

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2019 Conference Proceedings (Buffalo, New York)

Making the Invisible Visible: The Role of the Cuban Socio-cultural Contexts in Fostering Transformative Learning

James West
westjam2@msu.edu

John Dirkx
Michigan State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [International and Comparative Education Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

West, James and Dirkx, John (2019). "Making the Invisible Visible: The Role of the Cuban Socio-cultural Contexts in Fostering Transformative Learning," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2019/papers/31>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Making the Invisible Visible: The Role of the Cuban Socio-cultural Contexts in Fostering Transformative Learning

James R. West and John M. Dirkx
Michigan State University

Abstract: Over the last 20 years, the numbers of adults participating in education abroad programs have been steadily increasing. Yet, we know relatively little of the nature of their learning experiences or outcomes. In this study, we contribute to a small but growing body of scholarship on the nature of adult learning within these programs. Using a socio-cultural lens, we studied how the geo-political context of Cuba In particular, we take advantage of student perceptions and experiences of education abroad programs to Cuba to help better understanding how the Cuban geo-political context, a country only 90 miles off the coast of Florida t influences and shapes how participants make sense of their experiences in this program. We focused on the lived experiences of graduate students participating in 13-day study tours of Cuba. Data were collected through journals, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Reflecting the influence of class and race, he results demonstrated participants experienced disorientation around the Cuban geo-political contexts, fostering the beginnings of a shift in their meaning perspectives. Participants developed deeper insights into their sense of identity related to class and race, and their experiences helped, with respect to class and race, make the invisible more visible.

Keywords: education abroad, geopolitical context, sociocultural context, identity, Cuba

Education abroad has been and continues to be a widely recognized area of research, theory and practice within international education. Despite gradually increasing numbers of adults participating in short-term education abroad programs, the scholarship on education abroad, however, largely reflects a preoccupation among scholars and practitioners with undergraduate programs and younger students. With few exceptions (e.g., Coryell, 2018 AERC; Coryell, Sehin & Peña, 2018; Coryell & Sehin, 2014; Dirkx, Janka Millar, Sinclair, & Vizvary, 2016; Dirkx, Janka Millar, Berquist, & Vizvary, 2014; Dirkx, Spohr, Tepper, & Tons (2010), relatively little research is available to help us better understand and unpack the complicated nature of learning that occurs within and among adults who participate in various forms of education abroad, including graduate students. As graduate programs seek to internationalize their curricula, this limitation becomes particularly poignant.

Education abroad programs provide potentially powerful, but often disorienting opportunities for inter-cultural learning and development (Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012) that can foster critical reflection and transformative learning (Hunter, 2008). As participants work through these disorienting experiences that participants often report in education abroad involves a reconstruction of one's sense of self (Spaeth, Schwartz, Nayar, & Ma, 2015), a process to which Mezirow (1991) refers as "perspective transformation." However, as indicated earlier, few of these studies focus on adult learners. In addition, much of this work reflects an emphasis on psychosocial processes that characterize these experiences and their outcomes (Savicki, 2008; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). We know less about how or if particular socio-cultural contexts (Fenwick & Nerland, 2014) contribute to transformative learning within international contexts.

In December of 2014, U.S. President Barack Obama announced a normalization of diplomatic relations with Cuba. "The historic deal broke an enduring stalemate between two

countries divided by just 90 miles of water but oceans of mistrust and hostility dating from the days of Theodore Roosevelt's charge up San Juan Hill and the nuclear brinkmanship of the Cuban missile crisis" (Baker, 2014). This warming of geopolitical relations with Cuba created unique opportunities for scholars and students in education abroad to approach education abroad with a somewhat different lens. In the past two years however, relations have become strained again leaving the 2014 shift in relations in doubt.

The purpose of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of how the socio-cultural, socio-material, and geo-political contexts of Cuba (Fenwick & Nerland, 2014) contributed to participants' intercultural and transformative learning. In this study, we focused on the experiences of adult learners in a faculty-led, short-term graduate education-abroad program to Cuba.

Theoretical Framework

A theme that runs through the scholarship on education abroad within undergraduate programs is the deeply personal way in which participants perceive and understand the nature of their experiences abroad. Among the effects of education abroad that reflect this theme are identity and greater global awareness. In contrast, the limited data available on the perceptions of adult learners' experiences in education abroad programs suggest that they interpret these experiences as professional development. While we don't exclude profound personal impacts of graduate education abroad programs, the preponderance of our observations suggests that adults who participate in these programs view their experiences through an overarching frame of professional development and career enhancement (Dirkx, et al., 2016).

The second theoretical perspective we adopted for this study is transformative learning (Hunter, 2008; Mezirow, 1991). It is well known that participation in education abroad programs, as well as other intercultural experiences that are facilitated by trained and knowledgeable leaders, can foster dramatic shift in the ways in which one frames herself or himself, as well as his or her relationships with the broader world (Bamber, 2015; Savicki, 2008). This profound shift in one's consciousness or perspective relative to what is being experienced is generally regarded as a form of transformative learning (Dirkx, 2012; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Mezirow (1991) suggests that how individuals perceive, understand, and make sense of particular disorienting situations or dilemmas they experience is shaped by meaning perspectives or particular beliefs, assumptions, and values regarding the phenomenon being experienced. As individuals interact with and reflect on their broader social and cultural contexts, these perspectives are revisited and potentially transformed.

Finally, it was assumed that study participants approached their travel with particular frames of reference regarding Cuba, Cubans, and the socio-cultural/socio-political context. We were interested in knowing the extent their beliefs, assumptions, or values were challenged or questioned and how the socio-cultural and socio-material contexts (Fenwick & Nerland, 2014) contributed to disorientation, critical self-reflection, and transformation. In other words, what frames did the study participants carry with them into, during and following their experience in Cuba? What were the circumstance, if any, that challenged these frames and the underlying beliefs, assumptions, and values?

Methods

Participants for this study were drawn from two cohorts of doctoral students in education who were selected to receive a fellowship for a 13-day education abroad program to Cuba. Of the 31 students making up these two cohorts, 17 agreed to participate in this study, representing several social groups, and 10 of which were women and 7 were men. Both groups were led by the same primary instructor, who had considerable experience working in and studying Cuba. Working with colleagues in Cuba, she was primarily responsible for the design and facilitation of the students' educational and cultural experiences. Our qualitative methodology was informed by a phenomenological approach, which focused on the lived experiences of participants in the program (Creswell, 2014). This approach, which places the "subjective experience [of participants] at the center" (Mertens, 2005, p. 240), allowed us to examine how students draw upon their past to make sense of their experiences within particular socio-cultural contexts of the Cuba program.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, ranging from 60 to 90 minutes in length, and two focus group interviews comprised of selected participants from the two cohorts. In these interviews, participants described and reflected on their experiences within the education abroad program. The second cohort were provided journals and were encouraged to write in their journal daily or every other day. Specifically, they were instructed to consider: "what challenges stand out for you and in what ways did you work through them (e.g., challenges to your beliefs, values, or assumptions; interpersonal interactions; or simply things you found arising within yourself)?" We received a handful of journals at the conclusion of their trip. The data were analyzed using a constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006).

Findings

The findings reflect two broad themes that we summarize and illustrate here. First, the experience surfaced among the participants a greater insight on identity. For example, Stacy, a Black woman, spoke of discussing feminism in a critical race theory class, but it was not until her experience in Cuba that she understood intersectionality: "... I don't think I quite understood to a degree that someone else can't understand your narrative or your story..."

One of the women on the program described the power of hearing personal self-narratives of people in Cuba to understand their lived experience as opposed to the images this person learned through the U.S. government and media portraying Cuba in a particular light. "...when you're talking about identity and these gender markers and racial markers, a lot of times, you kind of scratch the surface with it and do it a very safe way, especially within the university system, but I think that by having these personal narratives and experiences and actually talking to people from groups who, who were Cuban but like they're also Afro Cuban and not ignoring that was a reality, I really appreciated that"

Second, the experience made the invisible more visible. Julie, a White woman, viewed race differently during her time in the country: "...I really had to check myself and say why are you having these feelings [about race relations, Cuban culture and life, and Cubans]?" Both examples demonstrate the experience of a disorienting dilemma, embedded within the particular geo-political contexts of Cuba.

Reflecting the influence of class, race and gender, data analysis demonstrated participants' experience of disorientation around the Cuban geo-political contexts, fostering the beginnings of a shift in their meaning perspectives. "I was very surprised by how kind they were to Americans, not because I expected them not to be but I feel like they have every reason not to

be, considering the relationships between the US government and Cuba.” This realization caused this participant to rethink her other assumptions about Cuba and the Cuban people. She considered how she had previously characterized the identity of Cubans and how that was changing rapidly.

Participants developed deeper insights into their sense of identity related to class, race and gender, and their experiences helped to make the invisible more visible. This study demonstrates how the context of Cuba brings into bold relief the role of socio-cultural/socio-political in the process of intercultural and transformative learning. For instance, upon arrival in Cuba, a study participant was struck with how relaxed the environment was in contrast to the security measures experienced and observed at airports in the United States. This was a stark illustration of the rhetoric surrounding Cuba as a militarized island bent on doing harm to the U.S. and the reality of life on the island nation. This new frame was carried by this person and others on this program through their time in the country as they began to look anew at identity and the ways in which identity is expressed.

Scholarly Significance

This study contributes to a limited but growing body of knowledge on short-term study abroad for graduate students (IIE, 2014) and the importance of the socio-cultural context in the process of learning within these programs. It further illustrates how these programs foster disorienting dilemmas that can lead to perspective transformation. Graduate students frame meaning of these programs within their own professional development and research interests (Dirkx, et. al., 2016). Yet, the socio-cultural context and geo-political relations of U.S. and Cuba, and how they are cast through media and government, invite a broader reframing of the learning and transformation that can occur within these programs. In the study, participants described the way these contexts affected them in different ways, but a theme across the two cohorts was how their physical presence in Cuba, a country only 90 miles from the U.S. that has been defined to most of them as the enemy, provided them with a mechanism with which to reconsider their own views. Views and beliefs of Cuba and the Cuban people became more nuanced and fresh. The way they viewed themselves also changed in some respects. This new perspective informed many participants’ professional focus. A few decided to be more intentional about thinking internationally and others found a renewed sense of the need to provide differing viewpoints in their work as educators and scholars.

The Cuban context of the program studied brings into bold relief socio-cultural/socio-political factors present, but perhaps more muted in other contexts. The close proximity of the United States and Cuba, only 90 miles separates the two countries, would suggest close relations, but the geopolitical relations shaped antagonistic narratives of each country and its people. For those from the U.S. this meant Cuba was essentially worlds away. This study helps to illuminate the influence of these contexts on what and how participants learned, an area not well developed in the scholarship of either graduate study abroad or transformative learning.

References

- Baker, P. (2014, December 17). U.S. to restore full relations with Cuba, erasing a last trace of cold war hostility. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/18/world/americas/us-cuba-relations.html>
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Coryell, J. E., & Sehin, O. (2014). Cosmopolitanism and adult education: A review of the

- research literature. Proceedings of the Commission of International Adult Education Pre Conference of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (pp. 32-44), Charleston, SC.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dirkx, J. M. (2012). Self-formation and transformative learning: A response to "Calling transformative learning into question: Some mutinous thoughts." *Adult Education Quarterly*, 62, 399-405.
- Dirkx, J. M., Janka Millar, K., Sinclair, J., & Vizvary G. (2016). Short-term study abroad in graduate education: How to make sense of international experience. In D. Vellaris, & D. Coleman-George (Eds.), *Handbook of research on study abroad programs and outbound mobility* (pp. 514-539). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Dirkx, J. M., Janka Millar, K., Berquist, B., & Vizvary, G. (2014). Graduate study abroad: An emerging trend? *International Higher Education*, No. 77, Fall (14-15). Retrieved from <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ihe/article/view/5677>
- Fenwick, T., & Nerland, M. (2014). *Reconceptualising professional learning: Sociomaterial knowledges, practices and responsibilities*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hunter, A. (2008). Transformative learning in international education. In V. Savicki (Ed.) *Developing intercultural competence and transformation: Theory, research, and application in international education* (pp. 92-107). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishers.
- Institute of International Education (IIE) (2014). U.S. study abroad. In *Open doors report on international educational exchange*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.iie.org/opendoors>
- Mertens, D. M. (2005). *Research methods in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative and qualitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Savicki, V. (2008). *Developing intercultural competence and transformation: Theory, research, and application in international education*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishers.
- Spaeth, J., Schwartz, S., Nayar, U., & Ma, W. (2015). Identity development and the construction of self: Findings and implications from the forum BEVI Project. In C. N. Shealy (Ed.), *Making sense of beliefs and values: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 205-232). New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company.
- Taylor, E. W., & Cranton, P. (2012). *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research, and practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Vande Berg, M., Paige, R. M., & Lou, K. H. (2012). *Student learning abroad: What our students are learning, what they're not, and what we can do about it*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.