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Recommended Citation

Dirkx, John M.; Spohr, Robert; Tepper, Laura; and Tons, Susan (2010). "Adult Learners and Short-term Study Abroad: Formation or Transformation?," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2010/papers/19>

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Adult Learners and Short-term Study Abroad: Formation or Transformation?

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Abstract: *This paper reports on the identity work in which adult learners engage who are participating in a graduate, short-term, study-abroad program in higher and adult education.*

We have known for some time that international and inter-cultural experiences might foster transformative learning among adult participants. Over fifteen years ago, Taylor (1994) suggested that intercultural experiences may trigger transformative learning, a finding essentially reiterated by Lyon (2002). Although these experiences were not specifically study abroad, the researchers noted changes among participating individuals in motivations, attitudes, values, meaning perspectives, and self-identity. Similar results have been reported for undergraduate students participating in traditional, study abroad programs (Dolby, 2004; Dwyer, 2004). Although many graduate programs in higher and adult education, as well as other disciplines such as law and social work, now feature international study tours or short-term study abroad programs, few studies have focused on participants' experiences in these programs.

In a recent text on international education, Robert Selby (2008) wrote, "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.

The purpose of this research was to explore how adults who participate in a short-term study abroad experience perceive and make sense of their international experiences. We wanted to develop a better understanding of the extent to which these experiences reflected self-identity work and transformative learning.

Theoretical Framework

We conceptualized this process of change within the theoretical perspectives of self-work and self-formation (Chappell, Rhodes, Solomon, Tennant, & Yates, 2003; Palmer, 2004; Tennant, 2000). Our study builds on those few studies that suggest short-term study abroad experiences may precipitate self-identity work (Brender, 2006; Dolby, 2004; Hopkins, 1999) and may also have an impact on participants' intellectual or personal lives. While often contested, the concept of the self is nonetheless prominently featured in much of the study of adult learning (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Brookfield, 1995; Clark & Dirkx, 2000; Kuchinke, 2005; Tennant, 2000; West, 2001). As with the study of multicultural education (Dolby, 2000), the concepts of self-identity and difference have emerged as important concepts in studies of international education and the development of intercultural competence. For purposes of this study, we regard self-identity as expressive of social relations and as constructed and re-constructed within particular discourse communities (Chappell, et. al, 2003; Dolby, 2000). That

is, the self and self-other relations are socially constructed notions that attain meaning within particular social groups. This meaning arises within and among the dialogical relationships that develop between the self and the content and the self and the particular context. In this study, we conceptualize self-formative processes as arising within an intersection of the context of the study abroad experience with the self of the learner and the academic content.

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. Not all self-work, however, is necessarily transformative. Through international experiences, one may simply add to and deepen particular perspectives related to the self. But these experiences may disrupt an existing sense of self, triggering a potentially transformative process. In this study, we explored the extent to which participants' perception of the experience of short-term study abroad was consistent with transformative learning.

Background and Context

For the past five years, Midwest University, a large research institution located in the American Midwest, has sponsored a short-term study abroad program for graduate students in higher and adult education, as part of a graduate-level course on comparative and international experiences in higher and adult education. The course reflects a unique, collaborative arrangement with a university within the United Kingdom (Brits University). In this study, graduate students from Brits University, lead by a member of their faculty, first participated in early summer in a field study of educational policy and practice within the area of Midwest University. Participants from Midwest University joined students from Brits University in both formal seminars and experiential visits to educational institutions within the area, and they also participated in more social and cultural events scheduled by the host instructor. Students from Midwest University then later in mid-summer participated in a parallel field study experience within the UK.

Central to this course, then, was the seven-day study abroad field experience. The primary emphasis of the UK field study was on colleges of further education, universities, and prison education within Southwest England. After the first couple field study trips, many participants reported being deeply moved by their experiences abroad. These anecdotal reports suggested that these experiences meant more to the participants than merely academic exercises (Dirkx, Jessup Anger, Brender, Gwekwerere, & Smith, 2007). Rather, there appeared to be a deeper engagement of the self of the learner in various ways. This study was undertaken to better understand the nature of this engagement and how it occurred.

Methodology

Nine of the eleven course participants, all graduate students, agreed to participate in the study. Of these, we were able to obtain pre and post-interviews for seven. Therefore, data from these seven were used for our analysis. The group consisted of five women and two men. All

seven were doctoral students in higher, adult and lifelong education. While one was just beginning his doctoral work, six were about midway through their studies. Five of these students were between the age 25 and 30, one was between 30-40 and one was over 50 years of age. One of the participants was a person of color. Five had substantial prior international experiences.

Our inquiry was framed within a qualitative methodology and we worked primarily within a phenomenological tradition (Moustakis, 1994). Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted prior to and following return from the field study. The pre-trip interview focused on eliciting information on participants' expectations for the field study experience and present understandings of themselves relative to their British hosts. The post-tour interviews focused on eliciting participants' critical incidents that held particular meaning or importance for them and through which they seemed to learn something about themselves. One of the researchers with previous field study 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. The interviews were subjected to categorical content analyses, through which we identified key themes that helped illuminate the nature of the experience for the participants.

Results

Participants tended to interpret this experience as one that largely contributed to their professional development as emerging scholars and scholar practitioners within the fields of higher or adult education. This developmental or formative process was influenced by a) their expectations of the experience, b) prior international experiences, and c) relational issues within their group. For the most part, their narratives suggest that the participants did not construe this experience as a location for deeply engaging in identity-work (Chappell, et. al., 2003; Tennant, 2000) related to their personal selves.

Expectations for the Experience

The participants' expectations for this short-term study abroad experience reflected both academic and personal concerns. For example, Dusty told us, "I'm looking right now at mid-career faculty and I wonder...is this an issue in other countries." Nora remarked that she wanted "to do work in my doctoral research in comparative higher education in some fashion and whole topic is right." She elaborated, "I've always got a bit of questioning so what can I do with this professionally; what does this do because all of this is fun but how does it fit into my career?" Nick said, "I want to get a chance to talk to a couple faculty members about their employment status and what's happened over here since they get tenure. See how the country reacted to that, whether that's had an impact on labor economics." Goals were also expressed in more personal and subjective terms. For example, Dusty said she was also interested in "learning about myself, learning about how I am thinking of questions and thinking of issues and the whole question of myself has come out more in this particular experience course than it has in the entire doctoral program so far." Gracie remarked that she thought the experience demonstrated that "a good combination of where you brought out different questions of professional development and personal development. Those two merged together but because it was a holistic experience it captured both of those." 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 interest in experiences that articulated with these intentions.

Influence of Prior International Experiences

Five of the seven participants had fairly substantial international experiences. Dusty described numerous prior international trips: “I’ve had a study abroad experience previously. In my junior year. Finishing my master’s degree I did two semesters in a study abroad, ten months in Japan.” Gracie reflected a similar depth of international experience: “Well I’ve been to England before and I’ve studied overseas and traveled quite a bit...” Jake told us, “I was stationed in South Carolina and went up to Virginia. Got switched, our home port got switched to Guam so we had to go through the Panama Canal, coast of Austral, Hong Kong, Korea, and then Japan for about two and a half, three years.”

Kevin referred to his lack of international experience. In describing his interest in doing study abroad: “I think specifically I’d like to study abroad. I’ve never traveled abroad before. It’s something that when I first got to the University of xxx as an undergrad I wanted to do. I specifically wanted to go to England because I knew I wanted to get a degree in literature and so Shakespeare has always been important to me.” Lauren reported that she regretted not doing international work earlier. When asked how much prior international experience she had, Laura told us,

Not a whole lot. I never studied abroad in college and that’s probably my biggest single regret of my four years was that I didn’t have a chance to go abroad...A lot of my friends did it and just came back totally different people in a good way. The things they learned. The people they meant, the different cultures they got to explore. It was always something I wanted to experience for myself.

In general, all participants tended to place less emphasis on personal growth within the field study but those with little or no prior international experience seemed to be somewhat more open to such experiences.

The Influence of Relational Issues

Finally, relational issues constituted a powerful influence on how the participants came to perceive and make sense of the field study experience. For example, Dusty expressed disappointment with the visit from members of the host country to the U.S. She remarked, “I guess I figured them just warm and fuzzy people. ‘Hello,’ ‘Welcome,’ ‘I’m so happy to see you here.’ That kind of thing... they were just kind of, I was there for what I needed to get and I’m out of here kind of thing. I think maybe that is just my personality...I can say I never bonded with them.”

Dusty also commented on relations with members of her field study group: “I wonder if my learning was somehow affected by the people I was around, in the group kind of thing.” When asked what stood out for her about the field study trip, Gracie responded, “Probably the interaction with the people. Especially within our group. Because I do know I’m friends with a lot of people in our group, respect them.” She elaborated further, “...it was also a challenge because I like my space. I like things lined up and a lot of that was taken away because I was sharing a schedule with so many people...that was... probably the greatest challenge of the whole experience.” Nick observed, “There were definitely like some people that bonded better with people. so I won’t call them cliques because it wasn’t so much people with just alienating such but there was one person who brought family members and I think that kind of tore a little bit at part of the group dynamics.” Lauren remarked that “just, you know, there’s little things that get on your nerves of people that maybe didn’t so much here in the land of Midwest University but over there just seeing peoples different personalities come out and how they are out of a

classroom environment and more in a day to day situation.” Interpersonal relationships, both within the group and with individuals from Brit University, figured prominent in how participants felt about the experience.

Discussion and Conclusion

For the adults participating in this study, short-term study abroad represented an enjoyable, meaningful experience. Such programs for graduate students often share structural similarities with programs for undergraduate students. However, our graduate students differed in how they interpreted their experiences. For younger students, 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). However, for the participants in this study, the sense-making process of their experiences reflected a complex relationship between the academic goals they construe for the experience and their own career goals. In contrast to the personal orientations of undergraduates, our participants reflected a more academic orientation to study abroad.

Not surprisingly, our participants, all doctoral students, perceived the international context as a location for furthering their professional goals. Identity work seemed to revolve around the participants’ professional selves and represented an extension of their interest and prior involvement in international experiences. However, the participants’ concerns for relatedness issues and the “group dynamics” suggest engagement with their personal selves as well. While the interactions and visits with educators and students from the host country provided the context for formative processes contributing to a professional self, the intra-group experiences represented a context in which personal selves were engaged. Unlike the professional development dimensions of the field tour, these group experiences were less intentional, more subjective, and emotionally-laden. But these experiences did not appear to lead to transformative learning. The lack of time for self-reflection, which the participants mentioned, may have contributed to this lack of identity work around personal selves. Self-reflection represents a critical component of transformative learning (Cranton, 2006; Merriam, et. al.,2007). Our findings suggest that the experience of difference and 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. Reflection on group process and group experiences should be integrated into the short-term study-abroad experience.

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