

# Talking with ‘Others’: Experiences and perspective transformation in a short-term study abroad program

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## Abstract

With the growth of short-term study abroad programs comes the need to develop impactful curricula and to provide supportive environments for deep learning abroad that is more than “upgraded” tourism but rather focused on educational outcomes. This qualitative case study investigates the experiences of five study abroad participants in Israel. Drawing from multiple data sources within an interpretive framework, the purpose of this study is to understand student experiences abroad. Data was analyzed inductively and thematically. Findings suggest that the holistic experience was anchored by (1) directed and diverse conversations, (2) hermeneutical reflections, (3) emotional disequilibrium, (4) intercultural competence development, and (5) student engagement in a classroom culture, which acted together as a *gestalt*. Results highlight the importance of dialogue, both with locals and within the classroom community, for transformative learning. These findings encourage international educators to provide instructional frames that encourage students to engage with local communities in critical ways.

## Keywords:

Short-term study abroad, transformative learning, perspective transformation, intercultural learning, reflection

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## Introduction

International education has been evolving in the past two decades with short-term study abroad sojourns becoming the dominant type of program (IIE, 2020; Ogden & Brewer, 2019). According to IIE Open Doors (2020), over 60% of students enrolled in a study abroad during the 2018-2019 academic year participated in programs shorter than eight weeks.

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Nevertheless, while universities have focused on simply upping their study abroad numbers (marketing programs with terms such as “worldliness” and “intercultural citizenship”) learning outcomes remain less clear (Tarrant et al., 2015; Strange & Gibson, 2017). A recent current in research challenges the paradigm, arguing that being abroad is not sufficient for change, thus challenging programs’ elitism, outcomes, assessment, and ethnocentric curricula that disregard place-based pedagogy (Adkins & Messerly, 2019; Engle, 2013; Jooste & Heleta, 2017; Paige & Vande Berg, 2012; Pipitone, 2018; Savicki & Brewer, 2015). These critiques challenge program evaluators go beyond simple satisfaction surveys to focus on intercultural competencies such as attitudes, knowledge, or beliefs, including how students change after international experiences. For these reasons, short-term programs have been under scrutiny in the past decade, as scholars question whether growth (linguistic and intercultural) can be achieved in short stays abroad (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Dwyer, 2004), with a tacit assumption that limited duration is synonymous with superficiality.

## Literature Review

Higher education institutions regularly market study abroad (SA) programs as educative environments that provide experiences outside of the classroom and lead to deep change. However, in a context of growing suspicion regarding the effects of international education on students’ intercultural development, researchers have been increasingly challenging the “immersion illusion,” (i.e., that simply being abroad could deeply affect students) (Jackson, 2015; Kinginger, 2013; Paige & Vande Berg, 2012), but also the increase of short-term programs per se. Hence, there is a large body of research on the value of interventions for optimizing international education, as well as on the outcomes of short-term programs (Jackson, 2017, 2018a; Jackson & Oguro, 2018). These interventions are defined as “intentional and deliberate pedagogical approaches, activated throughout the study abroad cycle (before, during, and after), that are designed to enhance students’ intercultural competence” (Paige & Vande Berg, 2012, pp. 29-30). The many forms of interventions include language preparation, teaching students how to reflect (Biagi et al., 2012; Passarelli & Kolb, 2012; Savicki & Price, 2019), providing systematic feedback on these reflections (Jackson, 2018b), and cultural mentoring (Paige & Vande Berg, 2012). Further, Jackson (2015) asserts that courses that scaffold reflection before, during, and after a sojourn “deepen understanding of sojourn experiences” (p. 98) and enhance intercultural awareness; the “after” portion, though perhaps the least intuitive, is vital, because the impact of studying abroad is not necessarily immediate.

Measuring the impact of study abroad remains elusive, however. Engle and Engle (2004) contend that interactions with locals and cultural mentoring lead to higher scores on the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer, 2012). The IDI is based on the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, which conceives growth as a spectrum from ethnocentric to ethnorelative. Although widely used to assess intercultural sensitivity change resulting from studying abroad (Anderson et al. 2005; Anderson et al., 2016; Vande Berg, 2009), the IDI cannot address intercultural development holistically. A developing trend in the literature has indeed been advocating a multi-method assessment of IS/IC development (Almeida, 2020; Deardorff, 2016). Hence, while recognized as a reliable and valid instrument, it is necessary to acknowledge the limits of the IDI and of other quantitative tools.

While there does appear to be a growing consensus that intervention may be helpful or necessary for effecting deep and lasting change in students, a far less settled question is whether short-term study abroad programs can affect students as deeply as longer programs can.

## Short-Term Study Abroad and Intercultural Sensitivity

Increased intercultural sensitivity (IS) is an expected outcome in education abroad (Deardorff & Jones, 2012). IS is defined as an “active desire to motivate [oneself] to understand, appreciate, and accept differences among cultures.” (Chen & Starosta, 1998, p. 231). However, despite the long-held belief that this capacity grows monotonically during international sojourns, some researchers have expressed concern, arguing that students sometimes return from SA with lower IS, or even with feelings of cultural superiority (Block, 2007; Terzuolo, 2018), especially when they are not mentored (Pedersen, 2010; Vande Berg, 2007; Vande Berg & Paige, 2009). Some of the concerns deal with the length of the program.

Length of time spent abroad has been of increasing interest (Anderson et al., 2016; Heinzmann et al., 2015; Yan Lo-Philip et al., 2015). A common belief is that the longer the stay in the host country, the more likely IS is to develop (Dwyer, 2004). For example, Medina-Lopez-Portillo (2004) found that students who stay abroad the longest tend to develop the most intercultural sensitivity. Behrnd and Porzelt (2012) found similar results in their study comparing students who had been abroad and those who had not. These findings have led to criticism of short-term programs considered too short for students to change their attitudes towards cultural diversity or related topics (Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004). Interestingly, Engle & Engle (2003) and Dörnyei & Csizer (2005) add to the complexity, arguing the opposite: they found that students who had participated in mid-length programs (one semester) had higher scores compared with both short (fewer than 12 weeks) and long-term programs (one academic year). Engle & Engle’s (2003) findings indicate that short-term study abroad programs can lead to positive intercultural sensitivity growth, whereas longer programs can in return lead to decreased curiosity and negative attitudes. They claim that students who participate in short programs might experience the “honeymoon stage” (Oberg, 1960), have access to “interesting scenery” (Heinzmann et al., 2015), but do not have enough time to dive into deeper stages, because “gain only comes at the expense of a certain pain” (Engle & Engle, 2003, p. 5).

However, other scholars found contradictory results. For instance, Chieffo & Griffiths (2004), in a large-scale quantitative study, found short-term programs to have various (self-perceived) effects on students. Similarly, some studies have identified intercultural sensitivity growth to be specifically affected— not only by the amount of time spent abroad, but by a larger set of program characteristics: interventions. For example, Nguyen (2017), in their study comparing self-perceived intercultural competency in eight short-term programs three months after student returned, found that students reported higher IC, even in 2-week programs, particularly because of the activities and assignments students had to complete. This also indicates the potential long-term effect of such sojourns. Similarly, Shiveley and Misco (2015) found long-term effects on intercultural awareness and appreciation for multiple perspectives in teachers who had participated in short-term programs up to 12 years earlier, indicating that even short programs can have long-lasting effects. Several studies have drawn similar conclusions regarding the influence of curriculum on intercultural competence and sensitivity development in short-term sojourns. Intervention, or carefully crafted programs, have been shown to have a positive

influence on “global citizenship,” a concept often related to intercultural competence. For instance, in their study of students conducting field research in ecology during a seven-day program in Costa Rica and Panama, McLaughlin et al. (2018) reported that participating in research helped students not only develop research skills, but also demonstrate a deeper commitment to global citizenship and greater awareness of the interconnectedness of our world. Their findings suggest that length is not the only (or even the primary) determinant of student change. Jackson (2011a), looking at the relationship between language and intercultural sensitivity in students studying for five weeks in England, found that participants’ language competence does not equate to intercultural sensitivity, and she noticed that despite a tendency for inflating one’s IS in self-reports, most students increased their Intercultural Sensitivity.

Hence, the literature suggests that the type of intervention might be more significant for intercultural competence and sensitivity development than the length of the program itself.

## Transformative Learning and International Education

If intercultural development thrives in the fertile disorienting ground of study abroad, so too does Transformative Learning (TL). As Perry, Stoner, and Tarrant (2012) assert, “exposure to new places, cultures, and learning environments where a student’s preconceived and established notions and beliefs are tested, may act as the catalyst or impetus for bring forth a transformative experience” (p. 682).

### Defining and Assessing Transformative Learning

TL is defined as “the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about the world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167). The expression “perspective transformation,” coined by Mezirow (1978), refers to the structural change experienced through adult development. This transformation, which Mezirow conceived as a series of 10 phases (see Table 1), moves from experiencing disorientation to reflecting on oneself and reintegrating the newly learned competence or skill into one’s perspective, affects how people see themselves and ultimately influences behavior through action. Hence, TL, for the purpose of this study, implies “irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world” (Hoggan, 2016, p. 71). In this sense, transformative learning leads to ‘perspective transformation,’ a form of permanent change. Hence, transformative learning can be perceived as being any of the following: a learning process, the actual pedagogy or activities, or the outcome of this learning process (Hoggan, 2016).

While Mezirow’s theory is not recent, studies continuously redefine the theory, ways to measure or identify transformative learning, and empirical implications thereof. Seminal texts on the topic do not address the concept of quantitative assessment. Though instruments do exist, including (inexhaustively) the Critical Reflection Questionnaire (Kember et al., 2000), the Learning Activities Survey (King, 2009), the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education rubric (AACU, 2013), the Student Transformative Learning Record (Barthell et al., 2010), and the Transformative Learning Survey (Stuckey et al., 2014), their use is far from universal and standardized (see Romano, 2018 for a short

review of instruments), nor does any one of them address every aspect of TL. These quantitative instruments aim at capturing the process of TL, measuring the extent of critical reflections, assessing classroom activities leading to TL, or outcomes of TL. Aside from quantitative measurements, interviews and artifacts have traditionally been used to identify transformative learning, particularly language that evokes critical reflection and change. To this effect, Hoggan (2016), in their article arguing for classifying TL as a metatheory, created a typology to classify categories of change.

**Table 1. Transformative Learning Theory Phases (Mezirow, 2009, p. 19)**

<b>Transformative Learning Theory Phases</b>
1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

### Transformative Learning and Study Abroad

Several studies have investigated whether, and how, TL can occur in study abroad contexts. Regrettably, many studies describe perspective transformation in binary terms, i.e. whether it happened or not, rather than viewing it through a lens of depth or extent. Among the qualitative studies in the SA field, Trilokekar and Kukar (2011) interviewed nine pre-service teachers who participated in three-month programs. All participants mentioned having experienced disorientation, and all articulated it around their experiences of “racial dynamics,” feeling like outsiders, gaining awareness of privilege and power, engaging in “risk-taking or experimenting with new identities,” and “recognizing privilege and global power relations” (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011, pp. 1144-1146). On the quantitative side, Strange and Gibson (2017) investigated the correlation between program length, experiential learning, and transformative learning, finding that reflection and discomfort were not (in contrast to Mezirow's transformative learning claim) necessary for transformation. They also state that short-term programs longer than 18 days can have “just as great of an impact as those of a full semester, or academic year long” (p. 96). Strange and Gibson (2017) are not alone in their observation that length is not necessarily an obstacle to TL. In their study of tourism students participating in short-term faculty-led SA programs (two to six weeks), Stone and colleagues (2017) found that out of 107 students who had answered their survey, 59% of them had “experienced overall [TL]” (p. 6), while others had only gone through one phase (disorientation). This quantitative study, although based on self-report, suggests that study abroad – even short sojourns – can foster perspective transformation.

Thus, even short SA programs can trigger disorienting experiences and create conditions for transformation of worldviews. But identifying which activities SA participants believe affect their transformation (and how) could help SA practitioners understand and hone curricula to optimize the transformative element. To this end, some

researchers argue that program curriculum and local interactions play a larger role than the length of the sojourn itself. For example, Tonkin and Bourgault du Coudray (2016) found evidence that socializing with local communities via beer drinking is more important for increasing awareness of cues and cultural differences than theoretical exposure to the same cultural concepts.

In his theoretical reflections on intercultural communication competence and consequently on intercultural sensitivity in relation to language teaching and learning, Byram (2010) emphasizes the concept of *bildung*, an “interplay between the individual and the world” (p. 318) that transforms the individual into a social actor. In a way, this concept finds echoes in “intercultural (critical) citizenship”, inseparable from intercultural (communication) competence, and requiring a global mindset. Fuhr, Laros, and Taylor (2017) go further, arguing *bildung* is inseparable from transformative learning, as both concepts “analyze complex, prolonged learning processes in which learners reconstruct basic assumptions and expectations that frame their thinking, feeling, and acting” (p. ix). Intercultural sensitivity and perspective transformation are deeply intertwined with the concept of identity in a global context.

These findings continue to contribute to the improvement of SA programs, but the growth and its perceived causes vary tremendously by program, context, and individual. Understanding how people think of their study abroad experiences, what they experienced, and how they think these experiences affect them, is critical for the field of international education.

## Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

This research project investigates students’ experiences in a short-term study abroad program in Israel, whether they perceived they changed and what they believe contributed to their change. The following research questions guided the study:

- What were the participants’ experiences in a short-term study abroad program in Israel?
- Do participants perceive they experienced transformative learning?
- If yes, what experiences do the participants perceive to have led to perspective transformation?

## Methods

### Research Design and Data Collection

This research sought to describe how study abroad participants perceived a short-term program in the Middle East to have affected them. In order to gain deep and holistic understanding of lived experiences, a qualitative case study methodology was employed to “understand an issue or problem using the case as a specific illustration” (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). The bounded system comprises students having participated in a four-week summer course offered at a university in Jerusalem. The course focused on understanding cultural diversity in the Israeli context. In order to gain insight into the students’ perspectives within their environments, multiple sources of data were used (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2000). These include 1) course syllabus, 2) written assignments submitted in class, 3) pictures and other artifacts created by participants while in Israel, and 4) semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2007) from all participants and instructor 6 months after return. As a researcher-

participant, I also observed and recorded notes on both classroom and field trips during the SA sojourn.

## Participants and Sampling

Data was collected with consent from the five students who participated in the same study abroad course in Jerusalem. The bounded-system is therefore defined by the following criteria: all students of at least 18 years old, participating in the same four-week summer study abroad program, making this project a case-study. The instructor of the five learners was also a participant in the research, further bounding the case. This complete collection, or criterion sampling enabled comprehensive data on all participants (Teddlie & Yu, 2007), minimizing undocumented influences and variables. The table below describes the participants using pseudonyms.

**Table 2. Participant characteristics**

Pseudo-nym	Sex	Country	Age	Class.	Major	Minor	Prior international experiences	Post SA
Alex	F	USA of Egyptian origin	20	Soph.	International affairs; religious studies after SA	N/A	Several trips to visit family in Egypt; Western Europe and Singapore with father; vacation in Spain;	SA in Scotland (following semester)
Katherine	F	USA	21	Junior	Global Studies + Middle East Studies	N/A	Brazil with family summer 2016 (1 <sup>st</sup> trip outside of US)	Traveled in Europe with father; SA in Jordan (following semester)
Hailey	F	Australia	21	Senior	Islamic Studies	Political Sc. + International relations	Various trips to Western Europe and North Africa	Graduate school
Sarah	F	USA	20	Junior	International Affairs	Arabic	HS SA in Rwanda; interned in Uganda (2016, 1 mo.); trips to Western Europe, Canada, and Mexico	
Maria	F	Denmark	38	N/A	Bio-analysis / Theology	N/A	Volunteered in Venezuela (9 mo.) and India (3 mo.); worked and lived in Norway (2 years); traveled across Europe	Volunteered teaching Danish to migrants
Ehud	M	Israel/US	45	Instructor	-	-	-	-

## Data Analysis

Data were transcribed verbatim and examined through inductive, thematic analysis to extract patterns and to capture meanings from participants (Ezzy, 2002). Data were tagged and labeled at the sentence or paragraph level with in-vivo codes from participants' voices (Charmaz, 2006). The codes were then organized into categories to which I gave new labels through analytic coding, which were compared, contrasted, aggregated, and arranged by segments (Morse, 1994). The thematic analysis displays trends across participants, enabling pattern identification between categories (Morse, 1994).

Several strategies were used to increase the overall trustworthiness of the findings. Researcher triangulation and member-checking in order for participants to clarify or confirm my interpretations improved finding credibility (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2000). In addition, experiences were recreated into narratives (with participant check), using the labels to restore individual stories and identify common categories (Polkinghorne, 1995). Using multiple sources of data, follow-up interviews for temporal triangulation, and researcher triangulation over codes and categories presented the data from multiple angles and helped increase the dependability, and the overall trustworthiness (Blestein & Shepard Wong, 2015). The small number of participants makes it difficult to state that saturation or "comprehension" was achieved (Morse, 1994).

## Findings and Discussion

The findings and discussion provide a summary of the participants' experiences and changes, and to what they attribute their change.

*What were the participants' experiences in a short-term study abroad program in Israel?*

This study found that all students had some level of perspective transformation resulting from experiences during their study abroad in Israel, allowing them to renegotiate their initial perceptions of Israeli society. The SA experience influenced students' perspectives in an organic way. Findings fall into five main categories presented in order of decreasing perceived influence:

1. Directed and diverse conversations;
2. Hermeneutical reflections;
3. Emotional disequilibrium;
4. Intercultural competence development; and
5. Student engagement in a classroom culture.

### Talking with Strangers: Directed and Diverse Conversations and Disrupting Expectations

#### Directed and Diverse Conversations: From Class Assignment to Intrinsic Interest

The most significant perspective transformation revolved around experiencing Israel through social interactions with people living there, or "directed and diverse conversations." Participants explained that talking with Israelis was out of their comfort zone and that they probably would not have interacted with them if the course had not



required them to. For example, Alex insisted that she was initially uncomfortable interacting with Israelis, not only because she is Arab, but also because of her initial opinion of Israelis.

I would have no motivation to speak to an Israeli citizen if I was not enrolled in my professor's class. If I didn't have this project to do or if I wasn't motivated by my classmates or my professor, there would be no way that I would be getting up early to talk to someone that was going to potentially disregard my entire beliefs.

Sarah felt the course encouraged her to engage in complex conversations:

I think that was outside of my comfort zone to be going up and asking people. I feel like if I wasn't pushed to do it, I probably wouldn't do it. (...). I probably wouldn't have approached people and asked them directly about this topic [i.e., the experiences and perceptions of Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants].

In their first written reflection, students reported not only on their observations of so-called cultural practices, but also on their reactions, and emotions.

### Directed and Diverse Conversations as Disorientation: Reflecting on Assumptions

Talking with different people in different areas of the country gave students access to different perspectives provided by so-called "normal people" who were not specialists of students' research topics (e.g., immigration in Israel). Some interactions elicited stronger emotions, and pushed participants to reevaluate their positioning, either during or after the conversations, or upon their return home. Katherine's conversation with a young Arab teenage boy, following her walk in the Jewish Quarter seeing plaques in the memory of victims of the 1948 and 1967 wars, juxtaposed with observing a Jewish toddler dancing in the shade of a destroyed and rebuilt synagogue, triggered strong emotions. Overwhelmed by the vast differences among possible futures for the children and by the disparate narratives to which they are exposed, she became overwhelmed and reflected on her own ideas about Israelis:

I came to realize how simplistic and presumptuous my understanding of the conflict was before beginning this course.

Hailey mentioned that encountering a group of ultra-orthodox teenage girls led her to realize her ignorance of entire communities, which she felt she would not have known about or ever talked with, had she not studied in Israel:

I spoke to a group of ultra-conservative girls who were growing up in a very conservative area. It was really just when I realized 'wow there are so many people in the world that I didn't even realize that they lived in this particular way or to that extent they were telling me.'

Alex felt "shame" and "embarrassment" after a conversation with an ultra-orthodox man, realizing she had tried to behave in a way that was religiously inappropriate for him:

Before the start of the interview, he did something very surprising. He moved his chair so that Hailey and I faced the back of him. I later found out this was because of ultra-orthodox laws. I feel somewhat embarrassed

because I kept trying to make eye contact with him, but now, I understand his motives behind this action.

All students quickly wound up investigating research topics related to power structures or oppression within the Israeli society. Conversations led to reflections, and participants reported that the structure of the course created a dynamic for sharing their understanding, as well as questions and emotions.

Learning about so-called cultural differences and their complexities and nuances appeared to be significant in the holistic growth of participants, and engagement with locals was fundamental to them moving away from essentializing people. It allowed participants to see how communities are shaped by place, which is in turn shaped by people. Had the learners not studied in Jerusalem and taken this course, they might not have had access to these opportunities of engaging with locals. Hence, this finding confirms that place-based pedagogy was essential for engaging students in critical learning (Pipitone, 2018).

Along with place-based pedagogy, interactions with so-called cultural “others” are an important part of the expectations of study abroad experiences. Here, participants were required to talk with people about controversial topics. This is not something they would have done normally, and it initiated transformative learning. These conversations offered an avenue to the “disorienting dilemma” mentioned in the TL literature (Mezirow, 2000). This finding on the importance of conversations for building nuance and complexity echoes that of Jurasek and colleagues (1996), who argue that “students observe, participate, and engage in meaningful conversations in which the complexities and contradictions of individuals and cultures are constantly in play on both sides-which is so critical in cultural interactions. Views and perspectives must constantly be refined for understanding to occur” (p. 29). In other words, ethnographic learning, which encompasses observation and conversation with people from local communities, has proven to be an effective activity to develop students’ knowledge of the place, but also to trigger intercultural awareness (Byram, 2008) leading to the examination of one’s positionality and impact on locals (Holliday, 2016). It is, however, not devoid of neocolonial risks since students are usually the sole beneficiaries of such interactions, which often lack an element of reciprocity for the local community (Lee, 2012). Indeed, as Adkins and Messerly (2019) contend, “it is only in approaching local community members abroad, not as accessories in our own narratives of self-improvement, but as collaborators in the project of true intercultural exchange, that we can begin to achieve the full promise of education abroad” (p. 89). Here, participants engaged in these interactions initially hoping to complete an assignment for a class, but while all of them saw these as avenue for changing themselves as the need arose, seeing locals as “informants,” not all of them dramatically shifted their attitude to see locals as “collaborators.” This finding therefore indicates that conversations can benefit from being framed by instructors or cultural mentors, but also need to be accompanied with deep reflections of one’s positionality and even one’s effect on these interactions. Too often, studies report on the importance of observing or talking with locals as being disorienting or even as causing transformation, which, I believe, often is a stretch, in that such reported transformations often seem very shallow in terms of actions, even though Mezirow (2000) argues that there is no transformation without action.

Dialogue is, according to both evidence and theory, central to transformation and humanization. Freire (1970) places dialogue at the core of transformative pedagogies, meaning-making, and disruption of status quo. In the context of talking with locals abroad,

these dialogues acted like “stimuli” (Bennett, 2008, p. 17), even when students had interactions they perceived to be unsuccessful. These “unsuccessful” encounters, while they often revolved around issues of power, asking people about their views on Palestinians and neighboring states, on the IDF, on the integration of refugees and migrant workers and on the self-actualization of Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) women, led students to reflect on their intercultural competence (Covert, 2014). Thus, it was only through “unsuccessful” encounters and reflection thereon that “successful” cultural transformation could be achieved, suggesting that discomfort and even pain foster transformation. As Kolb and Kolb (2005) state, “conflict, differences, and disagreement are what drive the learning process” (p. 194). However, although this might be true in the case of Alex who had conflictual and controversial conversations about ultra-orthodox women and feminism, it is not necessarily the case for other students who instead experienced disagreement within themselves rather than with others. These conversations alone were not necessarily immediately followed by complete changes in perspective and action. Instead, they provided a de-essentialized nuanced layer of conceptions, adding complexity to student understandings.

## Hermeneutical Reflections

Reflections happened in many forms and instances, individual and in group, written and oral, structured, and unstructured. Their ubiquity was a context for reevaluating past interactions with people, and for preparing research papers. Directions prepared by the instructor guided written reflections. All participants mentioned that multiple reflective tasks helped them gain awareness of new understanding, old biases, and progress towards change. For example, Alex felt that she was continuously reflecting:

The point of [Ehud’s] class, there was a hermeneutical aspect to it, you would reflect, you would reanalyze, you would go into it, and look at it, over and over again, and that allowed me to really become more in tune with what people were trying to say but weren’t saying, and their body language towards me... I would reflect on that a lot.

Hailey felt similarly about the repeated analysis of her interactions reinforced by readings and conversations with classmates:

[...] It’s one thing having a conversation with someone; but then, actually coming back and analyzing that conversation, wondering why it occurred that way and also doing research and reading on it and seeing that other people have had this shared experience [...]

The act of reflecting on change seems to include a strong performative element, as if thinking about change was a self-fulfilling prophecy, i.e., to desire to reflect is indicative of already being in a mindset that is prepared for some kind of growth and transformation. Nevertheless, it seems to be a necessary precondition: Paige (2015) argues that reflection is a “key principle of learning” (p. 566) as it helps students’ intercultural competence development, which Savicki and Price (2017) also claim helps foster perspective transformation. They state that “cognitive complexity sets the stage for reflection both in terms of describing in detail distinctions observed and in terms of integrating all aspects of the self” (Savicki & Price, 2017, p. 53). The findings here confirm the centrality of both cognitive and affective aspects, which they assert to be essential to effective reflection. Participants’ hermeneutical reflections mentioned knowledge, understanding (cognitive)

and emotions (affective). Interestingly, strong, and often negative or painful emotions appeared to emerge during conversations with locals, during reflections resulting from written or group recapitulations, in class, and after students' return. The omnipresence of emotions and reflections on emotions was particularly salient, although rarely mentioned in the literature on SA and TL.

Participants who displayed the most cognitive and affective phenomena in their reflections and during their in-depth interviews seemed to have gone deeper in their intercultural growth, resonating with Savicki and Price's (2017) findings. Alex mentioned shame, guilt, and discomfort during and after some interactions, as well as an "identity crisis" through de-essentializing Israeli Jews. This intense emotion disturbed one of the core elements of her cultural and familial identity, echoing Ellwood's (2011) idea that her "molar" (core cultural identity) was shaken and created a sort of movement leading Alex to let go of "molarized roles." Alex's emotional disequilibrium created a "line of flight," allowing her to dissolve her molar and open to the unknown, which she felt was "liberating." Katherine also talked about feeling humbled and emancipated when she realized her biases, and Hailey felt embarrassed and freer when she became aware of her lack of knowledge. These findings align with aspects of transformative learning including a "self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22) and emancipation or "*conscientização*" (Cranton, 2016; Freire, 1970). Students who reflected on their positionality and the influence of their background and upbringing on their understanding of Israel clearly demonstrated that they developed a new critical perspective abroad. The hermeneutical reflections seem to have created the opportunity for triggering self-examination and the "deep assessment of personal assumptions and alienation created by new roles" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22). The data indicates that participants perceived that the repetitive nature of reflection contributed to their emotional awareness of their prior opinions. In short, reflection can influence both TL and intercultural sensitivity, making an argument for IS as an aspect of TL as a process, an experience, and an outcome. By providing more nuanced perspectives on immigration, the conditions of Israeli Arabs and Palestinians, or identity of both locals and participants themselves, the process of talking with strangers followed with individual reflection and then talking and collaborating with their classroom community seems to have initiated a certain level of cognitive dissonance.

## Emotional Disequilibrium

Going into an unknown culture can raise anxiety and fear, as well as excitement. As Hailey states, the course was "engaging with emotion more so than the facts."

### Anxiety and Fear replaced with Enthusiasm

Both Hailey and Sarah insisted that prior to their first conversations they were "terrified," fearing locals would be reluctant to engage with them, or dreading people's reactions to controversial topics. Alex described feeling "tense" because of her Egyptian background:

at first it was a bit tense because I was afraid that they would be hostile towards me for some reason, even though I don't look Arab, but I guess I just kind of have that programmed into my head. But after I started Ehud's class, I felt much more at ease, and I began talking to more people, and it was completely natural and organic.

After overcoming fear of the first conversation, a pattern of high anxiety followed by enthusiasm recurred during Alex's sojourn. After a "meaningful conversation" with a woman, she began to enter "unsanctioned" spaces, such as Haredim neighborhoods: "I was so inspired by my previous interview with Nurit that I embraced venturing to Mea Shearim [an Ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Jerusalem]." However, she immediately understood that her newly developed enthusiasm might bring new levels of anxiety and embarrassment.

### Shame and Embarrassment replaced by Effort to Learn

As mentioned above, many participants experienced shame when realizing their ignorance and preconceptions; this manifested several times in an increased desire for self-improvement. Hailey emphasized that encountering a group of ultra-orthodox teenagers allowed her to become aware of her ignorance about Israel in general. She described how this lack of knowledge affected her views:

I felt like I lacked a lot of knowledge of the people. I felt a bit uncomfortable with how closed my views were to begin with. [...] I felt like I had closed myself up to a lot before I got to experience the people in Israel.

She decided to prepare for interviews more thoroughly, to read more about Israel, and to find diverse news sources, thus beginning to act with curiosity to avoid subsequent shame. Alex felt ashamed during her encounter with an ultra-orthodox man, making her realize she knew nothing about Haredim prior to studying abroad. While she initially felt hurt and insulted by his behavior, she realized that she was the one acting inappropriately out of a lack of knowledge about ultra-orthodox codes. This realization led her to read more about this specific community and to ask questions about her topic. Shame fostered curiosity and awareness of cultural similarities and new openness to so-called "cultural differences."

### Emotions as Catalyst of Lasting Change

Emotions were omnipresent, but mainly through reflections did emotions become reified into longer-term cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes, perhaps because "things become more real as we perceive them in more sensitive ways" (Bennett, 2012, p. 103). The strong emotions acted as disequilibrium in response to chronic stressors coming from disruption of opinions. They led learners to developing strategies to cope with such disruption. Participants developed ways to address their stress by confronting it in their reflections. They identified it before acting upon it through plans to increase their knowledge in order to affect the source of their stress (e.g., feeling ignorant), a pattern which resonates with transformative learning phases. Here, transformation emerged from an articulation of conversations, having strong emotions during and after such interactions, self-examination leading to feelings of shame, planning a course of action to avoid negative emotions, and acquiring knowledge (Cranton, 2016; King, 2009; Mezirow, 2000). This suggests that while the literature acknowledges both epochal and incremental transformation, participants' perspective transformation emerged from a momentous conversation, crystallized through reflections and strong emotions, which occurred cumulatively. In short, perspective transformation emerged through a series of disruptive encounters coupled with a complex interaction of other experiences, unlike what previous literature has described. Simply talking with different people did not necessarily lead to transformation. However, some types of conversations, because they contradicted students' assumptions and beliefs, led students to feel shame—a feeling they explored critically.

## Intercultural Competence Development: Changing Opinions

Findings related to intercultural competence emerged in three interrelated sub-groups: 1) Knowledge and Understanding 2) Attitude/Sensitivity, and 3) Behavior. Participants' written reflections displayed a pattern of progression, starting with cognitive change (knowledge and understanding), moving to affective change (sensitivity and attitudes), and finally altering interpersonal behavior.

### Knowledge and Understanding: Gaining Awareness of Complexities and Nuances

Knowledge and understanding developed as an initial type of change. Without this first layer at the cognitive level, other types of change would not have manifested. Hailey explained she identified complexities and nuances thanks to talking with people for her project, and to reflecting upon each interaction, which made her aware of her essentializing tendencies and of her lack of knowledge:

I just felt a bit ignorant. I think that was probably one of the moments that I realized I was changing and where I sort of looked back and felt a bit uncomfortable about what I knew beforehand.

In a different way, Katherine developed what she called a "sense of urgency" to confront her prior knowledge to become less biased:

That I wasn't aware of how unaware I was made me really eager to do as much as I could, while I was there, to learn about the culture, about people's perspectives of their history.

A specific interaction shed light on her assumptions about the Israeli military service requirement:

that particular experience with that younger Israeli (...) made me aware of my preconceived and biased opinions, and I was able to push those other ideas aside and approach the following conversations that I had with youth in the weeks that followed free of that. (...) that [conversation] was almost an immediate realization of the fact that I had to be more open.

Nuanced opinions and subsequent de-essentialization emerged because of having access to more complex and diverse viewpoints and reflecting upon them.

### Attitudes: Accepting Perceived "Cultural Differences"

Students' attitudes in intercultural interactions were altered during their SA sojourn. These changes took various forms: listening more and talking less; feeling more joy during interactions with Israelis; feeling more confident, more engaged, or more respectful of "cultural differences." Alex noticed for example that her overall attitudes changed over the course of her study abroad:

it was very normal. Like it just felt fine. And then I was like, 'okay, this is not so bad,' like, 'regardless of the people's political alignment or religious restrictions, I can still do this.'

Speaking with members of the Haredi community led her to feel "more tolerant." Such meaningful encounters made her aware of her tendency to essentialize "others." She stated:

I think the experiences that I had with people were based on topic matters that were sensitive. It could spark confusion in the identity of the person that was interviewed, like they could have confused me, I could have left questioning my belief in feminism or Islam, but instead, they just provided me with the opposite perspective, but I understood it, I understood where they were coming from, I tolerated their views. (...) I was not confused, I just didn't agree with it.

### Behavior: Adapting to Perceived Cultural Differences

Students reported interpersonal behavioral adjustments in order to adapt to the communities they encountered. Hailey adapted her questions to ultra-orthodox teenage girls during their conversations, while learning about their religious restrictions, even though she felt uncomfortable with the differences she was discovering:

I did feel myself sort of being a bit more (...) conservative with the conversation and the topics, (...) because there was a lot that they weren't open to discussing or they felt uncomfortable talking about, than a teenage girl where I am from.

Alex adapted her behavior to religious restrictions when interacting with ultra-orthodox communities:

As I walked around Mea Shearim, I felt, for the first time, very uncomfortable. I clung to my shawl in an effort to maintain my modesty.

Participants mentioned they used strategies such as observing various neighborhoods, talking with strangers, and engaging with people in "unsanctioned" spaces to learn about their environments and opinions, noticing and learning to imitate communication cues or making and later correcting "inappropriate" behavior. They decided to act upon their lack of knowledge to adjust their intercultural incompetence, making conscious efforts towards the negotiation of their intercultural growth.

Unsurprisingly, participants' intercultural knowledge (cognitive) preceded their intercultural sensitivity (affective) which developed before their intercultural adroitness (behavioral), supporting the long-established evidence that all three aspects are dynamic processes in constant evolution (Chen & Starosta, 1997). Most participants' emotions go from negative to nuanced, and their written reports went from quite essentializing to de-essentializing, which led to informed adaptation of behavior, as on a "continuum" (Bennett, 2013; Covert, 2014).

Students made intentional changes to their interpersonal behavior when interacting with Israelis (Covert, 2014), which finds similarities with certain transformative learning phases. Indeed, students' agency and self-efficacy development lead them to plan how to avoid having "unsuccessful" interactions and implementing new behaviors.

### Student Engagement in a Classroom Culture

Participants' mindset towards their learning experiences evolved. The feeling of belonging to the group and feeling accepted by classmates encouraged students to get out of their comfort zones, confirming research on the influence of peers on students' engagement, not only at the emotional level, but also at the behavioral, cognitive, and agentic levels. School engagement is argued to be the "holy grail of learning" (Sinatra et al.,

2015), its multidimensionality encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004). Behavioral engagement leads to actions including attendance or participation in class. Emotional engagement leads to a feeling of belonging in a school community, whereas cognitive engagement includes efforts to achieve tasks and includes self-regulation (Fredricks et al., 2004). Finally, agentic engagement occurs “when a student constructively contributes to the flow of instruction” (Sinatra et al., 2015, p. 2). In other words, engagement and agency promote students’ learning experience.

In the context of studying in Jerusalem, two intertwined and co-dependent aspects of engagement emerged:

- 1) Collaborative learning community
- 2) Faculty-student interactions

### Collaborative Learning Community

Horizontal relationships that participants built allowed them to create a supportive environment. Classmates encouraged each other and developed trusting relationships. Ehud pointed out: “a ‘public’ group reflection in the class allows us to learn from each other. And [...] to understand that we are not alone.”

Hailey explained:

We felt like we could freely express our own opinion without the judgement of someone else, especially when it’s not from an academic perspective, you don’t have someone constantly shutting down your ideas.

Alex felt like the engagement of her classmates motivated her to go beyond what she would normally do. She described:

I think everyone in class was doing a very interesting piece and they nuanced the project for me (...). It was a motivation for me, talking to my classmates about their projects and wanting to produce something equally as prolific as they were producing.

While the rest of the group was pushing each other early on, Maria sometimes isolated herself from the rest of the group, but eventually benefitted from what Ehud called the “willingness to engage.” Ehud clarified:

I think she struggled with, on one hand, my expectations of her, and on the other hand, what she hoped to be able to do in Israel, which was to take a class, and then also kind of travel around and see interesting places. But even she eventually was sucked into or suckered into doing something that I think in the end was very meaningful to her. But she engaged with it later and engaged with it a different way than everybody else.

Group cohesiveness was simultaneously a means and a result of engagement, contributing to intercultural growth, and influenced by it dialectically.

### Faculty-Student Interactions

The instructor facilitated student engagement by encouraging critical questions. All students perceived him to be challenging, with the content and pace of the course, but also because he challenged them interpersonally. The instructor required them to have difficult conversations about oppression, discrimination, racism, and conflicting narratives.



Sarah perceived that the “non-traditional class format” and the focus on “personal growth,” rather than only facts, was an important part of her experience. The pedagogy was “a lot more personal and relationship-driven and very personal growth-driven,” allowing her to “grow a lot as a person.” Being pushed to ask difficult questions allowed her to become a more reflective person.

Similarly, Alex felt like the support of her instructor to “explore something that I hadn’t experienced before” encouraged her to engage with a community she initially felt hostile to. Originally, she thought Ehud was a Zionist who would neglect the Palestinian side of Israeli society. She stated:

My instructor took a very non-biased approach to this class even though he was from Israeli origins and he actually was the one that educated me about the Nakba, and about how Deir Yasin was the same location as Yad Vashem [World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem]. This man from Israel was helping me strengthen my own opinion about Palestine and Israel. And I’m forever grateful to him. It also made me change my opinion on Israeli people.

By allowing students to choose their research topic within a certain frame, Ehud deepened Alex’s interest and engagement: “he let me do whatever I want. How cool is that, that you get the opportunity to explore something personal to you and be supported by your professor?” This freedom prompted self-directed learning: Alex went to various neighborhoods in the morning to talk with women instead of sleeping in, she read additional books about Haredi communities, watched documentaries, and engaged in various conversations.

The instructor’s mentoring role was central in fostering students’ engagement not only in class with the content, but also with locals. These findings are consistent with earlier studies examining the role of personal investment (Braskamp, 2009), as well as that of instructors in fostering student interest in the host culture (Anderson et al., 2016; Spenader & Retka, 2015). Engberg and Jourian (2015) contend that the role of faculty being both supportive and challenging is pivotal not only in students’ engagement, but also in their intercultural wonderment, which is closely related to intercultural competence. The role of faculty is central in the experience and types of changes of students.

All research participants reported having gone through perspective transformation because of their study abroad in Israel, perceiving the experience as challenging and leading to personal growth or change they could not “unsee”. However, not everyone named their change “transformation.” Interestingly, Maria rejected the term of “transformation” at first during the interview, before acknowledging that she had radically changed her views of Israelis to less essentialized perspectives. All students developed some level of transformation, although not every participant described a particular experience as catalyzing disorientation. For example, Alex and Sarah argued that their transformation resulted from both specific events and an “amalgam of things.” Alex mentioned that several instances of talking with ultra-orthodox girls and going to Yad Vashem triggered her change and made her aware of her need to change. Katherine had a similar disorienting experience with street musicians, and Hailey mentioned speaking with ultra-orthodox teenagers as a disorienting conversation.

The experience must be understood as a Gestalt or an integrated system. Perspective transformation experiences emerged as a Gestalt revolving around the course. This educational experience led students toward

“becoming critically aware of how and why their assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167).

Based on the course assignments and the in-depth interviews, all five participants experienced overall perspective transformation during a short-term study abroad program. While this study does not compare short and longer-term programs, this finding still challenges the idea that short-term programs are more akin to upgraded tourism and not able to achieve depth of change (Dwyer, 2004). This finding also contradicts the idea that short programs sometimes lead to positive views of the host communities because of their brevity, as students get caught in the honeymoon stage (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004). Here, findings revealed students did not necessarily leave Israel with positive emotions towards all the people they met, but rather a nuanced, “de-essentialized” view. This research therefore supports previous qualitative and quantitative studies arguing that transformative learning occurs in SA settings (Stone et al., 2017; Strange & Gibson, 2017; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). Despite its relative short time, this SA led to overall perspective transformation, suggesting that the type of experiences provided through SA can be more influential than the length of time regarding TL. Indeed, the types of change perceived by some participants embody the last phase of Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory regarding the “reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22).

Beyond discussions of the effect of program length on students, this research demonstrates the holistic nature of the experience for each participant, triggering disorientation and prompting them to having difficulty to disentangle and identify distinct events or experiences as having influenced them more than others. The whole experience of studying abroad, talking with people (strangers and classmates), reflecting, and having uncomfortable emotions can be thought of as a series of events, an “accumulation,” which, instead of being a clear-cut dilemma, can be thought as a unit composed of a multitude of transactional learning experiences which continued to affect participants even after their return. The timeframe here suggests that it is difficult to attribute perspective transformation to being abroad, or even to the specific experiences students went through while abroad, since reflection continued to happen after they returned. Talking with people seemed to have triggered or initiated the other parts of the experience, but conversations alone were not perceived as leading to change. Thus, a course design assuming a mentoring role in helping students research and reflect while abroad can have a positive impact on students’ understanding of their experiences. Further, the ubiquity and almost systematic habit of reflecting while in Israel might explain the deeper level of post-study abroad changes.

## Conclusion and Implications

This study explored the experiences of students participating in a short-term study abroad in a non-traditional destination. This research sought to address the lack of knowledge regarding the types of experiences and influence of short-term SA programs. This project was guided by the following research questions:

- What were the participants' experiences in a short-term study abroad program in Israel?
- Do participants perceive they experienced transformative learning?
- If yes, what experiences do the participants perceive to have led to perspective transformation?

This study contributes to the literature by adding insights regarding the broader impact of study abroad on students. It demonstrates that students who participate in short-term study abroad programs as short as four weeks can undergo perspective transformation, intercultural competence development in a broad sense, as well as intercultural sensitivity regarding the imagined locals. The results of this study indicate that all students went through several phases of transformative learning, and student perspective transformation revolved around five main components (or experiences) all intricately related to each other: 1) Directed and Diverse Conversations, 2) Hermeneutical Reflections, 3) Emotional Disequilibria, 4) Intercultural Competence Development, and 5) Student Engagement in Classroom Culture. These components created a *gestalt* leading to perspective transformation.

These findings inform the practice regarding study abroad curriculum development and suggest that educators should build their courses around interactions with individuals from the host country and encourage students to explore aspects of the communities of their choosing under the mentoring of faculty. Such interactions should be the center of the curriculum, as a departure point for students' reflections. Interactions should also be complex and address deep aspects of the host communities, focus on controversial issues, and involve consideration of their positionality. Finally, multifaceted reflections should bracket experience to allow students to set aside individual time to think critically, and to share what they learned and their emotional responses.

Several implications can be drawn from this case study. Many findings support research on the characteristics of "effective" study abroad programs and their impact on the continuums of both transformation (King, 2009) and intercultural sensitivity. Carefully crafted short-term programs revolving around experiential learning can lead to perspective transformation taking the shape of intercultural growth, among other manifestations.

Four significant theoretical and pedagogical implications emerged, and they suggest that if we want students to change while abroad, or as a later result of having been abroad, we need to teach them how to engage in experiences that might trigger change by teaching them strategies abroad for fostering transformation. Although this study does not specifically focus on how to develop such dimensions, one potential way to improve these aspects of students' experiences in short-term study abroad programs could be to teach students action plans or strategies before, during, and after their programs.

## Insights into Transformative Learning, Experiential Learning, and Intercultural Sensitivity Development

Experiential Learning encompassing talking with different people and hermeneutical and multimodal reflection creates the opportunity for transformative learning. Hence, TL, in the context of international education, is inextricable from intercultural competence. The transformative learning phases in Mezirow's framework correspond to the continuum of intercultural sensitivity development. Experiences fostering perspective transformation are similar to those fostering intercultural competence growth, and TL might be a mechanism to achieve high intercultural sensitivity.

Additionally, much of the research on transformative learning remains theoretical, and this study contributes to the understanding of the theory from an empirical perspective. The types of experiences leading to perspective transformation inform us of how it happens and how to implement TL.

Finally, transformation takes time. Learners did not change at the same pace. It is possible that some students feel the effects of change in relation to study abroad in the next month or next decade. Instead, assessing immediately after, 6 to 12 months, and many years after students return to their home campuses, might provide insights on the overall "value" and process of SA in relation to perspective transformation. Thus, life is an "accumulation of things," with a continuity of experiences informing each other (Dewey, 1938), and as students keep reflecting, such exercises might affect not only how they feel about cultural "others," but also how they think about themselves.

## Central Role of Directed and Diverse Conversations with Different People about Complex Social Issues in Unsanctioned Spaces

This case study illustrates that talking with locals is necessary for understanding the complexity within a country, and for challenging stereotypes. However, talking with locals should be framed if educators want their students to further their criticality: addressing social issues in conversations to learn about various opinions about controversial topics is a way to build critical cultural literacy (Byram, 2012; Freire & Macedo, 2005), if these conversations are both reflected upon and informed by readings. Talking with different people in different neighborhoods, towns, from different educational and socio-economic backgrounds, and from different religions provides a sense of heterogeneity.

Creating directed and intentional interactions with members of the host country seems necessary for fostering transformation and avoiding directionless and asymmetrical encounters (e.g., with shopkeepers), sometimes leading to a form of neocolonialism (Adkins & Messerly, 2019). Requiring interactions as part of a course to build on a research project about the host country was an effective means to learn about the communities, to develop sensitivity to people, and to display respect, but this case study shows that integrating meaningful interactions is difficult and depends on a variety of factors. Even when required and semi-framed, conversations do not guarantee a quality of exchange, subsequent reflections, cognitive development, or overall change – these depend on a variety of factors including student characteristics and locals' openness. Engaging in conversations on controversial topics might not be easy and might require students to have a high level of proficiency in the target language, not only linguistically, but also in terms of behavioral adaptation to the host languaculture. Engaging in conversations also requires learners to prepare the questions or topic they want to discuss with locals, but it also

requires knowing how to ask questions, and how to interpret conversations. In this study, talking about difficult topics with locals helped debunk student biases. All participants began, at various paces and with different intensity, to engage with real motivations and emotions rather than ponder faceless facts and cultural differences. In short, talking with different people humanized the host communities and de-essentialized individuals.

Entering “unsanctioned” spaces can intensify disequilibrium. Tourists rarely go to such locations and entering them heightens sensitivity and can potentially trigger reflections on positionality. While SA should never be dangerous, purposefully off-the-beaten-path destinations can be powerful. These spaces generally do not find their way on popular tourist guides. However, they can help one develop understanding of the host country, to gain a more holistic perspective, and to debunk what students sometimes think of the so-called “host cultures”: romanticized versions of what they actually are.

### The Impact of Hermeneutical and Multimodal Guided Reflections

The hermeneutical and multimodal guided reflections help students verbalize their emotions, opinions, and questions, but also take ownership over their learning. However, students need to be taught how to reflect, and reflection should be structured and scaffolded before, during, and after SA, and not simply be a final report on the experience abroad, nor should they end with the end of the sojourn. Systematizing guided reflections helps students look for specific phenomena while allowing freedom to explore aspects of their choosing, which supports learner-centered and critical education. Hence, developing courses that promote guided reflections shared between classmates, shared expressions of vulnerability, as well as critical self-re-examination of preconceptions can lead to heightened awareness. Creating space for vocalizing emotions and sharing difficulty can facilitate learning. By these methods, one can foster a long lasting reflective community of learning.

### The Prevalence of Critical Experiential Pedagogy

Short-term programs can lead to change beyond the host country. Critical experiential learning is a key component in student change, but critical reflection and experiential learning are not enough: student willingness to expand out of their comfort zone is crucial as well. Critical experiential learning provides students with a framework for evaluating their beliefs in response to the communities they encounter. It fosters critical thinking by encouraging students to investigate issues related to equity, identity, and cultural diversity. Critical experiential learning lets students become both agents of their own learning and agents of change via their critical cultural awareness. With a program that sufficiently engages, challenges, and disorients students, even a short-term study abroad is able to effect transformation of student perspectives and intercultural competence, helping learners to both actualize themselves and to read the world.

### Limitations

Although this study offers insights in the types of experiences students have in a short-term study abroad program and in the experiences leading to transformative learning, the most significant limitation is the difficulty to generalize from the limited sample size. Self-reported perceptions create issues of social desirability. The intent of qualitative research, as Creswell (2007) argues, “is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon” (p. 173). My participants were

not racially or ethnically diverse, and all of them came from so-called “Western” countries. Although participants were socio-economically and sexually diverse, collecting data from students with different racial, ethnic, religious, or gender identities, could provide different results and interpretations. Yet, based on the evidence presented here, there is a case to be made that short-term programs provide opportunities for transformation via intercultural competence development thanks to a set of experiences revolving around discussions and reflections.

## Future Research

The findings have hitherto been confined to transformative learning and experiences that are centered on *talking with people*, i.e., directly interacting with individuals from a host country. Further research could explore, more in-depth, what, within directed and diverse conversations, is perceived to be affecting participants’ perspectives. A question emerges from this: is there something intrinsically necessary about the interactions with members of the host country that triggers transformation?

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