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# **A Phenomenological Study on the Transformative Learning Experiences of International Students in Adult Education Graduate Programs**

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**Key words:** transformative learning, international students, cross-cultural experiences

**Abstract:** This phenomenological study endeavors to identify and illustrate international graduate students' TL experience, to better inform our understanding of TL from a context of studying abroad and international students' perspectives, and to foster transformative learning for international students.

This study endeavors to identify and illustrate international graduate students' transformative learning (TL) experiences, and to better inform our understanding of TL in a context of international graduate students studying in the US. International students pursuing graduate programs outside their home country is as important as ever on American campuses. The presence of foreign students provides American students and faculty with crucial and lived international knowledge, perspectives, and experience and enhances the diversity in the college experience (NAFSA, 2003). Too, the transformative learning (TL) experiences of international students invite educators of adult and higher education to consciously examine their understanding, teaching, and transformative learning practice in order to effectively facilitate those who are new to the learning, living, and cultural environments to successfully achieve their academic goals in the US.

The topic of TL is currently receiving even more attention than when Mezirow introduced in 1981. Taylor (2006) observes a significant increase in peer-reviewed journal publications on TL and his review of which shows that among the 40 empirical studies conducted between 1999 and 2005, none is concerned with the topic of international students' transformative learning experience. In addition, Taylor (2006) points out that there is "the lack of emphasis on identifying a transformative experience in a particular context and greater interest about the nature of a learning experience and how it informs our understanding of TL" (p. 392). Evidently, study abroad provides ample disorienting situations and moments that can kindle deep, emotional, and critical reflections for perspective transformation and transformative learning and education (Boyd & Myers 1988; Cranton 2006; Cranton & Roy, 2003; Illeris, 2004; Mezirow, 1991, 2000, 2003; Taylor, 2001). Thus, this research will contribute to identifying a particular kind of TL experience and inform us about perspectives of TL within the context of studying abroad (international students in the US).

The following research questions inform the study: What are the international graduate students' study abroad experiences that promote transformative learning? How do they describe their experiences and transformation? A phenomenological design is applied because the study aims to discover the lived meaning of a particular phenomenon, to focus on personal, lived, and unprobed everyday experiences (Merriam, 2002). Focus group discussions and in-depth recorded (audio and video) interviews were conducted to explore the stories and experiences of four female Asian graduate students currently studying in the graduate programs of adult learning and instructional technology. Data analysis uses "the methodology of reduction for specific statements and themes, and a search for all positive meanings... The researchers also set aside all prejudgments, bracketing their experiences and relying on intuition, imagination and universal

structure to obtain a picture of the experience” (Creswell, 1998, p. 52). The completion of this study is anticipated for the summer of 2008. Data collection, transcription, and analysis continue as we write for the AERC proceedings.

This round table presents common dilemmas and cases and invites a scholarly discussion on how international students learn, understand, and make sense of their learning experiences abroad. Questions to stimulate interactive discussion include: Why does the TL learning experience of international students matter to us? To what extent, as educators, should we know and be conscious of and even facilitate their learning, to negotiate between and across cultures in the learning processes for success? What do international students learn, value, and take with them from their transformation? And most importantly, what do the TL experiences of international students mean to us as educators of adult and higher education?

The authors will share their initial findings and reflections on practical approaches in teaching and learning transactions with international students. The illustrative examples and the value gained from insight into the processes of transformative learning may help equip adult educators and faculty with a more empathetic understanding of international students as well as a conceptual and theoretical framework for transformative learning that may be applied to effective interactions with their international students.

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