

Transformative Learning through Diverse International Experiences

Kaley Mumma
Purdue University
mumma@purdue.edu

Hema Lingireddy
Purdue University
hlingire@purdue.edu

Kent Montgomery, Jr.
University of Kentucky
Kent.Montgomeryjr@uky.edu

Kwabena Bayity
Purdue University
kbayity@purdue.edu

Transformative Learning through Diverse International Experiences

Introduction & Need for Strategy

International experiences are powerful for student growth and global skills like empathy and resilience (Guo-Brennan, 2022). Yet, we still don't fully understand how students internalize these changes. Most research neglects learning patterns as students adapt to new environments (Vermunt & Donche, 2017), hindering effective mentorship. Our study addresses this by using reflective prompts to explore the emotional and cognitive shifts of four learners through culturally disorienting situations. Findings aim to inform mentoring strategies that foster student empowerment and cross-cultural empathy.

Connection to Literature

This study applies Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) to understand how students internalize transformative experiences. TLT posits that critical reflection on disorienting dilemmas—experiences challenging preexisting beliefs—can alter our assumptions (Mezirow, 1997). A disorienting dilemma, per Mezirow (1991), is an experience misaligned with existing beliefs, prompting self-reflection. Critical reflection involves inspecting and challenging presuppositions, evaluating knowledge considering new experiences (Brookfield, 1990). This process, often triggered by a disorienting dilemma, fosters more open, informed, and adaptive thinking, described by Mezirow (1991, p. 108) as “more inclusive, discriminating, permeable and integrative beliefs.” TLT provides a meaningful framework to explore how students' beliefs are challenged internationally and how they respond, which is essential for developing effective mentoring and instructional approaches that promote intercultural empathy and self-awareness.

Reflections on International Experiences

This section presents individual reflections from four team members on their distinct international student experiences: two U.S. students on a short-term study abroad with their respective university in the UK, and two international team members completing long-term doctoral studies in the U.S. Each responded to reflective prompts to identify a “disorienting dilemma” experienced abroad, the internal assumptions challenged by their disorienting dilemma, and the critically reflective process and shift that occurred afterwards.

Reflection 1: The Perils of Centralized Power

- **Disorienting Dilemma:** A student touring non-profits in a low-income Glasgow neighborhood discovered many relied almost entirely on the UK government for funding. When the government was in disarray, this led to severe funding cuts, preventing organizations from providing basic necessities.
- **Challenged Assumptions:** This experience challenged the student's belief in the inherent benefits of decentralized democracy, making them question the risks of concentrating too much power in one place, even in a democratic system.
- **Critical Reflection & Shift:** By comparing the UK's centralized government to the US federal system, the student came to appreciate a less centralized approach. This shift empowered them to consider how to effect change independently, such as through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives.

Reflection 2: Navigating Public Transportation

- **Disorienting Dilemma:** A student found using public transportation in the UK to be an intimidating experience, having grown up in small U.S. towns without such systems.
- **Challenged Assumptions:** This challenged the student's value of politeness, as navigating public transport required self-advocacy, creating nervousness about inconveniencing others and the possibility of getting lost.
- **Critical Reflection & Shift:** Being part of a supportive learning community and recognizing the experience as a part of their study abroad helped the student lean into discomfort. Repeated exposure built confidence, leading to a love for public transportation and transferable skills for future transitions.

Reflection 3: The Silence of Space

- **Disorienting Dilemma:** A student arriving in the United States from densely populated India experienced an overwhelming sense of space and silence, a stark contrast to their usual environment, which triggered discomfort and panic.
- **Challenged Assumptions:** This challenged the student's core assumption that constant activity and background noise were part of life. It led to feelings of vulnerability and loneliness, and a re-evaluation of their understanding of community and infrastructure.
- **Critical Reflection & Shift:** The student initially coped by filling the quiet, but then actively joined local communities and reflected on why silence unsettled them. This process ultimately reframed silence as a space for peace.

Reflection 4: Kindness Across Borders

- **Disorienting Dilemma:** A student, new to the U.S. from Ghana, faced immediate disorientation from the cold weather, unfamiliar customs, and a financial hurdle. This was significantly eased by an unexpected act of kindness from a stranger.
- **Challenged Assumptions:** This encounter challenged the student's preconceived notion of Western environments as cold and untrusting, prompting a re-evaluation of assumptions about cultural differences and human connection.
- **Critical Reflection & Shift:** The student reflected on how cultural norms may not universally apply and how empathy can build community. This experience made them more open to engaging with strangers and transformed their sense of identity within an international context.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

These reflections powerfully illustrate how disorienting dilemmas in international settings, coupled with critical reflection, drive transformative learning. Each student's journey led to significant shifts in their understanding of self, community, and global dynamics. From re-evaluating governmental structures and public transportation to reframing silence and the nature of human kindness, these experiences demonstrate deep personal growth beyond mere cultural exposure. The disorienting dilemmas presented are unique to the lives of the authors. Other learners are bound to encounter their own original disorienting dilemmas. For educators and mentors, these findings emphasize the critical need to integrate structured reflective practices into international programs. By guiding students through identifying challenges, questioning assumptions, and integrating new perspectives, we can empower them to develop intercultural empathy, enhance self-awareness, and truly become adaptive global citizens.

References

- Brookfield, S. (1990). Using critical incidents to explore learners' assumptions. *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: A guide to transformative and emancipatory learning*, 177-193.
- Guo-Brennan, L. (2022). Making virtual global learning transformative and inclusive: A critical reflective study on high-impact practices in higher education. *Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 16(2), 28-49. <https://doi.org/10.22329/jtl.v16i2.6947>
- Mezirow, J. (1990). *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood* (pp. 1-20). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass, 350 Sansome Street, San Francisco, CA 94104-1310.
- Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New directions for adult and continuing education*, 1997(74), 5-12.
- Vermunt, J. D., & Donche, V. (2017). A learning patterns perspective on student learning in higher education: state of the art and moving forward. *Educational psychology review*, 29, 269-299. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i1/20462>