Service-Learning Experiences in Study Abroad: Reflections on the Role of Autonomy and Academic Research in the Transformation of Perspectives

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Introduction

There is overwhelming evidence to support the value of service-learning experiences in terms of its ability to transform the individual (Carrington and Selva 2010; Parker and Altman Dautoff 2007; Trilokekar and Kukar 2011). Similarly, academic scholarship focused on study abroad also heralds the transformative potential of these experiences. Kiely (2004) highlights the "transformational event" in college students' lives that "forever change their sense of self, lifestyle, connection to others, view of global problems and purpose in life" (5). Combined, study abroad and service-learning experiences have tremendous potential to alter a student both cognitively and affectively.

In this reflection, I will speak to the transformation I experienced as a result of two years spent working closely with the people and culture of Caye Caulker, an island off the coast of Belize. My transformative experience is framed by Jack Mezirow's (1997) Transformational Learning Theory, which encompasses ten dimensions of transformation in adult learners. These include:

- A disorienting dilemma: Learners have an experience that does not fit their established frame of reference.
- Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame: Learners feel confusion and unease as they try to reconcile what they thought they knew with the new experience.
- Recognition that one's discontent is shared amongst group members: Learners can understand that confusion and negativity may be felt by others in the group through discussion.
- Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions: Learners have new understandings that elicit new roles and relationships.
- A critical assessment of assumptions: Learners reorient prior perspectives that do not fit the new roles and relationships.
- Provisional trying of new roles: Learners try various actions and roles to understand what best fits the new perspective.
- Planning of a course of action: Learners decide how to act, think, and be with the new perspective.
- Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans: Learners acquire new knowledge to begin acting in a new way.

- Building of competence and confidence in new roles and relationships: Learners gain a clearer understanding within the context as they continue to practice new roles.
- A reintegration of one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspectives: Learners take the new knowledge and roles into other contexts.

This theory articulates the critical steps in the process of transformation that occur when adult learners grapple with new information that conflicts with prior knowledge (King 2009). Additionally, Mezirow (1997) explains the importance of interpreting our experiences through our own understandings rather than relying on the uncritical assimilated explanation of an authority figure. This process is important to make meaning and connections beyond the study abroad experience itself, instead considering how the experience influences and shapes pedagogy and practice. In this reflection, I seek to make meaning of my study abroad scholarship and research experiences related to Caye Caulker, Belize through the framework of the transformative learning theory.

Study Abroad Program Structure

In January 2014, Miami University launched its first Winter Term semester and many departments, including the Department of Teacher Education, used this three-week period to offer short-term study abroad experiences for students seeking additional learning opportunities. Short-term study abroad experiences are characterized by Kehl and Morris (2008) as those lasting less than eight weeks that attempt to integrate study abroad experiences with course work and community interaction to strengthen the alteration of students' perspectives of the world.

My selected study abroad program focused on language, culture, and technology in the Belizean context. I selected this program because it intertwined teacher education experiences with cultural contexts that would allow me to enhance my understanding of education, internationally. This knowledge benefits my teaching and learning in the United States because I have a broader concept of the needs of diverse students and my role in teaching and learning.

Students in the program enrolled in two three-credit courses, one focusing on language and culture and the other course focused on technology in schools. Initially, three class sessions were held in the months prior to our departure. These sessions were used to help prepare us for the cultural experiences as well as start the academic work associated with each course. The majority of the study abroad program occurred on the island of Caye Caulker in Belize. Service learning was the keystone of the study abroad experience. My days were primarily spent working individually with students at the Caye Caulker Roman Catholic School and then taking classes with the Miami faculty. Afternoons were used for work with adult English Language learners, and nights and weekends were reserved for cultural experiences and homework. I was part of a Standard III classroom, which is the equivalent to second grade in the U.S., and the majority of my time was spent using strategies and interventions to help students struggling with

literacy. I also spent substantial time at the Little Stars Preschool where I partnered with the teachers to create a series of technology-based lesson plans that supplemented alphabet and number instruction as well as basic technology skills.

Reflection Focus

For this reflection, I will focus on the technology course and the transformation that occurred as a result of the content and experiences. The course was taught by Dr. Darrel Davis, and one objective of this course was to examine the issues involved in integrating technology into the United States classroom. There was a certain irony in taking this course in a context with less access to and availability of technology, and this allowed for the dramatic juxtaposition of approaches and my eventual perspective change. Although I had many significant experiences during the program, I believe my transformation was primarily the result of my work at the preschool. The teachers at the Little Stars Preschool had asked Dr. Davis to partner with them to integrate technology in their classrooms. I volunteered to help with this task because I thought this experience would be interesting and it would also allow me to discover answers to the questions I had about international education and technology integration.

A disorienting dilemma

Jack Mezirow's process of transformational learning describes a disorienting dilemma as "a critical incident or event that acts as a trigger that can, under certain conditions, lead people to engage in a transformational learning process whereby previously taken-for-granted assumptions, values, beliefs and lifestyle habits are assessed and, in some cases, radically transformed" (Kiely 2005, 7). My dilemma started early in the program when we met during our pre-departure sessions. I questioned access and equity when integrating technology into a classroom, asking: "Why are we bringing a computer when the school has been fine without technological equipment?" and "Why is it necessary for us to say what piece of technology is 'best' for the community in which we are not members?" I initially dismissed my thoughts as passing concerns because I thought I was being too critical of our "nice gesture." As we discussed technology within the Belizean context, the issues of equity and access returned, but they were compounded by questions about culture and context. "Why is technology a better way in the context of Caye Caulker?" "What about the climate–sand and humidity–that impact the efficiency and effectiveness of technology?" The faculty provided a forum to talk about these issues, and as my peers and I discussed these issues, it became clear there were no easy answers. The climax of my dilemma occurred very early when we were on the island. After helping Dr. Davis install and configure the donated computer we brought for the preschool, I began to think about the consequences of introducing a piece of technology into a classroom that had operated well without it. I began to question my original ideas of access and equity and I began to question my role in the Belizean educational context. I asked questions like, "What is my role as

an American in Caye Caulker? How can I help if I do not fully understand the context and the culture of Belize?"

Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame

The dilemma I experienced caused me to question the intentions of education as a means to influence culture, which led to me feeling guilty for implementing technology in the preschool. During our class sessions on the island, we were critically assessing the value of various technologies used in the American and Belizean classrooms and brainstorming different ways to teach content in more meaningful ways. After these discussions in class, I would go to the preschool with my peer partner to work on the lesson plans to integrate technology in the preschool curriculum. Our university course required us to create an instructional video project to teach a concept to a specific group of people, but students were given flexibility and autonomy in how to complete the task. So, my peer partner, a fellow university student, and I decided to create a video to teach students at the preschool about the alphabet and numbers using pictures and words from their context: Caye Caulker Island. We also created an instructional lesson plan booklet for the Little Stars' teachers to use in combination with the computer we installed. The lesson plans included a Language Experience Approach activity and step-by-step instructions to complete the activities installed on the computer.

I quickly began to experience guilt and shame as I worked on the lessons for the preschool. I was very frustrated with my learning in the college classroom compared to my real-world experiences. I was convinced more technology did not equate to better teaching practices or increased student learning, especially if it was not effectively integrated with the curriculum and the learning context. These feelings carried over in my work at the preschool and I felt bad for creating technology-based instructional materials that may or may not be appropriately integrated into the Caye Caulker context. But, we did it anyway. I did not feel there were problems with either the task or our interpretation of it. My chief concern was that teaching and learning was happening at the preschool before we came to Caye Caulker, so who was I to expect the teachers to use the new technology and additions to the curriculum? This service-learning opportunity was unlike anything I had previously experienced. In my service-learning experiences in the United States, I was an observer and played a small role in the classrooms. In Belize, I had extensive autonomy to shape my experiences. Although I did not feel an innate sense of power, I was worried I would be perceived as either the "typical American" or there would be expectations of greatness in the products I created. I struggled with this relationship. I did not want the teachers to feel like I was the "end all be all" in technology integration, especially because I did not have a clue about the context within which we were working. I felt very guilty. In fact, I felt guilt during and after my time in Belize. The process of reflection during class discussions as well as conversations with Dr. Davis allowed me to articulate the guilt, but did not resolve my feelings of discomfort as it related to my role and impact. It was

this guilt that drove me to engage in a continued process of scholarship and research upon our return to the United States after the Winter Term.

Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated

In the Spring 2014 semester, Dr. Davis and I began meeting weekly to discuss our time in Belize during the Winter Term. In these conversations, I further reflected and questioned my understandings of education and my role as a pre-service educator. I thought often about my identity as an American in Belize and the impact it had on the response I received when I handed the technology lesson plans to the teachers at the preschool. I interpreted the teachers' willingness to accept our work as their view of Americans as "more knowledgeable" about technology as well as pedagogy and practice. It seemed so bizarre to me they would trust a pre-service teacher to implement specific content and activities into their curriculum. Dr. Davis encouraged me to think more deeply about the implications of these types of reflections on my role as a pre-service teacher, and this led to conversations related to privilege, power, and exceptionalism. He facilitated a meaningful discourse by giving me the space to assume various roles in the discourse equal to his own. He was also willing to listen and taught me to become critically reflective of assumptions others and I had made during our time in Belize. Dr. Davis, too, expressed his own assumptions, which revealed commonalities in terms of our perceptions of education, culture, and context.

Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions

Given our common discontent with our work in the preschool and the obvious shift in my perspectives, Dr. Davis and I began to brainstorm ways to research the perspectives of my peers who also participated in the Belize study abroad experience. In this investigation, I began experimenting with a new role: researcher. This role was different from my previous role as a pre-service educator and college student. As a researcher, I was in a position of leadership and autonomy, deciding what I felt was important to know and learn. This new role, of course, required new action.

A critical assessment of assumptions

The brainstorming process allowed *me* ample opportunity to interact with a variety of research concepts related to my experience in Belize, which further enhanced my understanding of the experience. Mezirow (1997) notes, "the key idea is to help the learners actively engage the concepts presented in the context of their own lives and collectively critically assess the justification of the new knowledge" (10). I researched various frameworks related to qualitative research including: Experiential Learning, Interpretative Phenomenology, and Transformative

Learning Theory, to name a few. Each of these frameworks offered various ways to think about my own perspectives and the perspectives of my peers. With each option, I assessed the value the new knowledge added to our continuous list of research questions and how completely the framework would allow us to understand the perspectives. In coherence with the framework, Dr. Davis and I discussed various research questions that focused on my peers in Belize and the transformative effects of study abroad and service-learning experiences.

Given the diverse service-learning experiences and opportunities the study abroad offered, each pre-service teacher would have a very unique experience. For this reason, we chose not to limit the research questions to one specific perspective and instead evaluated the students' perspectives related to the experience in general. The process of developing these questions deepened my understanding of the various types of transformations that could occur as a result of the service-learning and study abroad experiences. This, in turn, broadened my view of the impact the program had on my own learning. I thought more deeply about my assumptions related to my own perspectives on technology and the influence it had on my actions. This reflection led me to try new ways of acting.

Provisional trying of new roles

As a researcher, I not only questioned my own perspectives, but I began to question the perspectives of my peers. I was deeply interested in the perspectives my peers had as a result of their time in Belize and the impact of those experiences on their lives in the United States. Our specific questions related to perspectives of adult learners were most easily understood through Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory. Through more research, I found Kathleen King's Learning Activities Survey (Technology Version), which is a survey and interview instrument to assess the transformation of perspectives on technology related to teachers in the field.

The use of these instruments gave us great insight into the perspectives of my peers. However, there was something very important that was missing, data from before and during the trip. It was difficult to make conclusions about a difference in perspectives as a result of the Belize study abroad without substantial data related to the perspectives of the learners before and during the experience. This left us at a standstill at the end of the Spring 2014 semester.

Planning of a course of action

Upon my return to Miami University in Fall 2014, Dr. Davis and I began meeting again. We continued to discuss the research we had done in the spring on the heels of our experience in January 2014. Despite the incomplete nature of the work we had already done, it seemed appropriate to begin a new plan of action for the coming 2015 Winter Term. We began discussing potential interventions in the structure of the Belize study abroad program that would lead to a transformative learning experience for future Miami pre-service teachers. With this, we

were able to discuss potential pre- and post-trip curricula that would elicit critical conversations about the feelings of discomfort and impact experienced by future students.

In light of these discussions and the missing data from our research the previous semester, I suggested the possibility of returning to Belize in January 2015. Of course, my return would lend itself to a more significant research role. I was interested in this option because it would allow me to re-evaluate my perspectives. For example, during my first experience in Belize I continuously compared the United States system of education to the Belizean system. I evaluated the Belizean system using a deficit lens, in regards to technology as well as general teaching and learning practices, assuming our way of doing things, including technology integration, was superior. Through conversations with Dr. Davis, I became critical of this deficit model and was more aware of the impact of context. I continued questioning the value of the American education system versus the Belizean system and even went as far as to question the value of that comparison. I came to understand that because the contexts were so different, it was not valid to compare the systems simply in terms of good or bad, or how to make one look like and function like the other. Although I understood this idea, I was not confident in my ability to implement these ideas into my actions. Returning to Belize in January 2015 would give me an opportunity to test my transformation thus far. I would be able to answer the question: Have I reached Mezirow's final dimension of transformative learning?

Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans

My second trip to Belize served another, broader purpose. It allowed me to collect data on participants' (15 pre-service teachers) perspectives throughout a study abroad experience. As a researcher, my goal was to gather as much information as possible regarding the pre-service teachers' perspectives in the context of the Belize study abroad experience. In order to do this, I assumed a new role: participant observer. Participant observation as a form of qualitative research "is the process enabling researchers to learn about the activities of the people under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities" (Kawulich 2005, 2). This new role prompted the need for additional knowledge and skills I had not yet acquired in my research and scholarship experience. In this phase of my transformation, the acquisition of knowledge was necessary for the success of the research. Without a clear understanding of my roles and actions, I would fail to collect the extensive data necessary to evaluate the perspective of the participants. At this point, I understood my role not only as a researcher and observer, but also a mentor in the experience. I planned to share my perspectives based on my previous experiences in Belize to guide the thinking of the Miami pre-service teachers as they went through their own (hopefully) transformation. This role would change greatly throughout the trip, leading to the next phase of Transformative Learning.

Building of competence and confidence in new roles and relationships

The Winter 2015 program was similar to the previous program in January 2014. I participated in a majority of the experiences including all excursions, class meetings, English Language Learner adult tutoring, meals, and additional interactions on the island. During these times, I observed and listened closely to the comments of 13 participants (two students chose not to participate). After three days, Dr. Davis and I evaluated the process and realized there were five participants with whom my interactions were deeper and potentially more meaningful. Therefore, we chose to focus more closely on these five participants for the remainder of the trip. These participants were aware of this focus and I interviewed each person four or five times during the span of our stay on the island. These interviews were in addition to normal daily interaction and observation.

Through this process, I began to understand my role as a researcher, observer, and mentor differently than I had initially envisioned. Prior to the experience, I understood myself as a mentor, a sharer of my own ideas from my previous experience in Belize; however, after the initial interviews and observations, I realized there was more room for me to listen than to speak. Instead of sharing my perspectives, I became intrigued with hearing the experiences of the participants and my opinions seemed out of place. My perspectives were based on the previous study abroad program and almost a year's time of research and discussions with Dr. Davis. My perspectives had evolved greatly, but I still had more to learn. Consequently, I began to sit back and listen more closely. I listened and wrote and let the participants' perspectives evolve without my input. I even limited my questions because they were coming from my biased perspective. When I began to let them lead the conversations, I learned more about their learning processes and much more about my own roles and actions. This reflection, which led to the release of the mentorship role, was crucial to further my transformation.

A reintegration of one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspectives

Returning to the United States after my second trip to Belize was an interesting experience because at this time I started my third block of the education program. My courses focused on the synthesis of knowledge from the previous two and a half years. This synthesis included not only the classes I had taken in the United States, but also my study abroad experiences in Belize. I used writing to understand my new perspectives and their place in my life in the American education system. For example, in an autobiography assignment in my educational leadership course, I dissected my initial ideas of mentorship and leadership, which I assumed before conducting research in Belize in Winter 2015. I compared my realization of the importance of allowing my participants to "lead the conversation" to the significance of allowing my future students to do the same in our classroom.

Through writing, I have also interpreted my own experiences on the basis of autonomy and discovery, an important aspect of the transformation process. Mezirow (1997) noted the importance of this process, which involves "transforming frames of reference through critical

reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, taking action on one's reflective insight, and critically assessing it" (11). In my service-learning experience at the preschool, my frame of reference was that of a college student. As a learner, I was deeply intrigued with the dichotomy of technology integration in the Belizean context and the effect the realization had on my thoughts, actions, and roles as a pre-service teacher. My frame of reference evolved as a result of continuous research and scholarship, which allowed me new knowledge and skills to complete this work. And finally, my return to Belize as a participant observer gave me the opportunity to take action with my new knowledge and then again reflect and critically assess my perspectives. Through the reintegration of new ideas into my life, I have been able to articulate and reconcile many of my experiences and questions from my time in Belize. The most critical insight has come through an extension of this work.

Enduring Understandings

I distinguish three important take aways from my process of transformative learning as a result of a service-learning experience in Belize. First, study abroad and service learning offered a critical sphere to enhance my learning in the university classroom. Without spending hours in the Little Stars Preschool, I could not have authentically experienced the contrast of theory and real-world that so greatly sparked my interest in technology integration in the classroom. Also, the preschool offered a valuable space to try new roles and actions that resulted from my new perspectives. For example, I was able to integrate technology-based resources into the preschool curriculum and this would have been an inauthentic exercise in the university classroom. Finally, the authenticity led to real feelings of guilt and shame, which enhanced my search for knowledge through academic research and scholarship.

Second, research was the keystone of my transformation. The research process transformed my role as a learner to something much deeper and more meaningful. I have discovered new skills and knowledge unlike previous learning opportunities I have experienced. In the university classroom, oftentimes undergraduates are receivers of knowledge the professor grants. Students have very little autonomy or leadership in their learning, which hinders deep engagement in the process. Research, however, required me to be an active participant in my learning. With the support of Dr. Davis, I was engaged in the material that led me to new perspectives and understandings of others and myself. These new perspectives enhanced my roles as learner, teacher, and researcher.

Finally, my transformation as defined by Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory is incomplete. Before the second trip I asked: "Had I reached Mezirow's final dimension of transformative learning?" I can now answer that question: No, I have not. This whole process of scholarship and research has taught me this very important piece about transformation. It is just that, a process. There is no end point or final step. Learning is a continuous process of cyclical reflection in action and reflection on action (Poetter 2011). As a pre-service teacher, I am continuously re-evaluating my perspectives based on new interactions and experiences. With

each service experience, study abroad, class discussion, reflection journal, and lecture, my perspectives will continue to evolve and transform through the ten dimensions of Mezirow's theory. As I enter student teaching next semester, I will, again, have the opportunity to try my hand at technology integration using what I learned in the Little Stars Preschool to guide my action and reflection. With each attempt, my thoughts and actions can change.

My personal case study elicits implications for international service learning at large. As seen in the articulation of my transformation, it took two years for me to fully experience all ten steps of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory. That being said, service learning in the context of study abroad must extend the learning experiences of students beyond the in-country experiences. The critical time before and after the experience must be capitalized upon to ensure students make the most of the reintegration phase of transformation because service learning and study abroad are simply one phase of a lifelong learning experience.

In Fall 2015, I considered the implications described above and proposed a year-long study abroad curriculum at Miami University. With this, I received a grant to design, build, and implement a curriculum that aims to engage undergraduates in the work of critical reflection and analysis of assumptions and perspectives related to the context of the host country, prior to setting foot in the country. The post-trip modules will reorient the students' perspectives gained from study abroad into the university context, to extend upon the learning and reflection which occurs prior to and during the study abroad experience. This process has simply extended my reintegration phase, eliciting new disorienting dilemmas, and inciting a recursive cycle of transformation in my understandings of study abroad at large.

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