Transforming Horizons:
The Process of Learning in Global Social Action
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Abstract: This paper presents research that led to the development of a theoretical framework for explaining how adult learners experience the process of transformational learning in global social action.

Mezirow's (1991, 2000) transformational learning theory provides adult educators with a useful model for understanding how adult learners engage in critically reflective forms of learning that may lead to significant changes in consciousness and lifestyle habits. However, a number of adult learning theorists have argued that Mezirow's transformational learning theory has overestimated its usefulness in understanding and explaining how context and unequal relations of power shape transformational learning processes (Clark & Wilson, 1991; Collard & Law, 1989; Hart, 1990; Newman, 1994). Adult learning theorists have also critiqued Mezirow's theory for privileging rational forms of learning, such as critical reflection and discourse, over affective and spiritual modes of learning which further weakens the model's explanatory power (Brookfield, 1994; Tisdell, 2000). Taylor (2000) indicates that empirical studies have neglected to address ongoing theoretical concerns regarding Mezirow's transformational learning model and in particular, how transformational learning helps foster the movement from individual perspective transformation to social action (Foley, 1999). The purpose of this longitudinal case study was to examine how adult undergraduate students experience transformational learning as a result of their participation in an international service-learning program in Nicaragua (Kiely, 2002). This paper describes a transformational learning process model that emerged from this study. The model provides a useful framework for understanding how adult learners engage in global social action.

Theoretical Framework

Mezirow's (1991, 2000) transformational learning theory informed this study. His conceptual model describes a learning process that results in the re-examination of distorted assumptions through critical reflection and discourse which eventually can lead to transformation of one's worldview or "frame of reference" (Mezirow, 2000). The transformational learning process includes the following non-sequential components: 1) A disorienting dilemma, 2) self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame, 3) a critical assessment of assumptions, 4) recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared, 5) exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions, 6) planning a course of action, 7) acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans, 8) provisionally trying of new roles 9) building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships 10) a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22). According to Mezirow (2000), the forms of perspective transformation and the actions that result, depend on the unique circumstances that one is experiencing. In addition, because people bring diverse biographies, experiences, self-concepts, motivations and expectations into different educational contexts there is still a tremendous amount of debate regarding the processes that lead to transformation of one's world-view (Taylor, 2000, Mezirow, 2000).

Lyon (2002) provides an excellent review of eight empirical studies that explore transformational learning in cross-cultural learning contexts. She found that these studies shared elements in their findings including: the identification of disorienting dilemmas as a trigger for learning, reflective and non-reflective learning processes, different types of perspective

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transformation, and the important role of relationships in facilitating transformational learning (Lyon, 2002). Importantly, the studies above did not offer insight on how contextual factors affect study participants' transformational learning and neglected to examine the long-term processes of transformational learning (Lyon, 2002; Taylor, 2000). Prior studies largely assume a constructivist epistemological position and do not include in their analyses a response to the theoretical critiques described earlier regarding the role of context, power, and affect in transformational learning. Consequently, the individualist, psychological and rational framework underlying Mezirow's (1991, 2000) theory remains largely the same. This study examined how adult students from the US experienced the process of transformational learning as a result of their participation in a community-based service-learning program in Nicaragua.

The International Service-Learning Program Setting

Since 1994, a small community college in upstate New York has offered students the opportunity to participate in a six-credit service-learning immersion program in Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, a community that has been experiencing persistent poverty. Students attend seminars on a variety of topics, (i.e., health, political economy, community development, Nicaraguan history, and Spanish language) and organize and implement health clinics in collaboration with community members. The international service-learning program maintains an explicit social justice orientation and is purposely designed to disrupt students' notion of reality. The learning goals of the program involve raising consciousness about the historical development of racism, sexism, economic disparities, and unequal relations of power through a series of community presentations, seminars and readings. The transformative vision embedded in the course pedagogy is that after participating in service-learning students will develop a critical understanding of the meaning of global citizenship, and begin to engage in social action to transform existing institutions and policies that perpetuate political oppression, economic disparities and persistent global poverty.

Methodology

The study used a longitudinal case study design to better understand how undergraduate students from the U.S. experienced transformational learning processes during and after participation in community-based international service-learning program in Nicaragua (Kiely, 2002). Data gathering methods included on-site participant observation, document analysis of journals and final reflection papers, and semi-structured interviews. A purposeful, heterogeneous sample of twenty undergraduate students participated in the study from 1994 to 2002 (Patton, 2002). Constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1973) of the research data aided in the identification of emergent patterns associated with the meanings study participants attributed to their international service-learning experience (Merriam, 1998).

Findings & Implications

The study identified six themes that describe how students experience the process of transformational learning in international service-learning: contextual border crossing, dissonance, personalizing, processing, connecting and emerging global consciousness. These six themes expand on Mezirow's (2000) model and provide a useful conceptual framework for educators to better understand the learning processes that connect individual perspective transformation and social action.

Contextual border crossing

Once they arrive in Nicaragua, students begin to unpack previously invisible aspects of their social, political, cultural and economic "baggage" and start to recognize their privileged position relative to the resource-poor Nicaraguans that they work with. Contextual border

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crossing represents the transformational learning process of re-positioning one's identity and social location on the global map of power across personal, structural, and historically structured social relations and borders. For example, Doris reflects on the contextual "baggage" she uncovered and reexamined during and after her international service-learning experience:

I was about to embark on the 'mission' of 'helping people' so poor that they can't help themselves. I was about to impart my 'Western knowledge' on a rural coastal community whose most outstanding statistic was 90% unemployment. I felt good about this mission and hopeful that whatever relief from physical suffering I could bring the community was a means to an end. My experience in rural Nicaragua would soon prove this 'Western thought process' to be very far from reality…

While previous studies (Lyon, 2002; Taylor, 2000) view transformational learning separate from the social context, this study found contextual factors such as personal biographies, the service-learning program pedagogy, historical relations between the US and Nicaragua, and structural forces including nationality, class, gender, race influenced students' transformational learning. Prior research also tends to perpetuate the notion that perspective transformation means learning how to adapt to (i.e., intercultural competence), rather than critique society (Lyon, 2002; Taylor, 2000). This study, on the other hand, found that contextual processes influenced adult learners' emerging global consciousness, which entailed understanding and challenging oppressive policies and institutions and to create a more just society, rather than adapting to the status quo.

Dissonance

Students describe their initial experience in Nicaragua as the "free fall of culture shock" – a radical encounter with multiple and intense forms of dissonance. Students experienced different types of dissonance during participation in international service-learning activities (i.e., historical, environmental, physical, economic, political, cultural, spiritual, social communicative and technological forms of dissonance). Immersion in a new and unfamiliar cultural milieu and direct contact with human suffering through service work was extremely disorienting in terms of students' prior experiences, assumptions, and expectations. Students describe feeling like their "senses are on high alert," in "crisis mode" or "a combination of fear, curiosity, and confusion." Students struggle to adjust their cognitive and affective lenses in order to reconcile scenes of poverty that "seem unimaginable, and "surreal," and in contradiction with their previous expectations and taken for granted "assumptions about the resilience of the human spirit." Metaphors that students use to express the meaning of dissonance include, "going through a museum at 100 miles per hour, multiple colors and blurred images of the human condition, beauty, pain, suffering, hope, sadness, tragedy, laughter," and "walking into the aftermath of a war zone."

Importantly, as a longitudinal study, the research gathered data on dissonance over time and identified a significant relationship among the type, intensity and duration of dissonance. Students indicated that high intensity dissonance (i.e., exposure to extreme poverty) fostered students' transformational learning long after participation. For example, students continued to learn from and channel dissonance by making dramatic changes in their consumption habits and by raising awareness about global disparities upon return to the US. Eight years after participating in the program, Karen's attempts to stay involved in social justice issues are fueled by the dissonance she experienced living with the orphanage children. Four years after going to Nicaragua, Beth continues to draw inspiration from the plight of Nicaraguan women and children she worked with, to raise awareness about global poverty and human rights issues in the global

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studies classes that she teaches at a local high school. Surprisingly, low intensity dissonance (i.e., language and cultural barriers) did not lead to profound shifts in students' perspective, but did lead to increased intercultural competence in accomplishing daily tasks in Nicaragua.

The identification and differentiation among the type, intensity and duration of dissonance has important theoretical implications for explaining the persistence of transformational learning. This finding refutes the notion that disorienting dilemmas simply act as internal, cognitive learning triggers or events that fade away once experienced as suggested by Mezirow (1991, 2000). The familiar adage "time heals old wounds" was not the case for many international service-learning participants. High intensity forms of "dissonance" that stems from directly experiencing poverty for the first time – remained as a fundamental part of students' global consciousness and a permanent fixture within their new cultural frame of reference.

Personalizing

Personalizing describes how each student responds to the various forms of dissonance that they experience in Nicaragua. Service work in Nicaragua puts them in direct contact with Nicaraguans who live in extreme poverty and this visceral experience often triggers emotional reactions causing students to assess their personal strengths and critique their weaknesses. Direct confrontation with the human face of poverty cannot be "intellectualized or rationalized away" as students say over and over. Personal involvement in peoples' suffering causes intense emotional reactions, as one student exclaimed "demanding immediate attention." The experience also generates a sense of moral obligation and "personal responsibility."

The learning process entailed in personalizing is similar to Mezirow's process model, in that adult learners who experience "disorienting dilemmas" often engage in "self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame" (2000, p. 22). However, unlike Mezirow's (2000) conception of transformational learning, which privileges rational, cognitive processing, managing and controlling of emotions, this study confirms the central importance of the emotional and visceral aspects of transformational learning.

Processing and connecting

This study found that there was an interdependent and dialectical relationship between affective and reflective processes of transformational learning in international service-learning. Processing represented the ways in which students engaged in various reflection-oriented modes of learning to re-evaluate the validity of their assumptions or to find answers to the social problems they were witnessing firsthand. Connecting had to do with affective aspects of transformational learning in which students developed deeper more empathic relationships with Nicaraguans who were struggling with poverty. Processing had to do with students' critical reflection on the structural forces underlying the origin and solution to economic disparities and injustice in Nicaragua. Connecting meant listening, understanding, empathizing and struggling with Nicaraguans as allies.

For Mezirow (1990), "the most significant learning experiences in adulthood involve critical self-reflection – re assessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling and acting" (p. 13). However, findings from this study suggest that critical reflection combined with affective forms of learning provided the necessary and crucial integrative link to fostering the process of transformational learning. Reflection that occurs through processing has little significance in terms of students' sense of empathy, long-term solidarity with Nicaraguans and ongoing commitment to work for greater social justice unless it is understood in terms of affective learning. The intimate, personal, visceral, and deeply felt connections that students have with Nicaraguans living on the margins

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while situated in communities of service-work, however, cannot be fully assimilated unless students process it through reflection and dialogue. Therefore, transformational learning is more apt to persist over the long-term if there are structured opportunities for both reflective and affective learning processes to take place.

Emerging global consciousness

Emerging global consciousness (EGC) was the most salient long-term transformational learning process resulting from the research data. EGC represents both a learning product and process that stems from participation in international service-learning. As a product, EGC signifies a critical awareness of how one's identity, position and ability to act are socially and culturally structured. As a process, EGC is characterized by a dynamic and multifaceted shift in study participants' frame of reference along at least one of six domains: political, moral, intellectual, cultural, personal and spiritual. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, EGC represents a conceptual framework for developing a deeper understanding of what it means to be a global citizen. The field of adult education has begun to develop a more nuanced articulation of state-centric forms of citizenship as traditionally formulated, yet the concept of global citizenship has been largely neglected (Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997). Increasing dialogue and research on the meaning of global citizenship is essential if the field is to develop an adequate conceptual framework to draw from to articulate what it means to be a responsible member of an emerging global civil society.

Conclusion

The study findings provide a useful conceptual framework for adult educators to understand the transformational learning processes involved in learning global citizenship and engaging in social action. Importantly, the study problematizes the nature of disorienting dilemmas as discrete one time triggers of transformational learning and unpacks the meaning of context into structural, personal, programmatic and historical dimensions. The research findings also highlight the interdependency of affective and reflective forms of transformational learning, and uncover the different dimensions of how adults experience world-view transformation as a critical understanding of what it means to actively participate in global citizenship.

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