

Emancipated, Empowered, & Employable: Middle Eastern Women's Transformative Experiential Learning

Shelbee R. Nguyen
American University in Dubai

Keywords: perspective transformation, experiential learning, international education

Abstract: Critical reflection journals were employed to promote thinking about global citizenship and the meaning of social justice for Middle Eastern learners enrolled in a short-term study abroad course. Analyses of private reflections reveal general cognitive reordering, socially constructed ideals of justice, and themes related to empowerment for Middle Eastern women.

Introduction

The experiences of Non-Western adult learners are largely underrepresented in the collection of research about perspective transformation (Kim & Jeris, 2009). The purposes of this investigation was exploratory in nature and sought to identify what kind of perspective transformations, if any, were reported by Middle Eastern adult and higher education (AHE) learners who participated in an international experiential learning opportunity. The course entitled *International Organizations in Two Global Cities* aimed to offer students practical, hands-on learning and engagement by critically evaluating various aspects of inter-governmental, non-governmental, and non-profit international organizations in Paris and Geneva. Major themes relevant to perceptions of self, perceptions of social justice, increased confidence, and perspective transformations were identified from Middle Eastern women's reflection journals.

Relevant Literature

Study abroad and international education have long been praised for offering American students practical, meaningful and experiential learning about cross-cultural interaction, cultural awareness, personal growth, perspective transformation and increased employability (Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Dolby, 2004; Dolby, 2007). However, much of the literature negates some of how this meaningful learning manifests in adult learners outside of the confines of the United States (US) (Kim & Jeris, 2009). The current snapshot in the Middle East reveals that women outnumber their male counterparts in educational institutions, and are generally more educated than men (Metcalf, Hutchings & Cooper, 2009). Despite the increased presence of women in adult and higher education, women still earn less and hold limited leadership roles.

Method and Analysis

Critical reflective journals were completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a course cross-listed in international studies, business, and education. Critical reflective journals encouraged thinking about the learners' perceptions about and the role they play in social justice and global citizenship. These were prompted after one-hour group discussions about a particular international organization and their role in the maintenance of social justice, global citizenship, and community engagement. Journals were photo-copied, with the permission of the learners, to

be analyzed using constant-comparison techniques (Glaser, 1965). Several themes were identified from female learners.

Findings and Conclusions

For the females within this study, being able to even participate in a course abroad was a “big deal” for the family. For example, Salma shared, “my mother and grandmother insisted to bring me to the airport and see me off...I think this was harder for them.” For many female participants like Salma, being able to travel to another country on their own, without the family, was something that they would not have been able to do without having an educationally sanctioned purpose. Both Salma and Noor reported feeling “free” and “liberated” to do something “on their own” and be a part of conversations about global issues related to “migration, scarcity of resources, technological interconnectivity and human rights.” Being able to self-direct and take ownership of a selective, globally oriented course-abroad gave learners like Salma and Noor a sense of empowerment and confidence about their abilities to “ask questions, “and “be a part of the [critical] discussion” on ways that social justice manifests uniquely across cultures, Maryam extended that “asking questions, obtaining a visa and going through the whole process can be embarrassing” on your own especially when many others have more travel experience and “do not have the same questions.”

Many Middle Eastern female learners like Maryam shared that conversation with volunteers, coordinators, administrators and CEO’s changed how they perceived their own abilities. For example, Jasmine noted “I never felt like global issues began with informal dialogue.” Noora also explains “I hadn’t thought about the actual conversation” when reflecting on the most crucial aspect of preserving labor and human rights. Internships, extended studies and special training opportunities were offered to learners enrolled in the class. Participants like Noor, Noora and Salma revealed new thinking about their career paths and possibilities for their future by journaling “this could be real for me.” Ultimately, a course abroad for female students offered students learning far outside of set objectives for the course. Encouraging experiential international learning could foster new perspectives and opportunities in leadership for Middle Eastern AHE learners.

References

- Carlson, J. S., & Widaman, K. F. (1988). The effect of study abroad during college on attitudes toward other cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 12, 1-17.
- Dolby, N. (2004). Encountering an American self: Study abroad and national identity. *Comparative Education Review*, 48(2), 150-173.
- Dolby, N. (2007). Reflections on nation: American undergraduates and education abroad. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11(2), 141-156.
- Glaser, B. G. (1965). The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *Social Problems*, 12, 436 - 445.
- Kim, K., & Jeris, L. (2009). Job loss and transformative learning: A case of Korean women. *International Journal of Continuing and Lifelong Learning*, 2(1), 83-101.
- Metcalf, B., Hutchings, K., & Cooper, B. (2009). Re-examining women’s international management opportunities and experiences: A Middle Eastern perspective. In K. Ibeh and S. Davies (Eds.), *Contemporary Challenges to International Business* (pp. 33-55). London, England: Palgrave-Macmillan.