

Is Transformative Learning Possible in International Service-Learning?

H.Y. Lam, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Liz Jackson, University of Hong Kong

Stephen C.F. Chan, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

1. ABSTRACT & KEYWORDS.

This qualitative study drew on Mezirow's transformative learning theory to explore the impact of international service-learning (ISL) on transformative learning of students in one university in Hong Kong. The purposive sampling method was employed to select a total of 26 undergraduate students to be interviewed three to five months after their ISL experiences. Altogether, 31.3 hours of interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim, and 35 reflective journals and final reports were received from 24 participants.

The result is comparable to the literature; 10 participants (38%) demonstrated that they had experienced transformative learning in their ISL experiences. Most of the transformations occurred in personal aspects, then social, cultural, civic and intellectual aspects. None of the students demonstrated spiritual transformation or experienced re-evaluating cultural or ethnic identity, even though these had both been found in previous research. Over half of the respondents did not exhibit any transformative learning. However, according to Mezirow (2000), their reported gains and reflections are potentially transformative if accumulated over time. This indicates a need for further investigation and discussion.

This study adds to the literature by providing qualitative evidence of transformative learning in ISL in a non-western context.

Keywords: Transformative learning, International service learning, Service learning, Student learning

H. Y. Lam, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China, hy.lam@polyu.edu.hk;
Liz Jackson, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China, lizjackson@hku.hk; Stephen C. F.
Chan, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China,
stephen.c.chan@polyu.edu.hk.

2. INTRODUCTION

International service-learning (ISL) has been growing in popularity in the past two decades. It combines academic learning and community service in an international context with an aim to benefit both the students and the community. Research has shown that it can have tremendous potential to contribute to a wide range of students' learning outcomes, including transformative learning (e.g., Bamber, 2015; Kiely, 2004, 2005; Taylor, Jones, Massey, Mickey, & Reynolds, 2017). However, the existing literature is sparse, and most of the studies were conducted in the U. S. context.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study drew on Mezirow's transformative learning theory, developed in 1978 (Mezirow, 2000), to examine the impact of the ISL experiences on students. Mezirow defined transformative learning as "the process of becoming critically aware of how we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective" (1990, p. 5). Transformative learning is also known as perspective transformation. It starts with a disorienting dilemma, then is triggered by critical reflection, which is a process of examining distorting assumptions and exploring a new perspective, and finally reintegrates the new perspective into one's life (Mezirow, 1991). Kegan (2000) differentiated transformative learning from informational learning. Informational learning is to "extend already established cognitive capacities into new terrain" (p. 48). Kegan argued that both kinds of learning are valuable and desirable, and the weightings of each in learning activities depend on their natures and objectives.

Previous studies have revealed that participants in service-learning and ISL can experience transformative learning, but that not everyone does (Bamber, 2015; Kiely, 2004; Taylor et al., 2017). The transformative learning could occur in various aspects, such as personal, social, political, cultural, intellectual, moral or spiritual (Kiely, 2004; Bamber, 2011). Researchers have argued that transformative learning takes time to materialise (Taylor et al., 2017) but that it has a lasting impact (Fullerton, Reitenauer, & Kerrigan, 2015; Kiely, 2004, 2005). Kiely (2005) developed a transformative learning model for ISL based on Mezirow's theory, and identified five transformative processes that lead to perspective transformation, namely, contextual border crossing, dissonance, personalising, processing, and connecting. However, the number of studies is limited, and most of them were conducted in a western context and focused on one single ISL programme. Thus, the findings may not apply to other contexts. More studies are needed to better understand transformative learning in ISL, especially in a non-western context.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in a large public university in Hong Kong in which all undergraduate students are required to complete at least one 3-credit service-learning subject before graduation. In addition to lectures, seminars and workshops, the students are required to participate in a substantive service project that will benefit the community in a meaningful way. Students are expected to spend roughly a total of 130 study hours to complete the subject, 40 of which should be spent in direct service or interaction with clients. They are also required to reflect on the experiences and demonstrate their learning through debriefing, reflective journals, or presentations. They are assessed according to a letter-grade system, and the results are counted towards their grade point averages.

This study targeted nine international projects which were part of the service-learning subjects offered by the university in the 2016-18 academic years. The projects were offered by five academic departments at five different overseas locations. They were open to students from any discipline. In total there were 203 participants. The subjects lasted for one or two semesters, and the durations of the service trips ranged from 10 to 17 days. Table 1 shows the service nature of the participating ISL projects, the targets, durations and the numbers of participants.

Table 1: Details of the participating international service-learning projects

Project Name	Major service and targets	Trip Duration	No. of participants / No. of interviewees
1.Computing Cambodia	Set up solar panel station and indoor wiring for families in villages	17 days	40 / 4
2.Nursing Cambodia	Conduct basic health and lifestyle assessment and design tailor-made health care plan for low- income families in slum areas	15 days	31 / 4
3.Language Cambodia	Teach English to primary school children or college students and school teachers	10 days	29 / 4
4.Nursing Vietnam	Conduct basic health and lifestyle assessment and design tailor-made health care plan for low- income families in villages	12 days	15 / 2
5.Hospitality Vietnam	Provide hospitality basic skills training and workplace English teaching	11 days	28 / 4
6.Computing Rwanda	Set up solar panel station and indoor wiring for families in villages	16 days	13 / 2
7.Nursing Rwanda	Conduct basic health and lifestyle assessment and design tailor-made health care plan for low- income families in villages	16 days	14 / 2
8.Optomety Kyrgyzstan	Vision screening and eye care education for the community	15 days	18 / 2

9.Computing Myanmar	Set up solar panel station and indoor wiring for families in villages	11 days	15 / 2
------------------------	---	---------	--------

The purposive sampling method was employed to enable diverse and rich data to be collected. The students in each project were classified into two groups (more positive vs less positive) according to their ratings on the post-experience survey item asking how transformative the ISL experience had been for them. Based on nominations from the subject teachers, two or four students from each project were invited to take part in the study, half from the more positive group and half from the less positive group.

The data were collected from two sources: post-hoc semi-structured individual interviews and students' reflective journals and final reports that were submitted as course assignments. The individual interviews were conducted three to five months after the ISL experiences. Informed consent was obtained from each interviewee, and HK\$200 coupons were presented as an incentive to participate. Each interview was conducted in the student's preferred language (Cantonese, English or Putonghua) and lasted for about one to two hours. The interviewees were invited to indicate the level of impact and any strong emotions encountered, and to describe the changes and the incidents or reasons which might have contributed to such changes. In total, 26 undergraduate students were interviewed, with 31.3 hours of interview records generated.

After the interviews, the researcher collected the reflective journals and final reports which the students had submitted for their subject assignments. In all, 35 reflective journals and final reports were received from 24 participants. Two participants did not submit any reflective journal or report.

The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim to facilitate the data analysis process. Coding and categorisation were done using the software Nvivo. A qualitative content analysis approach was adopted to categorise, code, and analyse the data.

5. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the interview data and the students' reflective journals or reports showed that about 10 of the 26 research participants (38%), demonstrated that they had experienced transformative learning during their ISL experiences. This result is consistent with the findings of Eyler and Giles (1999) that about one-third of students participating in service- learning experienced transformed views. These students experienced transformative learning in the following aspects:

- Personal aspect: Seven students reflected on their previous self-concept, lifestyle, and future path. For example, a student majoring in the Chinese Language, who had not thought previously about his career path, was

inspired to pursue a career that can help others, such as social work. Another realised her tendency to manipulate others and to become negative and emotional when they disagreed with her.

- Social aspect: Four students experienced transformation through interacting with others. They changed their ways of dealing with people around them. For example, a student who was afraid to speak up built confidence to express his perspectives and ideas without worrying about being criticized in a group.
- Cultural aspect: In a cross-cultural environment, three students reflected their stereotypes and bias, and developed a relationship of mutual respect and care with the local people with whom they interacted. For example, one student re-evaluated her negative assumptions about the Cambodian people, and became more open-minded and learned not to make assumptions.
- Civic aspect: Three students developed or expanded their sense of social responsibility and citizenship. For example, one became motivated to understand the social problems and came to regard the service as necessary and an act to change unjust situations, whereas she had participated in previous service only as a leisure activity.
- Intellectual aspect: Three students had rethought their presuppositions or attitudes towards knowledge and problems. For example, one questioned her assumptions and approaches to solving problems when she could not figure out why a solar panel system had failed to function; she learned to think about more possibilities.

In the ISL experiences, the students were placed in challenging living environments with unhygienic water supplies, limited electricity, and often hot weather. Sometimes, they had to act differently to adapt to unfamiliar situations. They gained new experiences, learned surprising information which did not match their assumptions, and obtained new lenses to look at themselves in new ways. In the social aspect, they were required to work intensively in groups with members from diverse disciplines and interact closely with local people from different cultural backgrounds. They established equal relationships with people who were stereotyped as “needy” or “poor”. They learned how to get along with their teammates in conflicts, transformed by moving away “from uncritical, organic relationships towards contractual relationships with others” (Mezirow, 1978, p. 100). These lived experiences led them to think broadly, extended their comfort zones and triggered them to re-examine their presuppositions, self-understanding, or personal values critically, hence they thought they had become more mature, discriminating and inclusive.

Mezirow (2000) emphasized that transformative learning may also result from an accumulation of transformations in related points of view. In this study, although over half of the respondents did not exhibit transformative learning, some described their ISL experiences as “eye-opening”, “unforgettable”, or “life-changing”. They reported gains in knowledge and skills, changed attitudes towards a particular issue

or group of people, and reflections on how to do service better or to sustain the project impact in the community. These are potentially transformative if accumulated over time. At the same time, service-learning teachers should be more aware of the factors and processes affecting the transformation of students' perspectives, and incorporating them intentionally into the curricular and pedagogical design of their ISL subjects or projects.

6. LIMITATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY AND PRACTICE

This study adds to the literature on transformative learning in ISL by providing qualitative evidence of university students' transformative learning in ISL in a non-western context. The findings show that transformative learning occurred in different aspects. The aspects identified were comparable to the six types of transformation found by Kiely (2004) and Bamber (2011), except that none of the students in this study experienced spiritual transformation. Re-evaluating cultural or ethnic identity was one of the transformations most discussed in the literature (Kiely, 2005; Cox & Mcadams, 2012; Mather, Karbley, & Yamamoto, 2012), but it did not emerge in this study. The differences observed indicate a need for further investigation and discussion.

Furthermore, this study explored the transformative learning of ISL projects across disciplines and service sites instead of focusing on one single ISL project, thus enhancing the level of generalisation and contributing to the development of a practical and theory-based ISL model. However, as the study focused on academic ISL projects at a single university in Hong Kong, the transferability of the findings to other contexts must be viewed with caution. With the growing number of ISL projects in Hong Kong's higher education institutions, future studies can use a larger and more varied sample and employ a more quantitative approach.

This paper presents only part of the findings from the first round of data collection. Further study will aim to explore the longitudinal effect of the ISL projects on students and the factors fostering transformative learning.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The study is part of the research project "Accentuating the Positive Outcomes of Global Service-learning through Collaborative Action Research" and is partially funded by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

REFERENCES

- Bamber, P. M. (2015). Becoming Other-wise: Transforming International Service-Learning Through Nurturing Cosmopolitanism. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 13(1), 26–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344614551636>
- Cox, K., & Mcadams, D. P. (2012). The Transforming Self: Service Narratives and Identity Change in Emerging Adulthood. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 27(1), 18–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558410384732>
- Eyler, J., & Giles Jr, D. E. (1999). *Where's the Learning in Service-learning?* (1st ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fullerton, A., Reitenauer, V. L., & Kerrigan, S. M. (2015). A Grateful Recollecting: A Qualitative Study of the Long-Term Impact of Service-Learning on Graduates. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 19(2), 65–92.
- Kiely, R. (2004). A chameleon with a complex: Searching for transformation in international service-learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 10(2): 5-20.
- Kiely, R. (2005). A transformative learning model for service-learning: A longitudinal case study. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 12(1): 5-22.
- Mather, P. C., Karbley, M., & Yamamoto, M. (2012). Identity Matters in a Short-Term, International Service-Learning Program. *Journal of College and Character*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.1515/jcc-2012-1835>
- Mezirow, J. (1978). Perspective Transformation. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 28(2), 100–110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074171367802800202>
- Mezirow, J. (1990). How critical reflection triggers transformative learning. *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood*, 1, 20.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (2000) and Associates. *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (1st ed., Jossey-Bass higher and adult education series). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Taylor, K. B., Jones, S., Massey, R., Mickey, J., & Reynolds, D. J. (2017). 'It Just Had to Settle': A Longitudinal Investigation of Students' Developmental Readiness to Navigate Dissonance and Experience Transformation Through International Service Learning. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 00(00), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2017.1368817>