

**A Case Study of Cultural Immersion:
Long-term Impacts and Guidance for Future Programs**

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Introduction

Higher education institutions have faced and continue to face the responsibility of preparing students for active roles in a global society. Instruction on internationalization or globalization is recognized as an integral component of preparing students in higher education for an interconnected world (American Council on Education, 2026). Within agricultural education, this includes developing graduates who can navigate complex food, agricultural, and natural resource systems through intercultural understanding and applied global learning experiences (Heinert & Roberts, 2016; Roberts et al., 2025). Global engagement encompasses a broad range of international and intercultural learning experiences that foster global learning, intercultural competence, and meaningful cross-cultural engagement, such as study abroad, learning abroad, and short-term cultural immersion programs (Grad & van der Zande, 2022). Kuh et al. (2008) define and advocate for specific educational experiences that improve student learning and engagement. These activities create a platform for students to engage in high-impact experiences that promote personal reflection, thereby challenging personal perceptions and beliefs (Kuh et al., 2008; Canfield et al., 2009).

Research efforts to measure student change through experiences are often captured during and immediately after an experience. Pigg et al. (2021) stated a need for continued explorations and examinations of lifelong transformation. Lane (2022) suggests that longitudinal studies conducted five, ten, and even fifteen years post-experience could offer a more complete measure of the long-term impact of global experiences, guiding how we design these experiences.

Conceptual Framework

The framework that supported this study covered experiential learning principles (Dewey, 1938), Kuh's (2008) High-Impact Practices (HIPs), the Community Based Global Learning (GBGL) context (Hartman et al., 2018), Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, and Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory Cycle. The effects of transformative learning through cultural immersion may deepen and continue for periods of time following the experience (Nada, 2022; Kiely, 2004). By using these theories as a foundation, the research focused on understanding how transformative learning could be stimulated and encouraged through intentional program design, skilled facilitation, meaningful community partnerships, and structured critical reflections.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to document long-term impacts of cultural immersion experiences. Yin (2014) defines an explanatory case study as one that explains how and why a condition occurred. This study explored students' transformations based on personal reflections and recollections of pre-, during, and post-cultural immersion experience activities that may have contributed to those transformations—from short-term to long-term.

Methods

An explanatory single-case study method was employed to understand the transformative phenomena in students' cultural immersion experiences in one country during a specific period (2014-2018). Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method guided data analysis through the transcription of interviews, labeling of comments, coding concepts, and identification of emerging themes. *Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory* (2000) was used in a deductive analytical approach following three phases: a survey instrument, in-depth interviews, and multi-tiered member checking and data integration.

Findings

Over a four-year period (2014-2018), a total of 31 students participated in Haiti-based immersion experiences. Interviewees (n=9) comprised seven females and two males; and represented the breadth of the program's duration. Data analysis revealed four umbrella themes that provide a framework for how participants identify the long-term reflective perception of self-transformation: *Operational*, *Situational*, *Relational*, and *Reflection*. The most prominent theme identified across the data was *Operational*, which balanced the entirety of all the experiences. All the participants noted some form of operational activities that still resonate with them. The *situational* theme focused on in-country planned or unplanned cultural immersion situations that introduced or created a deep meaning for the participant. The *relational* theme focused on opportunities to better understand self, build relationships within the team, and to work closely within the national communities. The theme labeled *reflection* focused on how participants resonated with their cultural immersion experience. Participants noted multiple types of long-term transformation resulting from their experiences in Haiti. HP3i noted "a better understanding of the implications of international development" and HP5i gained an appreciation for "the life and vibrancy of developing countries." HP6i added, "This trip made me use a different part of my brain than before leaving for Haiti." Many participants noted a life trajectory transformation resulting from their experiences in Haiti as well. Multiple participants shared that they are applying lessons learned from their transformative experiences in Haiti.

Conclusions / Discussion / Implications

This explanatory case study revealed that years after a cultural immersion experience, the effects, positive or negative, still vividly resonate with participants. All participants agreed in the value of cultural immersion experiences, noting their program experience had a profound impact on who they are today. The findings show that transformative educational experiences depend not just on the activities, but also on the relationships, culture, and opportunities for reflection that surround the activities. This research suggests that high-impact international learning experiences are most effective when participants move beyond observation and become active contributors to the learning process. Reflection, relationship-building, collaborative problem-solving, and opportunities to apply learning in authentic community contexts appear particularly important. For agricultural educators designing study abroad, international immersion, and other experiential learning programs, intentionally incorporating these elements may strengthen student learning and contribute to the development of globally competent graduates prepared to engage in complex agricultural and food systems.

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