

A Qualitative Analysis of Adult Learners' Immersion Experiences to South Africa: Implications for Multicultural Training

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Introduction

Travel broadens the mind and expands the self. Imagine a pilgrimage to the source of the holiest river in India, the Ganges. The trek involves three days to reach the enormous melting glacier that forms the vast river. Indian and foreign pilgrims that reach the source of the Ganges take the icy plunge into the river to purify themselves, as is indoctrinated by religious belief. This plunge somehow changes them. Similarly, Killian and Hardy (1998) coined the term *cultural plunge* as dips into a new cultural experience. In their article, the plunge is used as a metaphor describing the experiential component of professional training as a therapist. The experience provides individuals the opportunity to possess minority status and experience the anxiety or discomfort often associated with being an “outsider.” What about the cultural experience causes change for each individual?

Gmelch (1997) and Miranda (1999) found undergraduate students returning from their study-abroad trips feeling more adaptable, less materialistic, independent in their thinking, sensitive to other cultures, and knowledgeable. The abundant literature on undergraduate study-abroad experience and experiential learning in multicultural education shows a positive effect for enhanced cultural understanding through study abroad experiences (Laubscher, 1994;

Stitsworth, 1989; Talburt & Stewart, 1999). Limited research exists, however, in recognizing the unique needs of adult learners, who may not have experienced study abroad or who were not exposed to multicultural courses, but are still required to exhibit the necessary skills to work with culturally diverse populations. Teachers and mental health workers in particular need the necessary training to understand different cultures, because these professions require the professional to empower and work within the student's/client's framework.

Study Tours as Multicultural Training Tools

One method that is currently being used to meet the unique needs of professionals/practitioners is study tours. Study tours have emerged as a viable way to combine education and culture within a 2- to 3-week period of time. Adult learners, who have work, family, and other commitments, may not have the extended time to take off from 5 weeks to a semester, as study abroad programs require. Thus, a brief study tour that incorporates an educational component and parallels the adult's professional work provides another vehicle through which to teach the necessary skills and knowledge needed to work within a multicultural society. Despite the potential of study tours, there is little empirical wisdom to inform the conceptualization and delivery of these tours so that adult learners gain the relevant cultural understanding needed. This study explores and describes through a qualitative lens the experiences of adult learners during a brief educational study tour to South Africa.

Experiential and Immersion Experiences in Training

Ridley, Mendoza, and Kanitz (1994) defined the concept of experiential training as "exercises that provide occasions for trainees to personally experience immersion in a culture different from their own" (p. 263). Sue and Sue (1990) suggested that courses should contain affective and reflective components that go beyond the typical acquisition seen in most training programs. Often assignments that incorporate experiential components provide more opportunity for

the arousal of emotions that are helpful in the critical reflection of individual and societal assumptions and beliefs. It was suggested that in-class exercises are “a step in the right direction” but the interaction with different cultures provides a still greater opportunity for multicultural learning (Pope-Davis & Coleman, 1997). As a reaction, the Multicultural Immersion Experience (MIE) was developed by Pope-Davis, Breaux, and Liu (1997). The MIE is an assigned course activity that requires students to immerse in a campus or community group culturally different from their own. The benefits of this type of immersion allow for a deeper level of reflection and a greater opportunity to understand the differences and similarities of other groups.

Experiential and Transformative Learning Theories

Experiential learning can be understood as learning “in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied” (Keeton & Tate, 1978). Kolb (1984), based on the works of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget, identified an experiential learning theory to better understand the process of learning through experience. The four components of his theory include an affective component, a perceptual component, a symbolic component, and a behavioral component. Each component is caused by a particular experience and results in higher order processes (Kolb, 1984).

Transformative learning is defined as “the social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of meaning of one’s experience as a guide to action” (Mezirow, 1994, pp. 222–223). Mezirow identified designs of research that include “observations and content analysis in an ongoing educational context” as valuable ways to assess the learning process (p. 34). Providing different perspectives from qualitative research sheds more light on the process and outcomes of experiential learning and if and when learning can be transformative.

Method

Culture is multidimensional. It is integrated into all aspects of society and both shapes and is shaped by the individuals and groups in which it is a part. It is a concept that is complex, dynamic, and defined in different ways. The definition of culture guiding this study refers to “an integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, beliefs, values and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group” (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Issacs, 1989, p. iv.) Through the use of life story interviews, journal analysis, photograph analysis, observation/field notes, and critical reflective post tour interviews, this study explores the specific cultural dynamics of gender, ethnicity, and the socioeconomic differences and similarities of U.S. educators as they experience the educational system and a society that conforms to both similar and different beliefs and values.

Results

Knowledge components of South Africa were enhanced due to the study tour. One 34-year-old, White female teacher stated, “I learned what the teachers are dealing with as compared to the U.S.” She identified similarities with administration problems but a vast difference in the amount of resources the schools she visited had as compared to the U.S. Additionally, the awareness component was heightened for a 28-year-old Hispanic college administrator. She alluded to “feeling uncomfortable, nervous, wanting to make a good impression” when a South African graduate student took her to his home and she played with his child.

Critical Reflection: A Key Component

The 28-year-old Hispanic administrator expressed that race and, to some extent, gender were most salient during the tour for her. She indicated that the amplification of race happened in part because of the tour. “It was really weird. There were African Americans and

there were white people on this trip. And for the most part we broke down into lines or groups by race, which surprised me because I thought we were all beyond that. But I felt very white.” When asked whether she brought it up to the group, she expressed “Uh, no, well, no. We didn’t talk about that, and that’s one of the things that would have been nice to have some critical reflection for.” Another tour participant, a 23-year-old female Egyptian teacher, also noted in her interview a similar observation of the split between White and Black tour participants and the failure to discuss the issue during the tour.

Group Learning

When learning about other cultures in a group or class format, group learning also plays a role in what adult learners reflect upon and potentially try out in future episodes in their life. One participant commented, “I was just amazed by T, cause she could just walk up to people on the street (in South Africa) and just start talking to them. One day we came back to the hotel and she was having a little rendezvous in the dining room, talking about how to get books from an organization she was a part of to build a library (in South Africa). Um, it gave you something to be inspired by and aspire to.”

Summary

Study abroad trips have shown a positive effect for enhancing cultural understanding, yet are mostly geared toward undergraduate students due to the time required to participate in them. An educational study tour, in comparison, is a 2- to 3-week educational immersion experience offered to expose adults to learning within a different cultural context. Study tours were identified as potential, additional training tools, expanding on the Multicultural Immersion Experience proposed by Pope-Davis, Breaux et al.(1997). Using experiential and transformative learning theories as a guide, a qualitative study was conducted that incorporated recorded observations/field notes during the tour, pre- and post tour interviews, journal analyses, and photo analyses into the data collection and analysis portion of the study.

Individual interviews presented the enhancement of knowledge and awareness of adult learners who participated on a 2-week tour to South Africa.

Conclusion

This study supports the idea that adult learners not only can benefit from cultural immersion experiences, but that also it can be a valuable learning tool in multicultural training and education. Critical reflection that happens at various points throughout the tour can enhance experiential learning and increase the potential for the cultural learning to be transformative. If critical reflection is not fostered, however, valuable learning can be lost or faulty stereotypes/biases maintained.

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