

A Chameleon with a Complex: Searching for Transformation in International Service-Learning

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This article reports findings from a longitudinal case study investigating how students experience perspective transformation from their participation in international service-learning program with an explicit social justice orientation. Findings indicate that each student experienced profound changes in their world-view in at least one of six dimensions: political, moral, intellectual, personal, spiritual, and cultural. Importantly, the study found that students who initially expressed a willingness to change their lifestyle and work for social justice experienced ongoing conflict and struggle in their attempts to translate their critical awareness into meaningful action.

The Nicaragua trip challenged my entire value and belief system. I now have feelings of guilt over having so much, of being privileged enough to be born in a stable prosperous country and into an educated White middle class family. Everyday I am unable to ignore a world of Maquiladoras, global commodity chains, and suffering due to the curse of bad luck, and social and political events that have taken place in Nicaragua and the rest of the developing world. Is this poverty the way it has to be? Do I just accept it and buy cheap goods at Wal-Mart or do I boycott and do something about the treatment of people in the third world factories that are being used and abused. My Nicaragua experience has gotten me involved in all of this whether I like it or not. The Nicaragua trip planted the seed...
(Karen, 1999, reflecting on her 1994 international service-learning experience in Nicaragua)

As an educator who has facilitated an international service-learning program in Nicaragua for the past 10 years, I have witnessed firsthand the transformative impact that service-learning immersion programs in developing countries can have on U.S. undergraduate students' worldview and lifestyle. Comments in journals, final reflection papers, and alumni reunions include numerous examples that indicate some form of transformation has occurred, such as, "I am a changed person since Nicaragua," or "the experience in Nicaragua is something I think about daily." Students return with a radically different frame of reference or worldview. They describe their transformation as having a better understanding of the larger structural forces underlying social problems in

Nicaragua, and also express rethinking their lifestyle, career, relationships to others and a desire to advocate for Nicaraguans, and others living in poverty. Such powerful expressions and actions suggest that for many undergraduate students, the international service-learning experience marks an important transformational event in their lives, one that will forever shape their sense of self, lifestyle, connection to others, view of global problems and purpose in life. However, as Karen's statement above suggests, there is more to students' transformation than meets the eye. As the study findings presented in this article illustrate, the long-term impact of students' perspective transformation on their ability to change their lifestyle habits, resist cultural norms, and engage in social action is often ambiguous and problematic.

While research on the impact of domestic service-learning has provided extensive documentation of various positive effects on students' academic learning, interpersonal, personal, and professional development (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Eyler, Giles, Stensen, & Gray, 2001; Sax & Astin, 1997), there is limited research on the impact of international service-learning programs on students' learning and development (Berry, 1990; Chisholm & Berry, 1999; Grusky, 2000; Hartman & Rola, 2000; Kadel, 2002; Kraft, 2002). Empirical studies (Crabtree, 1998; Kauffman, 1982; Myers-Lipton, 1994; Porter & Monard, 2001; Pyle, 1981) have found that participation in international service-learning increases students' intercultural competence, language skills, appreciation of cultural difference, tolerance for ambiguity, and experiential understanding of complex global problems related to their academic program

of study (Kiely, 2003). However, in comparison with studies examining the impact of domestic service-learning, research “on the effects of international service-learning is limited and anecdotal in nature” (Kraft, 2002, p. 303).

The literature in international service-learning tends to highlight only the short-term and positive transformative effects of international service-learning on undergraduate students (Crabtree, 1998; Grusky, 2000; Hartman & Rola, 2000; Kadel, 2002; Kraft & Dwyer, 2000; O’Donnell, 2000). Kadel states that for “many students” the international service-learning experience “solidifies a commitment to social justice” (p. 59). Grusky claims that “integrated into a well-developed program, international service-learning can fulfill its potential as a transformational learning experience for students informing subsequent study and career choices” (abstract). Hartman and Rola contend that as a result of their international service-learning experience “students are transformed as individuals,” and “change their career focus, and all become more informed, caring, and affirmed students.” However, the authors also add, “we do not know whether these changes continue throughout a lifetime, but the short term changes are all positive” (p. 21).

As a veteran international service-learning educator, I was also complicit in perpetuating the uniformly positive and largely unsubstantiated claims regarding international service-learning’s transformative potential. Because post-trip evaluation of student journals and final reflection papers tended to indicate that profound transformational learning had occurred, I assumed transformation was largely unproblematic and would provide students with the intercultural knowledge and passion to adjust their lifestyles and engage in social justice work. As a result of the present case study, I found that my previous understanding of the meaning and long-term effects of students’ “transformation” on their daily lives had been sorely lacking. As with the studies above, prior to this study there was very little follow-up in the form of systematic, longitudinal research. This article describes the major findings of a longitudinal case study examining how 22 undergraduate students experienced perspective transformation from participating in a well-integrated international service-learning program with an explicit social justice orientation (Kiely, 2002).¹ By illuminating both the meanings students associate with the long-term impact of their perspective transformation and the actions they take as a result of their transformational learning experience, this study makes an important contribution to service-learning theory and practice. This article also seeks to initiate discussion regarding

the practical and ethical implications of fostering transformational learning as part of both domestic and international service-learning pedagogy.

Literature Review

Mezirow’s (1978, 1991, 2000) transformational learning theory provided a useful conceptual framework for examining how students experience perspective transformation in international service-learning.² Mezirow (1978) developed a theory of perspective transformation based on a national study of women participating in reentry programs at a number of U.S. community colleges. He found that the experience of returning to school caused many women to critically reexamine their assumptions and dependence on culturally defined gender roles and expectations. In particular, many women questioned the assumption that “the woman’s place is in the home” and began to develop a new interpretation of their identity and social role. Mezirow (1981, 1991) labeled the significant learning that these women experienced as “perspective transformation.” Mezirow (1991) defines perspective transformation as,

the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting on these new understandings. (p. 14)

Mezirow’s (1991) transformational learning theory describes “how learners construe, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experience” (Cranton, 1994, p. 22).³ Mezirow (1978) argues that many people are “caught in [their] own history and reliving it,” which can be detrimental to personal development and growth (p. 101). He claims that our meaning perspectives or “our frames of reference often represent cultural paradigms... learning that is unintentionally assimilated from the culture—or personal perspectives derived from the idiosyncrasies of primary caregivers” (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 16-17). Because meaning perspectives often reflect our cultural biases, they “are like a ‘double edged sword’ whereby they give meaning (validation) to our experiences, but at the same time skew our reality” (Taylor, 1998, p. 7). Mezirow (1991) initially identified epistemic, psychic or sociocultural sets of assumptions that constitute individual’s meaning perspectives and act as filters for interpreting experience.⁴ Unlike instrumental forms of learning which add knowledge without changing existing frames of reference,

transformational learning occurs when individuals surface, evaluate, and revise distortions in the sets of assumptions above through critical reflection and discourse. The main goal of transformational learning is for learners to develop more valid meaning perspectives for interpreting experience and guiding action. For example, like constructive developmental models (e.g., Kegan, 1994; Perry, 1970), perspective transformation that is *epistemic* would mean a qualitative shift in how service-learners understand the nature and use of knowledge (i.e., an epistemological shift from a dualistic to relativistic interpretation of social problems). Perspective transformation can also involve a reassessment of distorted sociolinguistic and psychological assumptions (Mezirow). Perspective transformation of distorted psychological assumptions might lead learners to develop greater confidence, or a significant change in their self-concept, relationships, and/or lifestyle habits that are unhealthy and dysfunctional (Mezirow). Lastly, and similar to Freire's (1970) notion of *conscientization*, transformation of "false" sociolinguistic assumptions results in developing critical consciousness regarding how oppressive ideologies, relationships, norms, and rituals representing dominant interests are reproduced, legitimated, and enforced through culture, the media, and other social institutions (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). While Freire's notion of critical consciousness requires that learners take reflective action (i.e., praxis) to transform unequal relations of power, Mezirow (1989) argues that the resulting action depends on a number of mitigating circumstances, such as "a lack of information, situational constraints, psychological hang-ups or absence of required skills" (p. 172). A significant amount of empirical research over the past decade has examined different components of Mezirow's conceptual model; however, understanding what constitutes perspective transformation has proven somewhat elusive.⁵

Where's the Perspective Transformation in Service-Learning?

Eyler and Giles (1999) contend that "service-learning practitioners tend to come down on the side of transformational learning, supporting education that raises fundamental questions and empowers students to do something about them" (p. 133). They further claim that service-learning as a transformational learning process is "not about accumulating more knowledge, but about seeing the world in a profoundly different way, one that calls for personal commitment and action" (p. 129). Eyler and Giles' large, mixed-method study

incorporated Mezirow's model as the conceptual framework for investigating perspective transformation in service-learning. Findings from their study indicate that students experience perspective transformation from their participation in service-learning as: (1) a new understanding of the locus and solution to social problems as linked to existing social arrangements, (2) questioning current social and institutional arrangements, (3) a commitment to social justice, and (4) an *intent* [emphasis added] to act in ways that change social policies and institutions to alleviate social problems (p. 149). Results from their study also suggest "well-integrated" service-learning programs focusing on social change, and emphasizing quality community placements, reflection, community voice, and diversity into their pedagogy are more apt to lead to transformative learning outcomes. While the Eyler and Giles study provides some documentation of students' perspective transformation, it did not occur frequently. Their study also did not measure the long-term meaning and persistence of students' perspective transformation.

Two other studies conducted by Rhoads (1997) and Kellogg (1999) found that service-learning can have a transformative impact on students. Rhoads collected data through interviews, participant observation, and journal analysis over a six-year period during which he evaluated students who participated in a variety of community service and service-learning programs at three different universities. Rhoads' study found that students who experienced perspective transformation began to develop a more critical and caring self, one that understands the structural nature of social problems, identifies with the poor, and intends to advocate on their behalf. Rhoads' research also indicates that most students continue to see the world through the lens of charity or as "do-gooders."

Kellogg's (1999) study incorporates Kahne and Westheimer's (1996) typology for examining students' perspective transformation along the political, moral, and intellectual dimensions of charity and social change service-learning models. Based on journals, papers, and surveys of students participating in service-learning activities as part of an environmental studies senior project class, Kellogg found that students experienced moral, political, and intellectual transformation. Kellogg views students' moral perspective transformation as "an enhanced sense of empathy and caring about urban neighborhoods...in which students would identify themselves and residents of these neighborhoods as members of the same community" (p. 64). Students' political transformation entailed learning "how the environmental regulatory system works

and how relative power differences between industry, local jurisdictions, and community-based groups affect policy,” including how to “access and use environmental information” collaboratively (p. 65). Intellectual transformation meant that students gained a “better understanding of the challenges faced by urban neighborhoods seeking to address environmental problems and the challenges that can result from the structure of the regulatory system” (p. 69). Importantly, Kellogg’s study alludes to the longer-term impact of moral transformation by describing two students who “demonstrated their caring relationship” by continuing to work with residents after the semester ended (p. 70).

Overall, findings from at least two previous studies (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Rhoads, 1997) indicate that students do not experience perspective transformation frequently. These studies also suggest that students’ perspective transformation is more apt to result from participation in “well-integrated programs” that maintain a social justice pedagogy. Previous studies above also confirm that perspective transformation in service-learning means substantial moral, political, and intellectual change; however, none of the studies provided evidence of the long-term nature of perspective transformation. Importantly, because none of the studies above examined the impact on students over time, they equate perspective transformation with “the intention to act to promote social justice,” rather than the action itself. The studies also assume that transformation is uniformly positive. They neglect to consider the challenges that result from questioning the status quo and fail to offer any empirical insight regarding the internal struggles that might result from reevaluating cherished assumptions. By focusing on the short-term, positive nature of individual perspective transformation, prior research has indirectly fueled a romanticized and an uncritical acceptance that the students’ intent to act on perspective transformation will often lead to persistent engagement in social action (Kiely, 2002; Langseth & Troppe, 1997; Leeds, 1999). This study adds important empirical insight on the long-term meaning of students’ perspective transformation in international service-learning, and its connection to individual and social action. The following sections provide a description of the program setting, research methodology, salient findings, and implications for service-learning theory and practice.

The International Service-Learning Program Setting

Since 1994, a small community college in upstate New York has offered undergraduate stu-

dents the opportunity to participate in a six-credit service-learning immersion program during the January winter session in Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, a resource-poor community that has been experiencing persistent poverty. Students attend seminars on various topics (e.g., health, political economy, community development, Nicaraguan history, American foreign policy, and Spanish language). Through service-learning work and other course-based activities, U.S. students come into contact with Nicaraguans who are experiencing significant poverty and also maintain diverse and competing ideologies, values, beliefs and traditions. Ethnic groups in the Atlantic Coast region of Nicaragua include the Miskito, Rama, Sumu, and Garifuna—who make up the indigenous communities along the Atlantic Coast region—as well as English-speaking black Creoles and Spanish-speaking Mestizos. Situated outside their familiar surroundings and placed in a radically different reality, service-learning participants are completely immersed in the natural beauty of the Mosquito Coast. However, this seemingly idyllic physical setting provides a stark contrast to the hardships and struggles that characterize the daily life for a significant portion of the Puerto Cabezas community.

The program’s primary service-learning component is to organize and implement health clinics in collaboration with local community members. To gain a more thorough understanding of the community’s health concerns, students also conduct participatory research with community members, participate in community dialogues, attend presentations from health, government, and neighborhood leaders, interview social service providers, and volunteer at the local hospital. In some cases, students conduct health assessments and distribute medicine that saves lives! Given the intense and profound interactions that occur and the outcomes that result from their service-learning work, U.S. students forge powerful relationships with Nicaraguans.

The international service-learning program maintains an explicit social justice orientation and is intentionally designed to disrupt students’ notion of reality. The learning goals of the program involve raising consciousness about the historical development of racism, sexism, economic disparities, and unequal relations of power through a series of community presentations, seminars, and readings. The central premise underlying the program’s service-learning theory is that experiential dissonance combined with critical reflection and deeper connections with community through service-learning activities will lead to profound changes in students’ worldview. The transformative vision embedded in the course pedagogy is that

Table 1
Interview Sample

Cohort Year	Number of Students	Number of Students Interviewed during 2001-02
1995	8	2
1996	9	2
1997	11	6
1999	7	5
2001	8	7

after participating in service-learning in Nicaragua, students will work to transform lifestyles, relationships, institutions and policies that perpetuate political oppression, economic disparities, and persistent global poverty.⁶

Methodology

A longitudinal case study design provided a useful phenomenological approach for examining students' perspective transformation during and after participation in the Nicaragua international service-learning program. Forty-three students participated in the program over a seven-year period, from 1994-2001. Over that time period, five separate cohorts participated in the program. Twenty-two students representing each of the five cohorts participated in this study (see Table 1).⁷

The purposeful sample (Patton, 1990) represented a heterogeneous group in terms of age, marital status, nationality, profession, academic major, and motivations for participating in the program. The study sample consisted of 19 females and 3 males. There were only 5 male students out of 43 total program participants. All study participants were White and U.S. citizens, except one participant who was Black, Nicaraguan, and Creole. The participants' ages in the sample ranged from 18-60. Most students described themselves as middle class, although three students classified themselves as living below the poverty line by U.S. standards. While many students were matriculated in a two-year Nursing degree program, their professional, academic, personal backgrounds, and international travel experiences were quite diverse.

Methods for gathering data included on-site participant observation, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews (Patton, 1990, p. 245). Document analysis entailed an in-depth review of pre- and post-trip questionnaires, photographs, student journals, final reflection papers and post-trip contracts or "covenants" for future action. My role as cofacilitator of the Nicaragua program from 1994-2001 enabled extensive on-site participant-observation of students' involvement in program

activities and corroboration of the nature of specific events during post-trip interviews during 2001-2002. Particular attention was devoted to observing participant reactions to critical incidents, the physical setting, service activities, and social interaction. Extensive field notes were recorded each year. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each study participant (N = 22) from May 2001 to May 2002. These interviews specifically focused on the program's long-term transformative impact, the meaning of their perspective transformation over time, and the actions that resulted. During post-program interviews, I paid particular attention to the meanings students associated with significant changes in perspectives, lifestyle, and relationships, and examples of individual and social action. I also focused on factors that hindered or enhanced perspective transformation.

The constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1973) was used to integrate a substantial body of qualitative data, and identify emergent patterns associated with the meanings study participants attributed to their perspective transformation (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990). Data analysis began by developing a case profile for each study participant based on field notes, student journals, and papers. Categories that emerged served as useful starting points for post-trip interviews conducted 2001-2002. Ongoing member checks with study participants, debriefing with peers, and an audit trail helped ensure consistency and trustworthiness in the analysis, interpretation, and representation of the data (Patton).

Findings

The study confirmed that each study participant experienced at least one of six forms of perspective transformation from their participation in the international service-learning program. *Emerging global consciousness* describes the ongoing and overall pattern of students' perspective transformation. Three categories helped integrate and give further meaning to the transformational learning pattern reflected in emerging global consciousness: (1) envisioning, (2) transforming forms, and (3) chameleon complex (see Table 2). *Envisioning* reflects the initial shift in perspectives in which most students express the "intention to act" on their perspective transformation by actively working for social justice upon return to the United States. *Transforming forms* represents how each study participant experiences a dynamic shift in how they see themselves and the world in at least one of six different types of perspective transformation: political, moral, intellectual, cultural, personal, and spiritual. Lastly, *chameleon complex*, represents the long-term challenges and struggles students experi-

Table 2

Emerging Global Consciousness

Emerging Global Consciousness	Characteristics
Envisioning	Imagining alternative possibilities for changing one's lifestyle. A willingness to ally with the poor and to challenge oppressive institutional policies, and social, economic, and political systems.
Transforming Forms	Ongoing and significant changes in the political, moral, intellectual, cultural, personal, and spiritual aspects of students' worldview.
Chameleon Complex: Re/Dis-integration	Struggling to take action that reconciles and integrates profound shifts in one's worldview upon reentry to the United States

ence in attempting to change their lifestyle and engage in social action. Emerging global consciousness and the three categories taken together describe students' perspective transformation as much more complex, dynamic, and multifaceted in nature than previous research. The next section describes the three categories in greater detail.

Envisioning

Shortly after participation in service-learning activities, each study participant consistently reports "a sense of empowerment" and often expresses a "hopeful" intention to act on their emerging global consciousness to promote global social justice. Participants initially "envision" changes to their lifestyle, relationships, and social policies to coincide with their newly found critical awareness of the systemic forces underlying the economic disparities, health problems, and poverty witnessed in Nicaragua. Envisioning stems from the greater connection and increased confidence students feel from having successfully implemented a number of health clinics in collaboration with Nicaraguans. Students describe their experience with the international service-learning program as the "seed" and "incubator" to changing their lives. Participants express the need to "raise awareness regarding the poverty that many Nicaraguans experience," and "build solidarity to promote social change." Each study participant expressed their willingness and commitment to different forms of social action in covenants, post-trip reunions, and final reflection papers.

For example, Kendra writes in her journal a few days after returning from Nicaragua,

I have a great desire to partake in community development that works to instill solidarity and self-confidence...I have many ideas and questions about how to help the human race reach a place of equality, growth, stability and justice. I think it's a bit of a big project.

Betsy writes in her final reflection paper two months after returning,

I now feel a bond with some of the people of Puerto Cabezas, and I feel compelled to do something. I feel that I must keep in touch with people that I have come to know and appreciate and that I will go back to Puerto Cabezas at some point in the future...When one gets close to people and begins to feel a 'heart connection'...it's difficult, if not impossible to walk away and never look back, as if the trip was some sort of experiential game.

Laura's envisioning took her in a more politicized direction, "I've realized that the NICA trip is causing me to be more involved in my community at home...I want to look into people's movements...People's movements are where it's at!"

As the above quotations suggest, envisioning represents students' initial action plan to make a difference. Each of the students experienced a change in their frame of reference. Prior to the program they had not imagined changing their lifestyle, and/or advocating on behalf of the Nicaraguan people with which they had connected. What this study identified as envisioning reflects the learning outcome of perspective transformation found in prior studies (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kellogg, 1999; Rhoads, 1997). However, follow-up interviews with study participants after program participation indicate that envisioning only presents part of the meaning of the long-term nature of perspective transformation as the intention to act, but not the action itself. Importantly, this initial sense of hope and optimism in their ability to become agents of social change, as indicated in students' comments, takes on more complex and ambiguous meanings as participants begin to negotiate personal, interpersonal, and institutional barriers associated with their lives in the United States.

Transforming Forms

Transforming forms represent the specific types of worldview shifts that study participants experience from their participation in the international service-learning program. Although the nature and significance of the transformational learning jour-

Table 3
Transforming Forms

Transforming Forms	Meaning of Transformation	Characteristics and Examples
Political	Expanded sense of social responsibility and citizenship that is both local and global.	More active involvement to advocate on behalf of global poor, raise consciousness on poverty, and change unjust institutions and policies that oppress global poor.
Moral	Develop a relationship of mutual respect and care and sense of solidarity with Nicaraguans.	Learn from daily struggle of Nicaraguans. See Nicaraguans as friends rather than recipients of health care. Look for ways to build allies with people living in poverty
Intellectual	Question assumptions re: origin, nature and solutions to problems.	Question relief model of service. Value local knowledge and see how contextual factors shape social problems.
Cultural	Rethink dominant U.S. cultural and social values, norms, and rituals; question U.S. global hegemony.	Resist dominant U.S. norms, (i.e., consumerism, materialism, and individualism); see and act on privilege, power, and position relative to Nicaraguans in new way.
Personal	Rethink previous self-concept lifestyle, relationships, and career.	Actively develop more individually and socially conscious lifestyle, relationships, career, and educational choices.
Spiritual	A movement toward deeper (un)conscious understanding of self, purpose, society, and greater good.	Search for spiritual practices and organizations to connect with community of likeminded individuals and to help sustain ability to challenge systemic injustice.

ney was unique for each student, all of the 22 students interviewed consistently characterize perspective transformation as occurring within at least one or more of the following dimensions of their frame of reference: intellectual, moral, political, cultural, personal, and spiritual. The six forms also help in understanding how study participants learned to translate their one of the six new perspectives from envisioning into acting within different spheres of their lives (see Table 3).

Political Transformation. Each of the study participants describe political transformation as “rethinking their citizenship role” from a passive form of voting and volunteerism to more active involvement. Importantly, the meaning that students attach to political transformation also has to do with expanding their notions of citizenship as global rather than just national. Students also consistently display an increased understanding of the unequal distribution of power and resources within Nicaragua, and between the United States and Nicaragua. They express a greater sense of responsibility and accountability to address the persistent poverty in Nicaragua—not just as U.S. citizens, but as global allies with Nicaraguans.

To translate their political transformation into action, a number of students gave presentations in schools, churches, and local service organizations, to educate people about economic disparities between the United States and Nicaragua. At least

seven students interviewed changed their career direction to engage more actively in political activities aimed at challenging local and global policies and institutions. For example, in 1998, two years after returning from Nicaragua, Beth decided to quit her job as a study abroad advisor because she did not feel like she was able to incorporate social justice advocacy into her work, although she “kept trying to encourage students to study in developing countries.” After completing graduate work, she found a job teaching global studies at a local high school and decided to incorporate a number of activities into the classroom to raise students’ awareness about sweat shops, hunger, and poverty in developing countries and alternative economic systems, such as the fair trade movement. During our interview in 2001, Beth explains,

Since Nicaragua, I got much more interested in social justice issues related to globalization and now I shape my lesson plan for the year around that idea, although it’s hard given the curriculum requirements and standards that are imposed by the state.

During our interview four years after her participation in the international service-learning program, Laura also explains that she decided to quit her job because she had reservations about “becoming a nurse as part of a larger institutional framework of education that served to reproduce an

unjust health care system.” She did not feel that a career in nursing would help her fulfill her broader vision of advocating on behalf of those without access to health care, so she decided to take a more active role in a local nonprofit organization that supported universal health insurance. She also became the co-chair of the local Green Party to actively resist the dominant two-party status quo.

I went through like two or three years really having a hard time finding people that thought that way, but then all the sudden along comes Ralph Nader who says it’s not just voting for Gore or Bush, it’s a whole system that needs to be reworked, that’s more environmentally conscientious...and social welfare and health care should be socialized and so on...some people come back and they see people in Nicaragua who are in a system that works against them. From my perspective if we were going to change things in Nicaragua we’d have to change the system...So part of that means changing the way the U.S. works with Nicaragua on a more systemic level.

As indicated in the examples above, participants who experience political perspective transformation shift their understanding of citizenship toward greater responsibility to raise consciousness, and advocate for people experiencing oppression and poverty. The diversity and depth of their actions (i.e., consciousness raising, changing career direction, greater involvement in social justice work) reflect substantial sacrifice and struggle working to challenge institutions and policies that perpetuate inequality locally and globally.

Intellectual Transformation. Intellectual transformation describes how study participants questioned the value and effectiveness of service that provides “relief” (i.e., health clinics and the donation of medicines) to address health problems in Nicaragua. Students also describe how much more they value community knowledge and expertise, and the importance of context in understanding and addressing poverty. Each study participant revised their initial perception that health clinics were an effective intervention for overcoming persistent health problems in Puerto Cabezas. They consistently describe health clinics as “Band-Aid solutions,” and “temporary relief” directed at the symptoms but not the “root causes” of health problems in Nicaragua. Angela states,

I had never really given much thought to sustainable development issues. In the face of such overwhelming needs my first response is that we should go in and fix it...we could relieve the immediate effects of certain problems for some of the people, but their suffering would continue

because the underlying problems would continue to exist. This was a difficult problem for me to reconcile. I wanted to help and yet it was clear that we were providing a Band-Aid solution to a systemic problem.

For Doris, the international service-learning experience represented a dramatic turnaround in the way she perceived the role of community service, value of local knowledge, and origin and nature of social problems. Six months after returning from Nicaragua, she explains the overall meaning of her international service-learning experience in this way: “my thoughts pre- and post-journey have taken a 360-degree turnabout.” Prior to leaving for Nicaragua, Doris described herself as a “do-gooder,” who believed in the universal power of charity and who had been actively volunteering in her local community for years. She explains that she was “hopeful that whatever relief from physical suffering I could bring the community was a means to an end...[but] my experience in rural Nicaragua would soon prove this ‘Western thought process’ to be very far from reality.” Doris also mentions how

the clinics proved to be a true eye-opener for me on how little I know of native people, their resourcefulness, their community interdependence, and the level of ‘status quo’ thinking regarding their adherence to their immediate situations.

Doris explains her intellectual transformation in the following statement:

I did not come initially to figure out the government policies or how lack of public policy affects essential services from reaching the poor. I would need to be ‘educated’ in time by the people themselves. I would need to let go of my preconceived notions of why people can’t raise themselves up to a high level of living, why they don’t demand more from their local government, why they choose work over going to school. I would have to become childlike in my quest for answers in order to understand.

Moral Transformation. Transformation in the moral realm entails revising one’s sense of moral obligation and affiliation. Prior to visiting Nicaragua, most students had difficulty imagining the daily life and struggle of the poorest people in a developing country. However, after working with Nicaraguans with very little access to health care, and living in extreme poverty, students begin to feel a deeper connection with Nicaraguan’s situation and livelihood. Study participants explain that through developing deeper relationships with Nicaraguans, the idea of poverty transforms from an abstract concept to condition with a “human

face.” Karen describes moral transformation in the following manner, “Never have I taken a class or read a book or watched a movie that influenced me so much. I am a different person since Nicaragua, a more involved, caring person.”

Students’ increased sense of empathy and care leads them to see their relationship with Nicaraguans not as one-way charitable service but as a reciprocal relationship whereby students appreciate and draw strength from the knowledge, ability, and resilience of Nicaraguans with whom they worked. Students also explain that working alongside Nicaraguans and sharing stories helped them to transform their sense of moral obligation into seeing the importance of building solidarity with the poor, valuing collective action, and using their power and privilege to support social change efforts rather than just “giving to the needy.” Students express their desire to “...work in communities like Puerto Cabezas to give support to local organizations that are working to mobilize solidarity,” and “...raise awareness with my friends at home and at least get them to think about working or advocating on behalf of poor people.” Doris explains that

it was only when I stopped my own thought process of how things could be, listen to the people who were working for change, that I began to realize that empowerment comes from the mobilization of the people, not throwing money or medical supplies at them.

For Doris, seeing Nicaraguan’s collective spirit, wisdom, and ability to accomplish so much with so little helped her understand the importance of expressing her solidarity by supporting and encouraging their existing efforts to address health problems, rather than providing a short supply of medicines.

Joyce describes feeling a sense of solidarity with Nicaraguan women, and “discovering a sisterhood kind of thing, you know their culture is so different, but...It was like finding a commonality and tapping into it.” For each female study participant, “sisterhood” becomes a powerful metaphor for describing the intense bond they formed with Nicaraguan women. Like most study participants, Kendra describes developing her moral solidarity by learning from the strength and resilience of the Nicaraguans. Kendra draws inspiration from the Nicaraguan women she met by keeping pictures of them by her bedside table, as daily reminders of their courage and struggle fighting for women’s rights against tremendous adversity and discrimination.

Cultural Transformation. Surprisingly, findings from most student narratives suggest cultural transformation has little to do with adapting to initial

culture shock related to adjusting to differences in daily rituals such as cooking, language, and transportation (i.e., learning how to be interculturally competent). Rather, the cultural transformation process has more to do with recognizing one’s “privileged lifestyle” and questioning American cultural hegemony that supports consumerism, materialism, and individualism, and the difficulties with actively resisting those values. Students who experience cultural transformation begin to see how cultural baggage shapes and distorts frame of reference. Transformation in this sense means questioning culturally defined values, beliefs, ideologies, and norms.

During an interview five years after returning from Nicaragua, Beth describes the impact of the service-learning experience: “although it was the shortest trip I ever went on, it was the most important life changing international experience I have ever had.” Coming from someone who had spent most of the five years prior to her Nicaragua experience living in Western Europe or working in study abroad, Beth could be described as “culturally competent.” Her previous international experiences had not caused a dramatic shift in how she understood the fundamental ideological building blocks of U.S. culture. Beth states,

Exposure to poverty firsthand and connecting with amazing people [Nicaraguans] changed my whole way of looking at the U.S. and the rest of the world, and I had to rethink the whole purpose of international education...I had basically been living in a sheltered world and the whole time thought of myself as worldly.

Despite subsequent frustrations in raising awareness, Beth describes the different ways she has translated her new cultural consciousness into action,

...since Nicaragua I have tried to change my lifestyle in ways that I think are socially conscious: I watch my consumption habits and support fair trade labeling, I try to raise consciousness of social justice issues through education. But I am not ready to become a political activist that protests in the street and I am not sure that is the answer. But I know I need to challenge many American’s general indifference to social problems outside the U.S. and our arrogance in how we treat the rest of the world.

Personal Transformation. Personal transformation entails a process of reevaluating one’s identity, lifestyle choices, daily habits, relationships, and career choice. Students also describe personal transformation as seeing their own vulnerable and/or weaker, less flattering sides. This was a real-

ization, students said, because they had never been put into a situation of such intense dissonance. The international service-learning experience becomes a critical turning point in which daily activities are shaped and influenced by constant reminders of the social and economic conditions of the Nicaraguan people. Students describe “giving away many of their material belongings” and “washing their clothing by hand in the bathtub.” Students report that the program assisted them in “coming out of their shell,” “dealing with crisis,” or in “overcoming insecurities.” Participants describe their personal transformational learning journey as a process of “slaying personal dragons” and “purging inner demons.” Such comments reflect increased self-esteem and confidence resulting from the Nicaragua experience. Students comment that the experience “strips one bare” and makes everyone “see what you are really made of.”

Ben expressed shame and embarrassment in feeling a “double-helplessness” upon arriving to Nicaragua. He said his manhood or sense of machismo and assumed intercultural competence had been put into question by emotional weakness in the face of extreme poverty. Jen explained that her Nicaragua experience helped to overcome insecurities and develop enough self-confidence to join the Peace Corps the day after she returned from Nicaragua. She explained that since leaving Nicaragua she had been on a personal mission to return to Puerto Cabezas to tell the Nicaraguans how much their giving, wisdom, and generosity had changed her life. A year later, she traveled on a harrowing two-day bus journey to reconnect with friends in Nicaragua. Upon return to the United States, Betsy described her personal transformation as a “purging” or “cleansing.” She said

I now think of my life as having two distinct phases: ‘before PC’ [Puerto Cabezas] and ‘after PC’ periods. I will never be the same. How could I be? It was a chance to face down the demons that have been dogging me for years.

During our interview five years later, Betsy explained that part of “facing her demons” meant “overcoming her fears,” finally quitting her job, and obtaining a degree in nursing to make a difference in other’s lives.

Spiritual Transformation. Participants report a profound shift in their spiritual frame of reference resulting from their international service-learning experience. Firsthand experiences with human suffering, poverty, and injustice often causes significant dissonance, leading participants to reflect more deeply on their role in society and ability to make a difference. Some students express the importance of

having a spiritual base for renewing faith, or finding the strength to work for greater social justice. Students report “having a new way at looking at their assumptions regarding religion,” “the human spirit,” “God,” and a “larger life force.” Other students look at their international service-learning experience as “a way to reexamine their spiritual beliefs.” Many students began to reexamine their existential role in society. These students searched for deeper meaning in who they are and how that connects to their newly perceived surroundings, conceived much more broadly than in the past.

Students’ spiritual transformation also reflects an effort to sustain their energy to work for social justice. It is a way to find solace from the restlessness and discomfort, which stems from the powerful impact of the service-learning experience in Nicaragua. *Searching for harmony* characterizes how students attempt to find balance and continue to channel in a positive way the intense and ongoing dissonance shaping their emerging global consciousness after returning to the United States. Eight years after her international service-learning experience, Karen’s willingness to stay involved in social justice issues is fueled by the dissonance she experienced living with orphanage children and working in health clinics as a translator, but she still feels tired and frustrated. She takes yoga classes as a “way to retreat from global problems that are overwhelming” and also as a “way to find harmony and inner peace.” Students also report that it is hard to describe how they feel in words. Gretchen describes her spiritual reawakening in the following way:

One thing I continue to ponder is this: How do I define existence? How do I define what the good life is, opposed to the bad life? Is suffering an inevitable part of the human condition? I suppose it depends on whether one perceives life from a spiritual, cosmic, karmic standpoint, or a moralistic/ intellectual standpoint...I fall somewhere in between...My heart and soul plead with my mind to work with the people...Going to Nicaragua expanded my world and decreased my fears of venturing into it.

Chameleon Complex

The previous descriptions of perspective transformation show the international service-learning experience significantly changes students. However, acting on their transformation when returning to the United States is a tremendous ongoing challenge for study participants. While *envisioning* suggests that students’ perspective transformation is developmentally progressive and positive, findings from post-trip interview data indicate students’ emerging

global consciousness is much more complex and problematic once they return and attempt to adjust to life in the United States. Chameleon complex describes the struggle study participants experience in learning how to translate their emerging global consciousness (along one or more of the six learning domains) into action upon reentry into the United States. Chameleon complex represents the internal struggle between conforming to, and resisting, dominant norms, rituals, and practices in the United States. Students report numerous challenges associated with reintegrating, applying, and coming to terms with aspects of their emerging global consciousness. They describe difficulties communicating their international service-learning experience to others and maintaining relationships when challenging dominant U.S. cultural norms, beliefs, and practices. Comments include “no one understands me,” or “my coworkers think I am radical,” and “friends and family don’t seem to care” and “get defensive” when students’ discuss the social justice issues that are now in the forefront of their globally-conscious minds. They feel disillusioned that people seem detached from issues of global poverty and/or get annoyed when they question cultural norms that value consumption and materialism, capitalist ideology, and U.S. foreign policy. Frequently, students feel compelled to hide their “true colors,” and blend in as a defense mechanism to avoid being chastised for having “radical views.” However, their defensive conformity leaves them frustrated like a chameleon with a complex. Kendra comments, “It takes a lot of discipline not to get sucked back into Americans’ obsession with consuming” and Beth states, “I try not to buy things that have been made in sweatshops and I raise awareness, but I feel like I am facing a mountain.” Cara describes chameleon complex in terms of her frustration and increasing alienation from friends who don’t seem to care:

When I returned from Nicaragua and tried to explain to a friend what I had experienced in Nicaragua and how it had changed me she didn’t want to listen she said—‘oh, you’ll get over that, it’s because you just returned.’ Well, it’s been almost six months and I haven’t gotten over it. I still think about the conditions down there and I still think about her attitude and other friends who are more concerned with school and social life, not social change. I just don’t say anything anymore...

Six years after her service-learning experience in Nicaragua, Karen explains that going against the mainstream causes her to worry about losing friends and isolating herself from family and co-

workers:

...some time after September 11, my neighbor says, ‘I hope they take out Afghanistan.’ I shut up...I think to myself ‘War against who...? We are just exercising our muscles, our planes are getting rusty, got to start your car, it needs gas to go on vacation.’ But I think, ‘what did the women and children of Afghanistan do to deserve this?’ All the American flags...buy more trucks, lower gas prices, I get cynical. Patriotism is so deadly. I hope we don’t go to war. This [bombing] was long in coming. What did you expect? Look at the way the United States treats the rest of the world...but no sense losing friendships over this...do I lose my village or society or do I just shut up? I put my reading glasses on sometimes to see things more clearly but there are situations I leave them off...You know words won’t help, they don’t change frames of reference...

Rather than speak out against what she feels is wrong with U.S. foreign policy, Karen keeps her thoughts and global consciousness to herself and “shuts up” to avoid making waves and/or losing friends. Beth’s metaphor representing the chameleon complex below aptly captures the tensions and struggle many students experience in trying to put perspective transformation into practice:

...it’s like when I ran track in college, we would do these exercises...you had to put an inner tube around your waist with a cord attached to it for resistance and you build up strength while people grab onto the rope to try to pull you back in...well, that’s what it’s like trying to escape or resist the culture of materialism in the United States...you have to build up so much strength to resist being pulled back in, and you keep fighting it.

Discussion

This longitudinal case study provides substantial empirical documentation confirming that participation in an international service-learning program with an explicit social justice orientation had a significant transformative impact on U.S. students’ worldview and lifestyle. Importantly, the identification of three distinct learning dimensions of students’ emerging global consciousness—(1) envisioning, (2) transforming forms, and (3) chameleon complex—expands on current conceptions of perspective transformation. These three components offer a more complex, differentiated view of the long-term nature of transformational learning in international service-learning. In addition to providing educators with a useful conceptual framework for understanding how students experience multiple forms of perspective

transformation over time, the three dimensions highlight the ongoing challenges students confront as they attempt to translate their transformational learning into meaningful and sustainable action after returning to the United States.⁸

The *envisioning* dimension supports previous empirical studies in service-learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kellogg, 1999; Rhoads, 1997) that found students developed an understanding and a “willingness” to act on the moral, political, and intellectual aspects of their perspective transformation. However, this study also found that upon reentry to the United States, students’ initial “intention” to translate their perspective transformation into action was often accompanied by significant conflict and tension between desired actions and external constraints. Previous studies (Eyler & Giles; Rhoads) assume the intention to act necessarily leads to action. What these studies conceptualize as perspective transformation only partially represents the transformational learning process for students participating in this study. This longitudinal research found two other important dimensions, chameleon complex and transforming forms, which offer important additional knowledge regarding the long-term meaning of students’ perspective transformation, and its relationship to individual change and social action.

Chameleon complex exemplifies the recursive and contested nature of the relationship between perspective transformation and action described above, and is perhaps the most provocative finding in this study. Chameleon complex depicts students’ ongoing struggle to translate their perspective transformation into meaningful action. Returning to the United States, students continue to confront dilemmas. There is often a disconnect between what students want to do and the actions they actually take. They struggle to act on their emerging global consciousness, which often means going against the opinions of friends, family, and coworkers. They also realize that their newly found global allegiances have very little support or conflict with perceived obligations as U.S. citizens. Sometimes students choose the safety that blending in affords, but rarely feel comfortable with such conformity. Chameleon complex renders problematic the conceptual models and studies that assume students’ perspective transformation in service-learning will follow a linear or developmental continuum from a charity to social change (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). According to this study, the link between perspective transformation, behavioral change, and social action is much more complex and tenuous. Chameleon complex suggests that a transformation in one’s worldview is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for

changing lifestyles, challenging mainstream norms, and engaging in collective action to transform existing social and political institutions. The chameleon complex also seems to lend empirical support to Leeds’ (1999) contention “that even if students come out of all classes with a social change perspective, it is a dubious leap of faith or logic that actual social transformation will occur as a result” (p. 119).

The identification of six transforming forms offers a useful framework for understanding the multiple ways that students might experience perspective transformation in domestic and international service-learning programs. This finding suggests that Mezirow’s (1978) theory of perspective transformation is useful to identify and understand the kinds of assumptions that students reevaluate and revise as a result of their international service-learning experience. However, Mezirow’s model does not adequately explain how students’ newly found perspective can be “reintegrated” more meaningfully into their lives. Knowing that students who participate in international service-learning programs begin to question fundamental assumptions in one of six dimensions that make up their worldview (i.e., moral, political, intellectual, personal, cultural, and spiritual) provides important insight into the relationship between the form of transformation and kinds of actions that might result. Moreover, having a better understanding of the form that is transforming establishes an important conceptual link for identifying and addressing potential challenges a student might contend with while integrating their new perspective into their daily lives. Such a link may enable the instructor and students to alleviate some of the stress and conflict that chameleon complex causes.

This study’s results also raise important ethical concerns related to fostering perspective transformation in international and domestic service-learning programs. As this study indicates, participation in an international service-learning program with a social justice pedagogy can trigger extremely powerful reactions from students who begin to critically reflect on long-held assumptions about themselves, lifestyle choices, cultural norms, U.S. capitalism, careers, relationships, social problems, and the world around them. After participating in the program, study participants find there is no turning back. They feel compelled to act on their emerging global consciousness, which tends to involve significant personal risks and interpersonal conflicts, such as rejecting previous habits, ending relationships, changing jobs, engaging in counter-hegemonic practices, and resisting aspects of the dominant norms and rituals of mainstream U.S. culture.

The practical implication for practitioners is to

recognize and identify individual and social factors that might enhance and constrain student agency, and develop more realistic and manageable expectations about students' ability to engage counter-hegemonic activities. Because mediating personal, structural, and contextual factors hinder students' capacity to act, it is unrealistic to assume that taking action to transform one's lifestyle, institutions, and policies will be an easy or smooth process for the transformed mind. However, there are useful strategies faculty can incorporate into coursework to help students turn their emerging global consciousness and the energy of envisioning into meaningful action. For example, prior to returning to the United States, practitioners can encourage students to develop a contract or "covenant" (see Evans & Hajak, 1987) specifying the actions they intend to take, and identifying possible barriers and strategies for achieving their objectives. Faculty can assist students with realistic expectations and provide them with appropriate readings and/or organizational contacts to help support their efforts to engage in meaningful social action. Another strategy is to develop an alumni network to help students sustain a social vision, and continue to contribute to the international service-learning program as a "team." Lastly, a post program course might allow for greater reflection on the various dimensions of students' emerging global consciousness. Because emerging global consciousness in this study led many students to question their identity and lifestyle, as well as challenge dominant U.S. cultural norms, a post-program course would provide opportunities for students to develop and implement action plans to more effectively address potential barriers and conflicts. Such a course would also provide students with a community of support to help them better understand and contend with the implications of their emerging global consciousness.

Conclusion

The results of this study break new ground by confirming the existence of multiple forms of perspective transformation that result from participation in international service-learning. Importantly, this research also offers substantial empirical insight into how students experience perspective transformation in international service-learning over time. However, given that this case study represents qualitative findings gleaned from a small purposeful sample of students (N = 22) drawn from a unique international service-learning immersion program with a social justice orientation, it has limited transferability to other domestic and international programs. The student sample chosen for

this research entailed primarily Caucasian, female participants who were U.S. citizens. Future research might draw from larger samples that are more diverse particularly in terms of gender, race, and nationality. Furthermore, a comparison study that includes multiple program sites in different geographic regions (both international and domestic), and maintains diverse pedagogical orientations and engages in a variety of service-learning activities, might generate more information regarding program factors that enhance and hinder transformational learning outcomes.

Research that examines the linkages between the three facets of emerging global consciousness would further enhance understanding of the complex relationship among the intent to act found in envisioning, the forms of perspective transformation (i.e., political, intellectual, moral, personal, cultural, and spiritual), and the challenges associated with taking individual and social actions represented in chameleon complex. There is a need for studies that examine learning transfer as it relates to perspective transformation and also identify program factors that help students translate envisioning into concrete actions that help foster social change. What program factors increase the likelihood that students will experience perspective transformation? Are there specific contexts and service-learning activities that are more apt to trigger perspective transformation? What strategies might service-learning educators develop to help foster and sustain meaningful perspective transformation? Research might also investigate the relationship among the six forms of perspective transformation. Do other types of perspective transformation occur as a result of participation in service-learning? There is also need for further research identifying how students experience the challenges and difficulties that stem from chameleon complex. Chameleon complex in this study points to the tensions in structure-agency and highlights the need for future research that examines how service-learning impacts student agency and the structural forces that impede individual action. Are there specific strategies that students and faculty can develop before, during, and after participation in service-learning programs that address problems students experience in attempting to sustain their transformed perspective in a meaningful way, and act on it, after returning to the United States?

Lastly, the study findings raise important practical, political, and ethical concerns related to fostering perspective transformation in service-learning, and suggest a need for further research into the potential risks associated with translating individual perspective transformation into social actions

that challenge unjust and oppressive aspects of the status quo. As Brookfield (1994) has pointed out, there is a “dark side” to fostering critical reflection and perspective transformation. The process of critical reflection often has an explicit political dimension that means questioning cultural hegemony and relations of power through ideology critique (Brookfield, 2000). As the data analyzed for this study indicates, participation in international service-learning programs can trigger extremely powerful visceral, emotional, cognitive reactions from students who begin to critically reflect on long-held and taken-for-granted assumptions about themselves, their lifestyle, career, relationships, social problems, and unjust hegemonic dimensions of the world around them. Research would be particularly useful in elaborating further the mediating factors that support and/or hinder individual transformation, challenges associated with acting on perspective transformation, and those aimed at transforming social structures and institutions that perpetuate inequality, oppression, and unjust relations of power.

An important message that emerges from this research is that service-learning educators who have “transformative intentions” need to recognize the long-term struggle inherent in the nature of transformational learning. The study findings suggest the need for greater dialogue on the value of both domestic and international service-learning as sites for fostering transformational learning. In addition, further research should examine the potential difficulties and risks associated with translating perspective transformation into a more socially conscious way of living, and attempt to clarify the contextual factors that enhance or hinder the development and long-term persistence of global consciousness. Further research and dialogue in the above areas will enhance educators’ ability to connect service-learning more effectively to its transformative and social justice mission.

Notes

¹ The longitudinal case study explored the forms, processes, actions, and programmatic factors that enhanced and/or hindered students’ transformational learning resulting from their participation in an international service-learning program with a social justice orientation. The study results presented here focus on the forms of perspective transformation and subsequent actions.

² Given space limitations, I have condensed my review for this paper to cover core concepts of Mezirow’s theoretical model as they inform this study and empirical studies in service-learning that focus on the outcome of perspective transformation. See Kiely

(2002) for an extensive review of theoretical critiques and empirical studies examining various process components of Mezirow’s model and notions of transformation in intercultural learning literature.

³ Mezirow’s theory draws from diverse views of learning found in Dewey’s pragmatism, Blumer’s and Mead’s symbolic interactionism, Gould’s psychoanalytic theory, Freire’s concept of *conscientization*, and Habermas’s critical social theory.

⁴ In Mezirow’s most recent work (2000), he expands his notion of meaning perspectives as a set of assumptions that are: sociolinguistic (cultural canon, ideologies, social norms, customs, “language games,” secondary socialization; moral-ethical (conscience, moral norms); epistemic (learning styles, sensory preferences, focus on wholes or parts or on the concrete or abstract); philosophical (religious doctrine, philosophy, transcendental worldview); psychological (self-concept, personality traits or types, repressed parental prohibitions that continue to dictate ways of feeling and acting in adulthood, emotional response patterns, images, fantasies, dreams); and aesthetic (values, tastes, attitudes, standards, and judgments about beauty and the insight and authenticity of aesthetic expressions, such as the sublime, ugly, tragic, humorous, “drab,” and others) (p. 17).

⁵ Taylor (2000) has conducted the most extensive review of 45 empirical studies that explored different aspects of Mezirow’s transformational learning theory. Taylor concludes that, “despite the abundance of studies looking at change in a frame of reference, it is still far from clear what warrants a perspective transformation” (p. 292). There are some learning theorists who contend that the transformative claims in research have become so abundant that “perspective transformation” has begun to lose its “critical” meaning as a form of learning that liberates students from distorted ideological assumptions, dependency relationships, and situations of oppression (Brookfield, 2000; Kegan, 2000). Kegan argues that despite an increase in empirical studies building on Mezirow’s initial conceptualization of transformational learning, there is no accepted set of criteria for identifying and evaluating the process of transformational learning and the eventual “form” that transforms. The lack of clarity combined with the scholarly fascination with Mezirow’s conception of transformational learning theory has made “transformation” a double-edged sword. That is, research has advanced our understanding of some of the forms and processes of transformational learning, but it also “begins to be used for myriad purposes; its meaning can be distorted, its distinct ideas lost” (Kegan, p. 47).

⁶ Because this article is focused on student learning, I have chosen to focus primarily on course pedagogy meant to structure and enhance the students’ experience. However, the course also emphasizes community benefits and participation, which is core to the program’s social vision. The community primarily drives the service work that takes place and indeed, much of the learning that takes place.

⁷ Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each study participant before and after program participation. I conducted semistructured interviews each year three to six months prior to departing to Nicaragua and elicited information regarding students' motivations, expectations, fears, values, personality traits, and prior travel experience. Although post-trip group reflection and evaluation occurred with each cohort three to four months after returning to the United States, more systematic semistructured interviews were conducted with 22 students from May 2001 to May 2002.

⁸ Although program factors are not discussed here, the study did find that immersion in a different cultural context, intense dissonance, opportunities for critical reflection, and significant interaction with the community through service work helped foster students' perspective transformation. Given space limitations, please see Kiely (2002) for a more detailed discussion of program characteristics and contextual factors that influence long-term perspective transformation.

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