

**THE ROLE OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN  
STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCES**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis project investigates why studying abroad molds better students and is beneficial for their preparation for the workforce. Real-world experiences challenge a student's values, assumptions, and determination, requiring them to be open-minded and independent. This project focuses specifically on how transformative learning is a valuable way to learn through experience, assessment, and reflection. The book I produced is a manifestation of the theory of transformative learning in the way that the reader must interact with a map in order to read the book.

## INTRODUCTION

The integration of study abroad in the curriculum has become more present on Appalachian State University's campus, along with the majority of universities across the country. Spending anywhere between a few weeks to a year in another country has become a highly valued part of a student's college career. What is the difference between learning in our home country and learning in a foreign one? The answer lies within the type of learning that happens *outside* of the classroom while a student is abroad. They encounter situations that they are not accustomed to, beginning a cycle of "transformative learning" that can lead them to assess their worldview and/or values. Transformative learning is an integral part of students' study abroad experiences in the way that it builds self-confidence and challenges assumptions in real-world situations.

While the years spent in school are important for soaking up knowledge in the classroom, it is also a crucial time for students to develop their identity. Their values, opinions and beliefs determine how they experience the world, however large or small it may be for them. Role models, home environment, or major life events can influence a person's frame of reference. Being thrust into a foreign culture requires one to be more conscious of their words and actions, having to consider the potential differences with the people surrounding them.

## RESEARCH

Policymakers are in support of study abroad programs because of how the student develops their 'role in the marketplace' (Brewer 8). However, students are more concerned with maturing as an individual while abroad. Other advocates of study

abroad programs believe the 'intercultural competency and affective learning' is what makes the experience worthwhile (Brewer 191). While there is a difference in the motivations to study abroad, the underlying point is that it is effective in helping students develop in preparation for life after graduation. 97% of study abroad students found employment with twelve months of graduation, while 25% of them have a higher salary on average ("What Statistics Show..."). It is apparent that studying abroad has a significant positive outcome on students, but it is not just because classes may be more rigorous. According to Imam, having to deal with a variety of people in another country teaches one to be proactive, assertive, patient, and a good listener (Imam). The change in the surrounding culture and everyday life is what has the greatest impact on a student's growth.

Transformative learning is a change in a person's frame of reference, which determines how we understand experiences (Cunningham 8). This type of learning makes us who we are—what we agree with, what we do not agree with, and what we are unsure about. Transformative learning is a kind of problem solving in which our emotions and rational thoughts collide, forcing us to see from a new perspective. It often results in a shifting of perspective through a questioning of values and self-reflection (Kumi 112). The aspect of reflection is imperative because it forces the student to acknowledge the issue and make a rational conclusion.

In 1978, Jack Mezirow first introduced the concept of transformative learning based on his research on the education of women in developing countries. He observed changes in their self-perceptions after they participated in classes and learned more about the outside world (Illeris 5). By being exposed to new ideas, the women gained

self-confidence and independence, suddenly aware of their potential and the value of their lives (Illeris 5). Mezirow's theory is outlined in ten steps for the transformative learning process:

1. A disorienting dilemma.
2. Self-examination with feeling of fear, anger, guilt, or shame.
3. Assessment of assumptions.
4. Recognition of discontent.
5. Explore options for new roles, relationships, actions.
6. Plan course of action.
7. Acquire knowledge and skills to carry out actions.
8. Testing of new roles.
9. Build competence and self-confidence in new roles.
10. Reintegration into life based on new perspectives.

(Nohl)

Mezirow's ten-step process seems lengthy at a glance, but it can be boiled down to a few steps essential for learning. An abbreviated transformative learning process includes: a dilemma, discontent, exploration, and application.

**Dilemma:** The defining characteristic of transformative learning. An abrupt change that brings up feelings of shock, grief, or fear. This crisis, whether planned or not, requires one to cope with new information.

**Discontent:** Realization that one's meaning structures are being challenged in a new context.

**Exploration:** Reassessment of values and self-reflection.

**Application:** Shifted perspective allows one to cope with those situations more easily in the future.

While Mezirow's theory takes an almost scientific approach, other researchers claim that this type of learning is based more on emotions and intuition (Illeris 108). Dilemmas can be deeply emotional and have a significant affect on a person's mental stability. It is important to take into account the fact that students may not make the best decisions while they are abroad. But these mistakes are what lead them to better decisions in the future. Finnish researcher Kaisu Mälkki defined the concept of a 'mental comfort zone,' which is when a person's perspectives are in harmony with what is going on around them (Illeris 108). Being out of that mental comfort zone is exactly where transformational learning begins to take place. When we are unable to analyze the outcome of a situation, our minds search for other answers that are outside of our usual realm of thought. The first reaction in a 'dilemma' may be emotional, but it is through rationalization that the problem is resolved. People miss out on a lot of potentially profitable experiences because we are wired to stay within our mental comfort zones. This is where studying abroad comes in. It practically forces us out of our comfort zones—mental and physical—and acquaints us with the feeling of being vulnerable.

One of the reasons that studying abroad is ideal for transformative learning is the high potential for "high-intensity dissonance" (Cunningham 10). The disorientation that is experienced while abroad opens the potential for change. This leads to questioning of assumptions and forming new habits (Cunningham 10). However, transformative learning relies heavily on the student's motivation. As with any type of

learning, a student will not absorb information if they do not have the desire to. This is why preparation for absorbing the surrounding culture is important before going abroad. Whether we are conscious of it or not, motivation is what drives our decisions, reactions, and how we benefit from our experiences. The presence of ethnocentrism can cause students to reject ideas that challenge their assumptions (Brewer 10). It may harden stereotypes rather than alter students' frame of reference. Because they encounter things they are not accustomed to, the first instinct is to hold tight to what they know. At the same time, resistance against new perspectives can strengthen one's personal identity. In the end, defending their personal position furthers their values and moral grounding (Knud 110).

As Illeris describes, motivation can take many forms (102). The type of motivation determines what a person will achieve or get out of an experience. Is it out of need? Is it to achieve a goal? Is there an incentive? Did another person do it? Both internal and external factors can come into play. With a definite goal in mind, students will be more likely to step out of their comfort zones in order to achieve their goals. For example, one weekend, my friends and I took a trip to Vienna. Our goal was to get back to Dornbirn from Vienna before class the next day. But when our travel was affected by country-wide flooding, our goal changed to finding a shelter for the night in a city where every hotel and hostel was booked. Immediately, our motivation to find shelter skyrocketed due to the circumstances out of our control. During those 24 hours, we were helpless, trusting, assertive, patient, gracious, and humbled. We found a safe place to sleep, but more importantly, we formed a tighter bond as we experienced that

together. Because of that experience, I am less concerned when plans change. I've become more flexible, patient, and comfortable without having a plan for everything.

Dilemmas like the one described put us out of our comfort zones. After a long day of sightseeing and travel, the last place we wanted to be was in a cold train station with crowds of stranded travelers. Without a choice, we had to cope with the situation and alter our perspective. We became comfortable with waiting without knowing what we were waiting for. We slept in a gymnasium with seventy other people, trusting that we would be picked up in the morning to get back to the train station. We were humbled by the way Austrian military cared for us during a crisis that made us feel helpless and lost. Reflecting on these events and feelings made me more aware of how one experience changed my views. For this reason, my book revolves around the aspect of self-reflection and navigation.

### **The Project**

At the point in my project when I was still deciding about the content for this book, I sent a survey out to past and current study abroad students. I received twelve responses to my questions about stressful experiences during their time abroad. While they gave me good insight, it did not give me the volume or consistency in the material I needed for the book I envisioned. However, I noticed repetition as I read through their responses and many blogs entries. I became interested in the similarities between experiences and fears, so I changed the direction of my focus.

The survey asked for reflections on students' most uncomfortable experiences abroad. I asked the following questions:



1. Summarize an experience where you felt uncomfortable or anxious while studying abroad.
2. What made you uncomfortable, hesitant, or anxious during this experience?
3. How did this change your perspectives or values?
4. Do you wish you had done anything differently?

I used their input, along with selections from various blogs, in my book for support.

From their answers, I developed three main ideas that summarize the advice from the students and also translate to the theory of transformational learning.

**You are not alone.**

Before exploring a new country, it is important to have an open mind for what you haven't seen. Accept things for how they are before making judgments.

**Say yes.**

Going abroad for school is not a time to be hesitant. As one student put it, "Go into a study abroad experience with a yes attitude; be ready to say yes to trying new and different things, new places, new people."

**Prepare to be unprepared.**

There is no way to be prepared for any situation that may occur while abroad. However, arriving with the expectation that things will not always go according to plan is the best way to be prepared.

The book that I designed takes this idea of transformative learning and applies it to a physical form. I brainstormed ways that would shift the perspective of the reader,

causing them to read the book in a non-traditional way. It was important that the book be interactive because transformative learning revolves around real-world problem solving. This led to the idea of incorporating the use of a map, which must be aligned with the pages in order to read the complete sentences. The text runs off the page, following the path of a subway line. Like a traveler uses a map to navigate through a city, the reader must use a map to read the book completely.

The text is written in the voice of students who have or will study abroad. The content derives from blogs and survey responses from Appalachian State study abroad participants. I found many similarities and repetition in the blogs I read—about anxieties, stress, and successes while abroad. For example, many students wrote about their worries of being alone, or making friends in their host country. Speckman writes, “Coming to Milan with no one I knew, and learning to navigate the city by myself and make new friends from all over the world gave me enormous, relieving confidence.” Kat reflects, “One of my biggest fears going into this tour was about making friends.” The Wayfarer’s blog mused about his first days abroad with feelings of homesickness, jetlag, and culture shock, but concluded, “I found that I was not alone.” Each of these students felt alone at one point, but realized that they were not alone in their struggles and that they had the strength to achieve things on their own.

The book became a manifestation of these reflections. The words along the subway line, written in the plural first person, act as a spokesperson for all study abroad students. It is written as a continuous stream of thought, which mimics the aspect of reflection that is so important to transformative learning. Their stories describe the challenges of being abroad and how they worked through their struggles. A

prospective student abroad can gain from this book because it has a simple message; everyone has discomforts and fears before and during their time abroad, but it results in an amazing experience.

The reader uses a map by turning it in any direction in order to line it up with the corresponding text. Sometimes the book needs to be turned sideways or upside-down to be read, which could get frustrating to read. In this way the reader is having an experience similar to the experiences of students abroad—when they get lost, confused, or overwhelmed.

The imagery mimics subway and train maps because they represent a journey—one that has many paths and can be confusing and dangerous along the way. While not everyone who studied abroad experienced the same troubles, they expressed similar feelings during any dilemmas. The maps in the background were created by scanning maps through a Risograph and printing with a halftone. The resulting prints have a great texture that adds depth to the pages through layering and overlays. I then scanned these into the computer in order to alter the color and scale before applying them to my book pages.

The final book is bound with a coptic stitch binding, which is commonly used for journals and sketchbooks. In this way, the book is more personal, inviting the reader to interact with the pages. While my vision for this project morphed throughout this semester, the final product is a culmination of everything I learned. Reflecting on my own study abroad experience, the theory of transformative learning immediately made sense. While pre-departure orientation attempts to prepare students for culture shock and situations they may encounter while abroad, it is impossible to anticipate exactly

what it is like. Most students say that they were changed by their experience abroad, but not very many could explain exactly in what way. The aspect of reflection in transformative learning is the way in which students can benefit most greatly from their experience. Upon returning from a study abroad semester, a focus group with past study abroad students could begin the conversation that leads to deeper meaning. While transformative learning begins with a dilemma that is out of our control, it ends with us; we determine whether we are willing to reassess our views and become that mature, worldly person that we strive to be.

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