

Beyond Culture Shock: The Meaning of Affect and Emotions in International Educational Experience

John Dirkx, Jody E. Jessup Anger, John R. Brender, Bernard Gwekwerere, and Regina O. Smith

Abstract: Short-term study abroad has become an increasing feature of graduate programs in adult and higher education. Their educative value, however in professional preparation remains unclear. We explore the meaning of emotional experiences in study abroad and their contribution to self-formative processes in professional preparation.

Lisa, Derek, and Erica are higher and adult education graduate students who have participated in short-term study abroad experiences. In reflecting on her experience Lisa remarked, “I was blown away by the trip. I don’t know what I was expecting but I never realized how different they are, even though we share the same language. This experience will stay with me for a long time.” Derek commented that the trip “stirred up a lot in me. It made me think about things I hadn’t every really paid attention to. At first I didn’t seem to fit in anywhere but now I see it was more me than them.” Several years later, Erica still recalls her study tour as a “a life-changing experience” that contributed to her altering the focus of her graduate program and ultimately a career with nongovernmental agencies.

These comments represent fictitious composites of stories told by students participating in a short-term, study abroad program that we have offered over the last four years. Surprised by the depth of emotional and affective experience reflected in these accounts, we set out to understand what they suggest about the meaning of cross-cultural experiences. In this paper, we explore how emotional and affective dimensions of intercultural experiences can potentially provide access to hidden aspects of the person and ultimately contribute to construction and reconstruction of one’s sense of self. We frame our theoretical exploration within psychodynamic cultural psychology (Roland, 1988; West, 2001) and our own experiences with short-term study abroad.

Summary of Our Graduate-level, Short-term Study Abroad Program

Four years ago we began an international dimension in our graduate curriculum. Conceptually analogous to undergraduate, short-term study-abroad, this experience explicitly focuses on comparing and understanding different educational practices within another country. The program involves adult learners from both countries in reciprocal week-long “field trips” or study tours with a program from another country. To minimize costs and potentially disruptive effects on students who are also working fulltime, we limit the length of our study tour to approximately one week. Students from the host country are invited to participate in the study tour along with their international guests, and many of our students avail themselves of this opportunity. The study tour focuses primarily on visiting different practice sites and engaging staff and students in discussions about the nature and context of the practice. It is carefully planned and tailored to address the specific needs and interests of its participants.

We initiated this effort largely to provide our adult learners with a formal and systematic, comparative educational experience in adult and higher education. Beyond new insights into various aspects of educational practice, however, some participants often reported profound,

affect-laden experiences of confusion and resistance to some local cultural rituals. Others described being surprised by a strong sense of connection and deeply moved by their experiences within the host country. These affective experiences often overshadowed more explicitly intended cognitive outcomes and have prompted us to reflect on what these emotional experiences mean with respect to what is being learned about the self within these study tours.

The Study of Inter-cultural Experiences

Research in intercultural experience stresses the learning processes associated with intercultural adaptation and competence (Lyons, 2000; Taylor, 1994; Zieghan, 2000). Encompassing a wide range of sojourner experiences, from tourist trips to studies of permanent immigrants, most of the time frames reflected in the programs studied range from several months to several years. One form of intercultural experience is study-abroad or the short-term study tour, a rapidly expanding phenomenon in higher education (In this paper, we use “study tour” and short-term study abroad synonymously). By short-term, study abroad, we refer to those programs sponsored by institutions of higher education that involve participants in discipline specific, international educational experiences for periods that are usually shorter than traditional, semester or year-long study-abroad experiences. From 1985 to 2002, enrollment in these programs more than tripled and the dominant major of the students enrolled shifted from the humanities and social sciences to more professionally-oriented studies, such as business and education. In general, study-abroad programs intend to help participants learn more about life within another culture, to reflect on the values and way of life in their own country, and to become more aware of their own country, their place in that country, and “its place in the world” (Dolby, 2004, p. 150).

Few studies describe the adjustment process of individuals and groups engaged in short term study abroad (Sussman, 2000). Opinion pieces regarding the virtues of study abroad abound and are often written by faculty members and returned students. Some of these describe study abroad as the paramount experiential education encounter, where theory and practice come together 24 hours a day as students negotiate both the classroom and the culture (Hopkins, 1999). Student testimonials often describe the study abroad experience as one where the students not only looked outward, learning about the new culture, but looked inward as well in an attempt to reconcile their cultural assumptions and practices in a new cultural context (Hopkins, 1999).

In other words, the process of intercultural adaptation reflects two dimensions of the experience: (a) learning about the new culture and, (b) learning about one’s self within the context of the new culture. Our research focuses primarily on how students’ experiences in a new culture evoke and foster learning about who they are and how they come to re-think their sense of self. In this sense, our work is consistent with those studies that have approached intercultural experience as a process of learning in general, and transformative learning in particular (Lyons, 2000; Taylor, 1994; Zieghan, 2000). This perspective stresses the importance of participant reflection on and modification of prior beliefs, values, and behaviors so that they align more appropriately with the country and culture in which one is working or studying, allowing the individual to “effectively accommodate the demands of living in a host culture” (Taylor, 1994, p. 154).

Related to the notion of intercultural competence are the idea of “cultural identity” (Brender, 2006) and the processes of acculturation characteristic of experiences within a foreign culture (Barry, 2001). Development of a cultural identity expresses the means by which beliefs,

assumptions, and values mediate the adaptation of practitioners and students to sometimes radically different cultural forms and practices (Brender, 2006). Others have studied the ways in which experience in cultures other than one's own affect or influence the participant's sense of self (Dolby, 2004; Roland, 1988; Sussman, 2000), and the learning and perspective transformation processes associated with these changes (Taylor, 1994). In other words, transformative processes associated with the development of intercultural competence and the re-examination of one's cultural identity reflect fundamental processes of self-formation.

Several inter-related areas of research are emerging within higher and adult education that depict the interaction of self-identity and study abroad, including the difference between psychological and sociocultural adjustment (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward, Leong, & Low, 2004), the interaction of cross-cultural exchange and experiences of stress and coping (Arthur, 2001), and the re-examination and negotiation of a "national identity" in study-abroad experiences (Dolby, 2004). This research underscores the importance of affective responses felt by sojourners who are engaged in cross-cultural experiences. These emotional dimensions are clearly illustrated in the concept of "culture shock" (Adler, 1975; Lyon, 2002; Oberg, 1960), a set of powerful and disequilibrating emotional or affective reactions often associated with experience of another culture other than one's own. Participants in short-term experiences are often flooded with powerful emotions that reflect both uncertainty and a chaotic sense of being in a foreign country (Barna, 1997; Oberg, 1960). These powerful emotional and affective reactions are often perceived by scholars and practitioners as undesirable side-effects that often detract from effective learning and acculturation. Scholars focusing on the transformative dimensions of intercultural experiences, however, suggest that such emotional experiences are an integral component of inter-cultural experiences, such as study-abroad (Lyons, 2000; Taylor, 1994).

Short-term study abroad programs are often too brief to foster cultural competence or the reworking of a cultural or intercultural identity. Their educative value, however, may well rest with their capacity to foster self-learning and self awareness among participants. The emotions experienced by participants in these programs provide a kind of language that, when understood, may contribute to professional and personal self-formation (West, 2001). Research on intercultural experiences have explored the possibility that the emotional aspects associated with initial participation in a new culture can serve as catalysts for change and the development of intercultural competence (Taylor, 1994; Zieghan, 2000). Rather than just emphasizing adaptation to an outer reality, this research suggests that these emotions express a deeper engagement of the self of the learner in intercultural experiences. While these studies describe primarily processes of acculturation and socialization (Lyons, 2002; Taylor, 1994), more research is needed on the intrapsychic or intrapersonal meaning these affective experiences and emotions hold for adult learners in study abroad experiences.

Understanding the Subjective Meaning of Emotions in Intercultural Experience

Prior research suggests that intercultural experiences contribute to the construction or reconstruction of a sense of self, a process to which we refer as "self-formation." This research, however, reflects differing understandings as to what is meant by the self. In the view of the self taken in this study, "the self can be thought of as a psychological structure that contains within it the various processes of mental life....selfhood comprises a core element of each individual's personality and subjective existence" (Frosh, 1991, p. 2). Through observation and reflection, one comes to know the self. Such views of the self as potentially knowable through observation

and critical reflection are prevalent in the concepts of cultural identity (Brender, 2006) and intercultural transformation theory (Lyons, 2000; Taylor, 1994).

The self, however possesses an ambiguous status, referring to both the object of knowledge – coming to know about one’s self – and that which experiences or comes to know. We cannot not fully know ourselves because the knower is in the self. That is, there are aspects of the self hidden from the self and not readily accessible to the knowing self. This hidden dimension of the self is expressed through the language “of the unconscious – of the impulses, anxieties, wishes and contradictory desires that are structured and restructured by our immersion in the social order” (Frosh, 1991, pp. 2-3). In other words, the unconscious is expressed through emotional and affective experiences that are often beyond our levels of conscious awareness. Aspects of the social order enter “unbidden and unnoticed into the foundation stones of our psychic structure” (Frosh, 1991, p. 2). Aspects of one’s social context, especially those revolving around interpersonal relationships and those which speak to our impulses, desires, and anxieties, are intimately and unconsciously bound up with self-formative processes.

The importance of self-formation to professional development and to society in general cannot be overstated. While narcissism, borderline disorders, and psychosis define extreme ends of disrupted self-formation, elements of these conditions are also evident in “normal” personalities. Theorists agree that “all selves are thrown into confusion when faced with the contradictions and multiplicities of modernity” (Frosh, 1991, p.3). Given modern society, the struggle for selfhood becomes difficult. According to Palmer (2004), many educators experience a sense of “divided self” that interferes with their capacity to work from the heart.

Within psychodynamic theory, intrapersonal and interpersonal dialogues are critical to developing awareness and knowledge of this hidden self. Developing self-knowledge that can contribute to self-formation involves not only observing and reflecting on conscious experiences but exploring and coming to know the unconscious dimensions of the psyche represented in experiences of and relationships with the “other.” While psychoanalysis underscores the importance of the analyst in this dialogue, scholars suggest that experience of a new culture as an “other” may also contribute to a kind of self-directed analysis that allows the person deeper insights into hidden or unconscious aspects of the psyche (Hopkins, 1999; Roland, 1988). Such structures of one’s mental life become more visible through the emotional and affective experiences resulting from immersion in a new and different culture.

For example, some students visiting a collectivist culture, in which emphasis is placed on the group and not individual autonomy, may find themselves desiring more time alone and resenting the amount of time they are expected to participate in activities with members of the host culture. Other students may be embarrassed and overwhelmed when members of the host culture seem so quick and eager to anticipate and take care of their needs. Such emotional experiences can help trigger critical reflection (Taylor, 1994) and potentially illuminate the students’ assumptions around cultural and national identity (Dolby 2004). But they also represent ways in which the self reveals unconscious aspects of itself, the impulses, anxieties, wishes, and contradictions that have become, over the years, integral but unconscious aspects of the self. Such emotions suggest how aspects of a current social context awaken within the psyche memories of experiences from our past that involved unconscious conflict around similar issues and how they continue to exert their influence in present-day life. Self-formative work, in which the learner engages these deeper aspects of the self in dialogue, involves developing awareness and understanding of their presence in one’s life and the ways in which they are making themselves heard in the everydayness of practice (Dirkx, 2003).

Recognizing, describing, and elaborating the specific contexts in which emotions arise are critical to developing greater awareness of one's self. Emotions are often associated with specific images (Dirkx, 2001) that help connect evocative stimuli within the present social context with prior, unconscious emotion-laden experiences. They facilitate understanding of the deep personal engagement reflected in powerful emotions. For example, elaborating the specific intercultural contexts that evoke feelings of resentment around not having more time for one's self may help one identify similar social contexts in the past in which such emotions are evoked. Elaborating these contexts may suggest a common theme or image that allows the person to discern deeper meaning to these experiences of anger and resentment.

The unconscious journey of the self often moves in ways seemingly mysterious or even contradictory to our ordinary, conscious awareness of self-presentations (Frosh, 1991). What the self needs most for its own development is often what we most consciously fear or from which we quickly turn away. Intercultural social contexts often evoke such emotional experiences. Working with emotion-laden images that arise within such contexts provides a method for differentiating and fostering individuation of the self (Dirkx, 2001) and a furthering of self-formation associated with professional preparation and development (Palmer, 2004). It is in this way that working with emotions arising within study abroad contributes to self-learning, self-awareness, and authenticity in professional practice.

Implications for Practice and Research

Prior research on intercultural experiences stresses the role of emotions in initiating transformative learning (Lyons, 2000; Taylor, 1994; Zieghan, 2000). We suggest that emotions represent more than trigger events for what has been essentially described as a cognitive, rational process of transformation. Rather, such experiences express the manifestation of extra-rational dimensions of the self that must be approached imaginatively rather than solely through analysis and critical reflection (Dirkx, 2001). More information is needed on the kinds of emotions that adult learners experience and the specific contexts in which they are evoked. Critical incident methodology, using narratives of students' experiences, can provide deeper understanding of these emotions and their contexts. In addition, research is needed on the value of dialogical journaling and the self-formative and transformative processes nurtured through this process.

References

- Arthur, N. (2001). Using critical incidents to investigate cross-cultural transition. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 25, 41-53.
- Adler, P. (1975). Transitional experience: An alternative view of culture shock. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 15(4), 13-23.
- Arthur, N. (1997a). Counselling issues with international students. *Canadian Journal of Counselling*, 31, 259-279.
- Barna, L. (1997). Stumbling blocks in intercultural communication. In L. Samovar & R. Porter (eds.), *Intercultural communication: A reader* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Barry, D. T. (2001). Development of a new scale for measuring acculturation: The East Asian acculturation measure. *Journal of Immigrant Health*, Oct 2001, 3(4), 193-197.
- Brender, J.R. (2006). Japanese undergraduates at an American university: Acculturation identity, cultural identity, and values. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University.

- Dirkx, J. M. (2003). Images, transformative learning, and the work of soul. *Adult Learning*, 12(3), Summer.
- Dirkx, J. M. (2001). The power of feelings: Emotion, imagination, and the construction of meaning in adult learning." In S. B. Merriam (ed). *The new update on adult learning theory*. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 89, Spring 2001, 63-72.
- Dolby, N. (2004). Encountering an American self: Study abroad and national identity. *Comparative Education Review*, 48, 150-174.
- Dwyer, M. M. (2004). Charting the impact of study abroad. *International educator*, 13, 14-20.
- Frosh, S. (1991). *Identity crisis: Modernity, psychoanalysis, and the self*. New York: Routledge.
- Hopkins, J.R. (1999). Studying abroad as a form of experiential education. *Liberal Education*, 85, 36-41.
- Lyon, C. (2002). Trigger event meets culture shock: Linking the literature of transformative learning theory and cross-cultural adaptation. In J. Pettit, et.al. (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 43rd Annual Adult Education Research Conference* (pp. 237-242). Raleigh, NC: North Carolina State University.
- Oberg, K., 1960. Cultural shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology*, 7, 177-182.
- Palmer, P. (2004). *A hidden wholeness: The journey toward an undivided life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Roland, A. (1988). *In search of self in India and Japan: A cross-cultural psychology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Searle, W., & Ward, C. (1990). The prediction of psychological and sociocultural adjustment during cross-cultural transitions. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 14, 449-464.
- Sussman, N.M. (2000). The dynamic nature of cultural identity throughout cultural transitions: Why home is not so sweet. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 4, 355-373.
- Taylor, E. (1994). Intercultural competence: A transformative learning process. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 44, 154-174.
- Ward, C., Leong, C.H., & Low, M. (2004). Personality and sojourner adjustment: An exploration of the Big Five and cultural fit proposition. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 35, 137-151.
- West, L. (2001). *Doctors on the edge: General practitioners, health, and learning in the inner-city*. London: Association Press.
- Ziegahn, L. (2000). Adult education, communication, and the global context. In A. L. Wilson & E. R. Hayes (eds.). *Handbook of adult and continuing education* (new edition) (pp. 312-326). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

John Dirkx, Professor, dirkx@msu.edu, Jody E. Jessup Anger, Graduate Assistant, jessupa1@msu.edu, John R. Brender, Graduate Assistant, brenderj@msu.edu, Bernard Gwekwerere, Graduate Assistant, gwekwer1@msu.edu - Higher, Adult and Lifelong Education, Michigan State University; Regina O. Smith, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Administrative Leadership, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee School of Education, rsmith2@uwm.edu

Presented at the Midwest Research-to Practice Conference in Adult, Continuing, and Community Education, University of Missouri-St. Louis, St. Louis, MO, October 4-6, 2006.