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Measurement of transformative learning in study abroad: An application of the learning activities survey

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ABSTRACT

Study abroad research has demonstrated that education abroad provides a host of benefits; however, it is still unclear how and to what extent these benefits occur. The present study aims to elucidate the study abroad learning process, especially as it pertains to the outcome of transformative learning. First, the study introduces the Learning Activities Survey (LAS), an instrument that operationalizes and quantitatively measures transformative learning constructs. Second, the study demonstrates the utility of the LAS for tourism educators, using data collected from students enrolled in the school of management at a private northwestern university. Results confirm that transformative learning occurs in study abroad settings and suggest that specific learning activities (e.g., exploring, sharing, and planning) facilitate transformative learning in that context. The authors recommend continued research using the LAS to measure transformative learning constructs in study abroad and other non-traditional contexts.

1. Introduction

International education, more commonly referred to as ‘study abroad’, refers to traveling internationally for educational purposes. The Institute for International Education (IIE, 2017) has traditionally defined a study abroad student as an individual who receives academic credit from his/her home college or university after returning from an educational experience abroad. The potential benefits of studying abroad have been well documented, and include improved intercultural competence, language development, increased global understanding and appreciation, identity achievement, and added competitiveness for employment opportunities (e.g., Cadd, 2015; Cushner, 2004; Danzig & Jing, 2007; Erichsen, 2011; Foronda & Belknap, 2012; Ogden, 2010; Lashbrooke, Hult, Cavusgil, Yaprak, & Knight, 2002; Salisbury, An, & Pascarella, 2013; Stone & Petrick, 2013). However, beyond these outcomes, study abroad is often described as a life-changing experience and those who have participated in or facilitated an overseas learning experience can attest to the ‘magic’ that occurs in some of these programs. This idea is aptly captured by Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi, and Lassegard (2006) who noted that, “as a study abroad student, you are not going to be just a tourist – you are embarking on something much richer, doing the kinds of things that most tourists can only dream about” (p.1). Though often elusively defined, some scholars have referred to this phenomenon as the *transformative* nature of study abroad.

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The impetus for the present study grew out of a desire to bring quantitative rigor to the study of the transformative nature of study abroad. By engaging quantitative tools and methods applied to transformative learning in other contexts (i.e. King, 2009), the authors of the present study examine not only the learning outcomes of study abroad and their transformative nature, but also the *process* by which these outcomes occur. This approach provides the necessary critical validation to others' claims that study abroad learning experiences are indeed transformative (Brown, 2009; Green, 2012; Hutchison & Rea, 2011; Tarrant et al., 2011; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). The following discussion examines the connection between study abroad and learning, the theory of transformative learning (TL), and the application of TL theory to study abroad. The discussion is followed by a description of the data and methods employed in the present study. The authors of the study found evidence of TL in study abroad and discuss its prevalence and some of the mechanisms by which it appears to occur in the final sections of the article.

1.1. Study abroad: learning through travel

The link between travel, education, and learning is well-established (Kalinowski & Weiler 1992; Ritchie, Carr, & Cooper, 2003; Van Klooster, van Wijk, Go, & van Rekom, 2008). Global leaders historically used and accepted travel as a means of learning, scholarship, global dialogue, and global citizenship (Falk, Ballantyne, & Packer, 2012; Kalinowski & Weiler, 1992). The Grand Tour (ranging from the late 1600s to the mid-1800s), for example, aside from being indicative of wealth and social status, was an opportunity for the affluent European aristocracy to learn about culture around the world. Similarly, the link between travel and learning in higher education (i.e., study abroad) reflects institutional interest in building intercultural understanding and global competencies among students. Study abroad programs have become a standard tool for achieving these competencies and the broader goals of internationalization, though their efficacy is still under scrutiny (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Soria & Troisi, 2014; Van Klooster et al., 2008).

Internationalization on campus refers to “any systematic, sustained effort aimed at making higher education [more] responsive to the requirements and challenges related to the globalization of societies, economy, and labor markets” (Van Der Wende, 1997, p. 53). According to Bamber and Hankin (2011), “shifts [toward internationalization] are said to be occurring in higher education pedagogy, where efforts are being made to expand the social, cultural, and human capital of universities and their local communities through experiential learning and active partnership” (p. 190). In other words, the continued expansion of study abroad aligns with greater institutional interest in helping students and faculty develop the knowledge and skills to successfully engage in diverse international cultures.

According to the 2016 Open Doors Report, 313,415 U.S. students studied abroad during the 2014-15 academic year, with the majority enrolling in short-term (summer, or eight weeks or less) programs (IIE, 2016). This statistic translates to approximately one in ten undergraduates studying abroad during an academic year and represents an increase (about 2.9%) from prior years. A substantive body of study abroad scholarship has emerged in response to this growth in participation and institutional interest in internationalization (Cadd, 2015; Cushner, 2004; Danzig & Jing, 2007; Erichsen, 2011; Foronda & Belknap, 2012; Lashbrooke et al., 2002; Ogden, 2010; Salisbury et al., 2013; Stone & Petrick, 2013), with a great deal of research focused on identifying outcome-based evidence (e.g., intercultural competencies, global awareness, language acquisition, identity development). Transformative learning theory has been identified as a framework that may extend this work.

1.2. Transformative learning theory

According to Mezirow (1991) transformative learning (TL) refers to “the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about the world” and is concerned with “changing these structures ...to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective” (p. 167). In other words, TL challenges and changes not only what we know but also how we learn and integrate knowledge into our lives and worldviews. Mezirow (1978) posited that TL occurs as an individual engages in the following 10 phases: “(1) Experiencing a disorienting dilemma, (2) Undergoing self-examination, (3) Conducting a deep assessment of personal role assumptions and alienation created by new roles, (4) Sharing and analyzing personal discontent and similar experiences with others, (5) Exploring options for new ways of thinking, (6) Building competence and self-confidence in new roles, (7) Planning a course of action, (8) Acquiring knowledge and skills for action, (9) Trying new roles and assessing feedback, and (10) Reintegrating into society with a new perspective” (cited in Coghlan & Gooch, 2011, pp. 716–717). Kitchenham (2008) suggested that the phases do not always have to occur sequentially or in their entirety to produce TL. Brock (2010), though, did find that individuals are more likely to experience TL if they undergo a greater number of the phases. Even so, the phases – taken in sum – outline a process of deliberation, or the “full cycle of perspective transformation” that learners might go through (King, 2009, p. 6).

Mezirow (1978) first conceived the idea of TL in the mid-1970s as part of a descriptive study exploring the adult-learning process in a sample of non-traditional students (i.e., middle-aged females returning to university after a long period of absence). Since then, however, educators have embraced and applied the theory to diverse student populations and educational settings, including study abroad (Brock, 2010; Foronda & Belknap, 2012; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011; Yeboah, 2012). Specifically, scholars have provided some evidence to suggest study abroad experiences align well with the 10 phases of TL (Stone & Duffy, 2015). In this regard, the reason why study abroad may be ideal for achieving TL is because of the unique opportunities for creating disorienting dilemmas, or facilitating the integration of reflection and debriefing.

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