . (R4) . . racism within the group was definitely fueled by the trip to the slave ports (R5).

Theme Five: The respondents felt that the **study abroad program was a life changing experience** and had affected their lives on a very personal level. Some participant reflections:

. . .we should have left Gambia as a close group of people and we didn't. . .(R1). .
. .the
study abroad program impacted me significantly. Some for the good and some for
the bad. I came home more prejudiced than I left. . .(R3). . .last time I looked,
my passport said American, not African American. We are Americans. We are
not Africans; and as a Black American, I have American problems and issues to
deal with when I return home . . .(R4). My worldview had been changed by the
trip. . .(R7). . .Even though the dynamics of the group challenged many of my
personal beliefs, I would definitely recommend a study abroad program to every
student. . .I was saddened by the poverty of the people, but hopeful because of
their community spirit. I was saddened by the behavior of so many of our group
members, but hopeful for a healing to take place. . .(R9).

Thoughts and Conclusions on the Post-interviews

The post-interviews indicated that the respondents were in critical reflection and rational discourse (Mezirow, 1995). In the critical reflection phase, the respondents were in the process of restructuring their assumptions and beliefs to be more inclusive and integrative, because many of their experiences were inconsistent with what they held to be true. In this process of reflection, the respondents turned their attention toward "the justifications for what they knew, felt, believed, and acted upon" (Mezirow, 1995, p. 46). Most of the respondents failed to accept their own prejudices, even though their comments supported their prejudicial beliefs. The negative group interaction led the respondents to conclude that the study abroad program was an experience in learning about ones' self.

The rational discourse phase of perspective transformation was evidenced throughout the post-interviews. The respondents questioned "the comprehensibility, truth, appropriateness (in relation to norms), or authenticity (in relation to feelings) of what was being asserted" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 77). For the respondents, rational discourse was the arena in which critical reflection was put into action. It is here that assumptions and beliefs are challenged and where meaning perspectives and meaning structures are transformed (Taylor, 1998).

As a result of visiting the slave ports, the respondents were given a more complete historical account of the slave trade. Visiting the slave ports became the disorienting experience that forced the respondents to question their basic assumptions concerning slavery and prejudice. All the respondents reported acquiring new knowledge that challenged their assumptions and beliefs. Some of the respondents reflected upon and wondered what it must have been like for the slaves as they stood at 'The Door of No Return' on Goree Island.

The respondents were acutely aware of a greater division within the group because of prejudices. The division was not only between Non-Black and Black, but also between Black and Black, and White and White. The respondents recognized these issues to be an opportunity for deeper insight into themselves and into their personal issues with prejudice. Many of the respondents

believed that the object of hate and anger, whether it is a person, place, thing, or entire race, often becomes the target upon which their misfortune and misery can be blamed.

Most of the respondents recognized that they had choices to make as a result of the study abroad trip. They could take the new experiences afforded them and change or alter their beliefs and assumptions. The study abroad program provided the opportunity to solidify those choices by serving as a mirror for the students. They could not run away from that mirror. It followed them wherever they went and served as a self-reflection into their very souls. When the respondents were faced with the disorienting dilemmas, they had to accept their own prejudices or restructure their belief system. All of the respondents believed that each person was accountable for his/her actions toward others and the world around him/her, and until each person accepted that responsibility, racism and prejudice would continue.

Reflections

Spending six weeks in a Third-World country requires a great deal of planning and cooperation to foster transformative learning. That learning can not take place in a vacuum. The participants have a right to expect that experiences that challenge their basic assumptions and worldviews can be discussed openly and in a safe environment. Clearly, that was not the case for the participants of this study. Study abroad programs have the capacity to impact a student's learning for the rest of his/her life. When the instructors or institutional leaders do not attend to the transformative nature of the learning experience, a great disservice is done to the students.

Perhaps, the greatest value of a study abroad program is its' ability to expose Americans to their American-ness. Exposing Americans to the world's stereotypical view of America, as well as revealing America's failings and virtues, as seen through the eyes of a foreigner, helps expand their worldviews. Students experienced a heightened sensitivity towards themselves, their country, and other nations of the world. The study abroad program to Gambia, West Africa, exposed students to the dynamics of their cultural and psychosocial assumptions, revealing how unaware they were of the role their assumptions played in their daily lives. It is these long held cultural assumptions, beliefs, and values, which are taken for granted truths used to validate one's experiences and give meaning to one's world. Distanced from the familiarity of one's culture, assumptions become a double edged sword, revealing the constraints to, and subjectivity of, one's worldview (Taylor, 1998). The removal of these constraints, through emancipatory learning, was a journey of personal transformation for all of the members of the study abroad group (Mezirow, 1991).

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Appendix A

Respondents' Demographic Information

Code	Gender	Age	Respondent's Ethnicity	Code	Gender	Age	Respondent's Ethnicity
R1	Female	32	Black-American	R6	Female	33	White-American
R2	Female	41	White-American	R7	Male	26	White-American
R3	Female	22	Native-American	R8	Female	21	White-American
R4	Female	49	Black-American	R9	Female	24	Native-American
R5	Female	53	Black-American				