Transformative Learning Theory and Intercultural Experience: How Experience Abroad Influences Perspectives Change in Learners

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As adults traverse the journey of life, researchers have sought to make meaning of their transitions and life experiences. Transformative Learning Theory has emerged as one lens in which to understand this process, and has seen great expansion through the past twenty years. What began as a little-known theory associated with Jack Mezirow has grown into a wide body of research, applied in many distinct disciplines. An aspect of adult learning theory, transformative learning theory recognizes variations of self-reflection adults apply to learning experiences that effect self change. Researchers have also sought situations through which adult self-reflection and change evolve. One explicit way of accomplishing this task has been through observation and analysis of the intercultural experience, specifically study or work abroad. An international experience serves as a catalyst for change; moving outside of one’s own culture for a period of time has been shown to alter students’ cognitive, but more importantly to transformative learning theory, affective and behavioral systems (Immetman & Schneider, 1998; John Dirkx, 2006). The distinct focus of this paper is to understand how researchers frame transformative effects of placing oneself in a foreign environment.

A related guiding question that emerged for this paper was the following: how have researchers applied transformative learning theory to measure change incited by intercultural experience? In this paper, I work to answer this question by first providing an overview the transformative learning theory- a basis for understanding, and second, using this theory as a lens for the learning that occurs through intercultural experiences. On a practical level, current trends in increased diversity and intercultural communication skills in higher education necessitate study of the impact of intercultural experiences on students. This need also translates to the workplace and society at large. According to Dirkx (2006), “the importance of self-formation to professional development and to society in general cannot be overstated,” (p. 4). Also, framing
an experience abroad within the context of transformative learning provides a unique picture of the learning that takes place.

**Transformative Learning Theory- an Overview**

Typing the word *transformation* into the computer’s thesaurus provides synonyms such as alteration, change, and conversion. This is what many researchers seek when they apply a transformative theory lens to a discipline; essentially, they look for a change in perceptions measured by change in behavior. To clarify, informative learning is concerned with what is learned (cognitive), where transformative learning seeks out the how and perhaps the why something is learned (more often affective and behavioral) (Kegan, 2000, as cited by Baumgartner, 2001). It relies upon rational or extra-rational interpretations of experiences and life circumstances and attempts to make sense of the ways adults make meaning in their lives. However, transformative learning, while based on the simple concept above, encompasses a large body of philosophies and perspectives today.

**Dirkx’s four-lens approach**

Baumgartner’s (2001) update on transformative learning highlights Dirkx’s four-lens framework of theories, one way to clarify the various approaches. Each of the four lenses is represented through the work of a different educational philosopher. A first lens depicts Paolo Freire’s point of view. He stressed emancipatory education, where his students participated in “conscientization” through which they learned to see the world differently. Consequently, students altered their role within the world, and reflected an inclination toward social justice, (Baumgartner, 2001). A second theory, emphasizing a developmental approach, is that of Daloz. Largely contextual, transformative learning is formed through a journey created through students’ social environment, namely family dynamics and social class. “Daloz’s narrative
approach...humanizes the transformative learning process as he shares stories of students’ struggles...and demonstrates how students negotiate developmental transitions and are changed in the process,” (Baumgartner, 2001, p. 17). Spirituality and learning highlight a third approach by Dirkx and Healy. Dirkx proposes the imagination as a catalyst for extra-rational learning; the use of feeling and images increasing self-understanding (Baumgartner, 2001). Finally, Jack Mezirow, perhaps the most proliferate generator of transformative learning theory- or the most relied upon by other researchers- emphasizes perspective transformation. Perspective transformation is evidenced through “more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective,” (Mezirow, as cited by Baumgartner, 2001). It is Mezirow’s theory that has most often been referred to in the context of intercultural experiences and transformational learning and thus, will later be given more in-depth treatment in this paper. As evidenced through the four theories outlined here, transformative learning theory is a topic of research that has gained momentum and seen deep and broad growth.

**Additional voices in transformative learning**

Representing the increase in research of transformative learning theory, Edward W. Taylor (2007) synthesizes and summarizes research and development through his very recent literature review. This provides a clearer picture of where the theory started, but also how researchers have come to view and apply the theory. Taylor (2007) correlates themes among the transformative learning theory studies: reflection and transformative learning, transformative relationships, fostering transformative learning, context and transformative learning, and perspectives change (p. 180). Although the review’s focus does not reflect the intercultural perspective of this paper, Taylor’s work is helpful in understanding how researchers have correlated experience abroad and transformative learning. Often representing the concept of
perspectives change, different researchers also incorporate other themes that play a role in effecting the change. For example, Lyon (2001) studied how relationships impact perceptions change in women studying abroad, a study that considers many of the themes at one time. Thus, it is clear that there has been no one approach to transformative learning, even when narrowly correlated with intercultural experience. This can be a benefit, providing many avenues for research; as there are many angles from which to see transformative change, perhaps the education community will know a fuller understanding of the learner.

A closer look at perspectives change in transformative learning

Jack Mezirow provided the basis of the theory of perspectives change in transformative learning. His series of ten steps summarized here explains the change through which learners progress. First occurs a disorienting dilemma (often some form of personal predicament that incites the process), then self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame, and critical assessment of assumptions. This is followed by recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared, exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions, and the planning of a course of action. Next are steps of acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans, provisional trying of new roles, building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships, and finally, assimilation into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective, (Mezirow, 2000). Most who have applied Mezirow’s steps to their research have reframed them in their own words. The stages provide the basis for answering the question posed in this paper, and variations on his approach provide a means for understanding how learners alter perceptions through experience abroad (Lyon, 2002).

This transformative learning perspective has at times been critiqued for engaging an overly rational approach to learning which emphasizes adult critical reflection in order to reach
transformation (Imel, 1998). According to Taylor (2007) however, others have built upon this foundation leading to this current description: “…a perspectives change is seen as the development of a more dependable frame of reference- one that is more inclusive, differentiating, permeable (open to other viewpoints), critically reflective of assumptions, emotionally capable of change and integrative of experience,” (p. 180). The primary characteristic of this view is need of the individual to self-reflect and act- to change behavior- upon an affective change. In addition, Taylor (1994) asserts that when a learner encounters a new perspective he or she must either reject the perspective or change current perspective to make room for the new. Modification in perspective is ultimately assessed through verbally-expressed change and alteration of actions.

Transformative Learning through Intercultural Experiences

Basis for connecting intercultural experience and perceptions change

Having provided a basic understanding of transformative learning theory, and more specifically of perceptions change, I represent how research has understood perceptions changes through the intercultural experience. This narrower focus- assessing perspective change through intercultural experience- does not constitute a large body of work (Taylor, 1994), although other researchers appear to have approached the broader topic through related disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, or anthropology. This presented difficulty in answering the questions posed earlier. But Dirkx signifies the importance of these questions: “Scholars suggest that experience of a new culture as an “other” may… contribute to a kind of self-directed analysis that allows the person deeper insights into the hidden or unconscious aspects of the psyche (Hopkins 1999; Roland, 1988, as cited by Dirkx, 2006). Other researchers have observed this
topic’s importance. Taylor (1994) provided an early tie between the two concepts, and his focus of intercultural competence relies on adults observing a differing culture, working to understand the culture, and integrating pieces of the new culture into a new perspective (p.155). He substantiates the connection of intercultural experience and perspectives change through transformative learning:

In effect, the literature seems to indicate that intercultural competency is a transformative process whereby the stranger develops an adaptive capacity, altering his or her perspective to effectively understand and accomplish the demands of the host culture. The competent stranger does not passively accept the social realities defined by others; instead, he or she is able to actively negotiate purpose and meaning. Moreover, the transformation of becoming interculturally competent is anchored within the individual. It is this ongoing process of the individual’s internal system that is at the core of intercultural competency, which is manifested in definitive affective, behavioral, and cognitive abilities such as empathy, adaptive motivation, perspective taking, behavioral flexibility, and person-centered communication (Kim, 1991, as referenced by Taylor, 1994, p.155).

Reframing Mezirow’s ten stages of perceptions change provides a basis for the process that learners progress through. Taylor (1994) conducted “conversational style interviews” with men and women who lived and worked in a host culture for at least two years in order to draw out thoughts, feelings, values, and actions (p. 159). Lyon (2001) also performed interviews, but with women only, who had worked in an overseas environment for a minimum of six months. Dirkx (2006), and Immetman & Schneider (1998) add to the conversation by deepening the understanding of affective and behavioral transition. The studies reveal a chronology of transformation, which I characterize as early stages, middle stages, and later stages.

**Early stages of transformation**

Mezirow’s disorienting dilemma is what research shows to be the catalyst for learning and change abroad. A complex process however, researchers provide varied names for the dilemma, and posit its occurrence at various points- or multiple times- during a stay abroad.
Early stages of transformative learning begin before a learner even leaves for the host country; a disorienting dilemma may occur some time before departure (Lyon, 2001). A confrontation or awareness of prior biases or ways of life that may conflict with the foreign culture may occur during this period. Each student brings a pre-set mentality, set of intercultural skills, and personal goals and interests that affect the learning process. Taylor (1994) claims that these all become part of a “learning readiness,” (p. 160). Lyon (2002) provides a different name for this early process; her name for the dilemma is “culture trigger,” a coinage that combines the concept of a trigger event with culture shock. Most applicable to this early stage is her description of “departure stage” where personal relationships prior to a leave are challenged. This may be observed in a parent who doesn’t support a daughter living and working in foreign country, or in uninformed friends with ideas of what the experience would hold for the participant (p. 121).

Events furthering a disorienting dilemma also occur upon arrival and adjustment to new culture. Culture shock is a process that individuals progress through upon integration into a new culture; learners experience disequilibrium of culture and flux of emotion. Fluidity characterizes the early stage; learners progress through stages differently, often experiencing similar emotions but at different times. Through this period, individuals negotiate new identity, adjust to daily life, and begin to develop competency in a new culture (Taylor, 1994; Lyon, 2002; Immetman & Schneider, 1998). Affecting this process may be indicators from prior experiences and perspectives (level of learning readiness), gender, marital status, race, or age. Dealing with the changes may also emerge in personal or professional environments, depending on the learner’s role in the new culture. This is “a necessary precondition to change and growth, as individuals strive to regain their inner balance by adapting to the demands and opportunities of the intercultural situation,” (Kim & Ruben, 1998, as cited by Taylor, 1994, p.158).
Through this stage, learners deal with beginning changes that centrally affective and emotion-based (Immetman & Schneider, 1998; John Dirkx, 2006). Although cognitive growth is a product of an experience abroad, the time abroad is highly marked by affective change that later leads to behavioral change. Chief emotions dealt with earlier in the stay abroad are frustration, loneliness, anger, and isolation. These emotions carry the learner toward making change in order to re-balance and adjust (Lyon, 2001; Taylor, 1994). This is a unique view of culture shock within transformative learning theory; rather than seeing this affective journey as simply an unpleasant process through which learners must proceed, transformative theorists believe these emotions propel the learner toward a deeper self and are holistically necessary to the transformation, (John Dirkx, 2006).

**Middle stages of transformation**

Learners progressing through a perceptions change as a result of living and working abroad continue to negotiate meanings and identity throughout the experience. Taylor’s research reveals that participants choose one of two “cognitive orientations” at this point; learners either participate in nonreflective or reflective orientation. A nonreflective response assumes limited questioning of previously-held perceptions. Conversely, other study participants revealed a deep critical questioning of personal values or beliefs- reflective orientation, (1994, p.154). Further, “the participants not only attempt to make sense of their experiences but at times are cognizant of the very learning process taking place and the subsequent change in behavior,” (Taylor, 1994, p. 165). Various behavioral strategies were applied by learners in order to balance their affective or emotional disequilibrium; methods were used to deal with a new culture trigger, or continuing effects of culture shock. Three broadly identified behaviors were observation, participation, and relationship-building. Observation included such activities as listening, watching, and reading
newspapers. Participation characterized learners as shopping at local markets, eating ethnic foods, and working and socializing with local people. Relationship building primarily focused on creating committed friendships (Taylor, 1994). This relationship building involved both enjoyment of new friendships and as well as dealing with confusion within the relationships and is a cornerstone to the transformative process as a whole (Lyon, 2002). “Aspects of one’s social context, especially around interpersonal relationships and those which speak to our impulses, desires, and anxieties, are intimately and unconsciously bound up with self-formative processes (Dirkx, 2006, p.3).

**Later stages of transformation**

Behavioral change in participants represented a key indicator of actual learning taking place. Beyond participation and relationship building, Taylor looked for evidence of an “evolving intercultural identity…where the participant’s cultural identity is no longer linked to one culture, in that they are able to identify and understand the perspectives of the host culture,” (1994, p.167). An arrival of an intercultural identity was evidenced by greater inclusiveness of varied points of view, and a sense of shared identity with humankind. This new perspective is a culmination of preceding stages, from dealing with culture triggers, through adjustments of behaviors to accept the host culture, and of perceptions changes of self and others (167).

Lyon (2002) then identifies a final culture trigger as the individual with new perspectives moves back into home culture. Learners found themselves readjusting to the aspects of American culture, and re-establishing personal and professional relationships. Through this readjustment, many participants demonstrated further evidence of transformative learning. Because learners had already experienced aspects of changed perceptions during the stay abroad, negotiating the place of new perspectives in home cultures proved a further challenge, especially
in terms of developing relationships again with those who did not share new perspectives (Lyon, 2001). In effect, the change that occurred during the experience abroad was often verbalized as a set of new perspectives, but those perspectives also necessitated a change in relationships upon return home.

**Implication and further questions**

Study or work abroad clearly provides an opportunity for adults to arrive at new perspectives and new behaviors for living. Additionally, viewing these changes through the transformative lens allows a unique understanding of how learners make meaning and adjust prior perceptions to make room for new. This approach also demonstrates the degree to which new perceptions affect individuals upon return to home culture, indicating a true change. As I came to understand the various angles to transformative learning, I wondered at their implications for further study. Although there is a sufficient amount of research correlating effects of study or work-abroad on the person, few distinctly correlated the intercultural experience with transformative learning theory. Perhaps further studies in transformative learning might approach from varied angles, such as Lyon’s work on the importance of relationships to women in the transformative process. An interesting study might apply Daloz’s social perspective, following a perception change in American students who traverse to developing countries in observation of how new perceptions affect social-justice actions upon re-entry into American culture. Surely similar research has been performed, perhaps just not from the perspective of transformative learning theory. Additionally, new research must always add something new to the “conversation.” However, I do believe that this topic carries current weight in our widening world.
Studies that correlate intercultural experience and transformative learning carry a deep and timely importance interpersonally as well socially in our world. Personal benefits include increased self-awareness and the satisfaction of developing an intercultural identity. However, these benefits carry into the greater society. On a practical level, workplaces necessitate employees who are interculturally fluent; increased globalization requires competence especially in communication skills with individuals from varied countries. Additionally, and perhaps often overlooked past the practical level, it benefits society at large to have a higher number of individuals who have a more developed sense of self (Dirkx, 2006). Finally, perhaps there is little finality to transformative learning; upon reintroduction to home culture, individuals continue to interact with others, perhaps inciting interest in others to change or become more aware of self-perceptions. Both on a personal and societal level, it is true that we are not what we know, but what we are willing to learn (Bateson, 1994).
References


