

Navigating Dissonance during a Study Abroad Course to Costa Rica: An Examination of the Antecedents to Transformational Learning for U.S. University Agricultural Students

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Introduction/Theoretical Framework

As globalization continues to increase, higher education institutions have been called to modify their curriculum to produce graduates better prepared to solve cross-cultural issues and problems (Myers, 2010). One approach used by universities in the U.S. to achieve such results is through study abroad courses (McCleod & Wainright, 2009). The Forum of Education Abroad (2011) defined a study abroad course as, “an education abroad enrollment option designed to result in academic credit” (para. 1). Previous literature has reported evidence on study abroad courses demonstrate the ability to transform students’ global competence, cross-cultural understandings, and views on agriculture (Roberts & Edwards, 2016; Strange & Gibson, 2017). To achieve the objective, however, requires study abroad courses to be designed purposefully to encourage students to question their existing beliefs – a concept Mezirow (1991) called dissonance. Mezirow (1991) explained that when individuals reflect on dissonance, it could facilitate a powerful learning process, called transformational learning (TL), by which individuals’ previously held worldviews are transformed. O’Malley, Roberts, Stair, and Blackburn (2019) reported that university students experienced four forms of dissonance during a study abroad course to Nicaragua: (1) environmental, (2) sociocultural, (3) personal, and (4) intellectual. As a consequence of such dissonance, students “underwent a perspective change on global issues and problems in agriculture” (O’Malley et al., 2019, p. 10). However, a need emerged to understand whether students in study abroad courses in other contexts experienced similar forms of dissonance. In response, 13 university agriculture students from Louisiana State University were required to reflect on their experiences daily, to examine their articulated dissonance, during a one-week study abroad to Costa Rica in Spring 2019.

Purpose

Grounded in Mezirow’s (1991) transformational learning theory (TLT), this study aimed to investigate whether the forms of dissonance experienced by students in a study abroad course to Costa Rica in 2019 were similar to those reported from a study abroad course to Nicaragua in 2019. We also sought to describe any emergent forms of dissonance not yet identified.

Methodology

To achieve this purpose, we used an instrumental case study approach (Stake, 1995). Then to uphold qualitative quality, we also embedded Lincoln’s and Guba’s (1985) standards for rigor – dependability, confirmability, credibility, and transferability – throughout each phase of this study. To investigate the phenomenon, we analyzed the following sources of data: (a) observations/field notes, and (b) 98 daily video reflections captured using the smart-phone application ReCap® during the study abroad course by the 13 participants. To analyze the data, we transcribed the video reflections verbatim. Then, we employed Corbin’s and Strauss’ (2015) constant comparative method to facilitate three coding procedures – open, axial, and selective to analyze our data. Using this inductive process, themes emerged.

Findings

After analysis of the data, three themes emerged: (1) environmental, (2) intellectual, and (3) moral. In a comparison to O’Malley et al. (2019) findings, an additional form of dissonance,

moral, emerged but the socio-cultural and personal forms of dissonance did not.

Environmental Dissonance

Through the study abroad experience, students noted that environmental differences existed between the United States and Costa Rica. For example, students articulated that they were largely surprised by discrepancies regarding the climate, geography, and wildlife and their existing frames of reference. For example, Participant #5 shared, “It just so different here... the mountains, the humidity, the wildlife, the driving...it’s just a lot different than what I’m used to in the United States.” Further, Participant #7 added, “All I could think, was how beautiful and clear the water was. I’ve never seen water like that before in the United States.”

Intellectual Dissonance

During the study abroad course, the students also described the ways in which they experienced inconsistencies concerning agricultural knowledge. In particular, students encountered new agricultural practices and modes of teaching in Costa Rica that contrasted from those they had been exposed to in the U.S. For instance, after visiting E.A.R.T.H University they experienced a different model to teaching and learning in which students at E.A.R.T.H acquired agricultural knowledge through “practical experiences rather than theory-based lectures. It just made me consider a different way of gaining agricultural knowledge” (Participant #2). Further, students also noted variances regarding agricultural practices found in Costa Rica in comparison to the United States. Participant #6 explained, “agriculturalists place a lot more emphasis on sustainability than those in the United States. They just really make it a priority here.”

Moral Dissonance

The final emergent theme, moral, encompassed how students began to alter their personal views of moral obligations as a result of their experiences in Costa Rica. For example, after being exposed to sustainable practices in Costa Rica, students began to articulate how they began to sense a moral responsibility to integrate sustainable practices into their daily lives. Participant #1 explained, “People in Costa Rica are really be trying to make the Earth a better place and make it more sustainable in terms of agriculture. It just feels like now when I go home, I need to make some changes so that being more sustainable in agriculture is a bigger priority in my life.”

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

Building on the findings of O’Malley et al. (2019), this study provided additional evidence that short-term study abroad courses can initiate forms of dissonance that lead to actionable perspective changes for U.S. university agriculture students. In particular, the consistency of the environmental and intellectual dissonance themes across contexts suggests that such may be common outcomes for study abroad courses. However, the emergence of moral dissonance in this investigation provided new understanding into the role that contextual factors may play in shaping students’ transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991) and deserves additional investigation. Consequently, we recommend that this study be replicated in different contexts and for varied durations of time. We also recommend that faculty leading study abroad courses reflect on the forms of dissonance described in this study to design experiences that better facilitate transformative learning for university agriculture students in the future.

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