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“Those lessons learned went right out the window once I was atop the soil where it all happened”: Transformative Learning in a Study Abroad Course

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Abstract

This project investigated the learning process and outcomes of a study abroad course in England and France that focused on dramatic social shifts in the world war eras. Well-established adult learning theories provided the course framework, and this study examines the characteristics and elements contributing to transformative learning. Eleven undergraduate students participated in this descriptive qualitative study. Three themes emerged from the research: students experienced a journey of intense emotion (Theme I) and meaning making (Theme II) sparking profound developmental changes (Theme III). Learning involved the whole body with students referring to visceral sensations stimulated by specific places visited during the course. Subsequent disorientation triggered the transformative learning process. Dialogue, journaling, and follow-up projects led to critical self-reflection whereby students questioned their perspectives and self-concepts. Post-travel focus groups revealed the impact of the course on validation and/or revision of student perspectives which led to informed decisions and actions. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in transformative learning, especially through place-based and embodied learning

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practices. Implications include embracing holistic learning, fostering awareness of the learning environment including historical context, developing authentic relationships, and role-modeling critical thought and reflection.

Keywords:

Study abroad, transformative learning, place as text, embodied learning, qualitative descriptive

Introduction

According to the annual Open Doors report, over 340,000 U.S. students studied abroad in 2017-2018, a 2.7% increase from the previous year (Institute of International Education, 2019), as universities seek to advance globalization and intercultural student outcomes. As the number of students studying abroad has increased prior to the coronavirus pandemic and is likely to increase again in the post-pandemic period, so has the focus on assessing student learning outcomes. Many of these outcome studies focus on intercultural competence and language proficiency (Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012; Czerwionka et al., 2015; Engberg & Jourian, 2014). Although these student learning outcomes are important, the evaluation of the personal impact of study abroad on students' thinking needs to be evaluated and theoretically aligned with the pedagogy used in study abroad courses.

The purpose of this project was to investigate the process of learning, based upon well-established adult learning theories, and the outcomes of that learning for students in a study abroad course. The course design was based on the theoretical perspectives of place as text pedagogy and transformative learning. As Strange and Gibson (2017) assert, “[s]ince the outcomes of both experiential and transformative learning are in alignment with those desired in study abroad, it is appropriate to use them both as frameworks to assess the effectiveness of a variety of study abroad models” (p. 86). Transformative learning shifts students' frames of reference through intense, sometimes discomfiting experiences, coupled with critical reflection. From an experiential standpoint, the course drew upon theories about place as text and place-based education which focus on using local settings and environments to teach broader concepts related to humanities and science (Deringer, 2017).

This course focused on medical care and nursing in the United Kingdom and France during World War I and inter-war years. Through the course, place

was examined experientially, and it was directly linked to history through texts, such as poems, memoirs, and scholarly works. Drawing from critical pedagogy, which interrogates systems of power, place-based instruction encourages students to pay attention to structures that privilege or marginalize certain groups. This study abroad course focused more on historical events than cultural immersion, yet students were prompted to engage with place and memory through this critical context. Finally, some places evoke transformational learning through an affective connection to place through history and memory. As Cravey and Petit suggest that “places induce affect by engaging the senses and emotions” (2012, p. 101). This was especially applicable to students as they visited locations with historical guides, including archives, museums, and war related memorial sites.

Literature Review

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning is about “learning to think like an adult” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 3) and is therefore highly pertinent to collegiate education. Transformative learning theory has its roots in a constructivist epistemology whereby learners aspire to make (construct) meaning of their reality (Taylor & Marienau, 2016). In his seminal study, Mezirow (1978) identified a transformative process whereby this work of meaning-making motivates toward social change. Mezirow’s work has inspired an abundance of research including the adaptation, interpretation, and clarification of core constructs of meaning making.

Recent scholarship in this area suggests that transformative learning involves “making meaning out of experiences and questioning assumptions based on prior learning” (Cranton, 2016, p. 7). Three main phases of transformative learning theory include disorientating dilemmas, critical reflection, and changed meaning perspectives (Kear, 2013). Further, Thompson et al. (2016) outline the following as essential elements of transformative learning:

1. Frames of references – the assumptions and expectations, which are typically unconscious and culturally mediated, through which sense impressions are filtered.

2. Disorienting dilemmas – life events that require a learner to reflect on their frames of references.
3. Critical reflection – critical self-examination as learners confront their frames of references
4. Discourse with others – sharing of experiences and perspectives
5. Conditions that foster transformation – learning environments that are designed to foster reflection and discourse.

Although study abroad courses are not always grounded in transformative learning theory, many studies document that students regularly describe their study abroad experiences as transformative, especially if critical thinking is facilitated during the experience (Bell et al., 2017). Other studies have focused on transformative learning through critical reflection and changed meaning perspectives. Our research uses critical reflection as one of the descriptive measures of student perspective change as well as long-term learning from disorienting dilemmas, in this case historical dilemmas and their legacies on power dynamics in contemporary contexts.

Critical self-reflection, especially related to interpersonal and systemic power dynamics, are as crucial to transformative learning as the experience of education abroad. Indeed, Foronda and Belknap (2012) caution that students may not always find study abroad courses transformative, especially those in low-income countries. Instead, these experiences may reinforce preconceived ideas and stereotypes. However, when prompted to question assumptions, self-reflect meaningfully, and build new relationships, previous beliefs change dramatically. Dorsett et al. (2019) provide examples of such personal transformation through intercultural learning in India. One student explained, “the experiences I have gained... have changed me forever... I have gained a deeper understanding and awareness of myself and the effects my presence and behavior can have on those around me as well as developing cultural sensitivity and awareness” (p. 569). Expanding on this insight, Levine (2009) connects life changing outcomes for nursing students participating in international immersion programs to risk-taking, assuming advocacy roles, and recognizing their own privilege. Critical reflection on positionality and power relations are central to maximizing such learning. For example, nearly all the social work students in a study abroad experience in Guatemala found their experience transformative based on a variety of reflective processes, including anticipatory, reflection-on-action and critical reflection (Cotten & Thompson, 2017).

Active sense-making as well as change and transformation were core outcomes of a qualitative study on nursing students involved in a study abroad experience; and again, reflection on personal situatedness and cross-cultural relationality were key concerns (Morgan, 2019). Savicki and Price (2017) found that language usage patterns changed during the study abroad experience, with a decrease in identifying distinctions between self and the host country as students reflected on and made sense of their experience. It should be noted that these courses varied from short experiences (Bell et al., 2017; Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Dorsett et al., 2019) to longer experiences (Levine, 2009; Morgan, 2019) and some included practicum and service-learning experiences (Bell et al., 2017; Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Levine, 2009; Morgan, 2019) which could affect the transformational learning process (Strange & Gibson, 2017).

Place as Text

Deringer (2017) defines place-based education as “the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum” (p. 335). In addition to a focus on critical thinking and problem-posed education, place-based education emphasizes engagement through community connection as a way to make complex information more understandable to students. In this particular course, which focused on history, we encouraged students to engage not only with place, but also with text as a way of reading primary sources in archives, in processing museum exhibits, and visiting local sites indelibly marked by the past. Pipitone (2018) argues for the need to reconceptualize study abroad experience using place because it is through “intense engagement with the specifics and dynamics of *local places* that students can come to realize the specificity and interconnectedness of *all places*” (Jakubiak & Mellom, 2015 p. 101). This proved equally true in thinking about place as text, holding the vast stories of the past and bridging them to the present.

Overview of Course

A study abroad course for undergraduate students, with a focus on students in the Honors College, called WAR!, was offered in May-June 2019. Grounded primarily in WWI, the course examined the social dimensions of war, with specific emphasis on the transformation of medical professions and knowledge during periods of war. We created a context juxtaposing history,

contemporary places, and texts, which facilitated students' ability to define and articulate disorienting dilemmas.

Students and faculty spent three weeks in England and France. Three pre-session meetings during the spring semester introduced students to broad topics surrounding nursing and rehabilitation as well as social disruption during WWI through the use of art, literature and memoir. The students were asked to read *The Great War and Modern Memory* by Paul Fussell, *World War One British Poets*, and another book of their choice in preparation for the trip. While abroad, the class visited museums, archives, memorials, cemeteries, and battlefields with local guides who were experts in medical history, war, literature, and poetry. As part of the course, students kept a journal in the format of their choosing during the time in England and France. Shortly after returning to the United States, the students were asked to use their journals and experiences to write a reflective essay. In subsequent weeks, the students completed a project that could be a creative piece or an academic essay. These projects varied from an essay on the art of WWI, to a written summary of one student's attempt to live off WWI food rations, to building a coffin with an associated piece of poetry.

Methods

A descriptive qualitative design was used based on Framework Analysis, as explained in the third sub-section below. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained through the University of Wyoming.

Sampling and Participants

Convenience sampling was used. At the end of a study abroad course, students were asked if they were willing to participate in the study. Students signed a consent form. If a student did not consent to participate, their course assignments were not included in the study, nor did they participate in the focus group or complete the questionnaire.

Fourteen undergraduate students participated in the course. Eleven of the 14 participated in the focus groups and gave permission to use their course assignments. Three of the 11 had participated in a study abroad course prior to Summer 2019, although nine of the 11 had travelled outside of the US, either with family, a high school trip or a medical mission. There were four rising sophomores, five juniors, and two seniors. Student majors were as follows: five

nursing, two physiology, one chemistry, one chemical engineering, one kinesiology, and one art history. All of the students were female and three of the 11 were first generation college students. Eight of the students were Caucasian, one Latina, and two identified as multi-ethnic. Four of the 11 spoke another language.

Data Collection

Students were asked to allow faculty to use their course assignments, specifically their reflection papers, for analysis of student outcomes. Faculty journals with reflective notes written during the study abroad course were also used in the project. In addition, students completed a demographic and background questionnaire and participated in one of three focus groups held in Fall 2019 to reflect upon their participation in the course and the impact of the course on their learning. The focus groups lasted between 34 and 63 minutes and were attended by one to six students. The students were asked to describe experiences during the course that were disorienting, the processes they used for reflection, assumptions that were challenged, and the learning they achieved during the course. They were also asked about how the course had impacted their interest in seeking out new and different experiences and their comfort with disorienting experiences. Finally, they were asked about how the course influenced their thinking about personal, academic, and professional goals and plans.

Data Analysis

Framework Analysis was used to guide the qualitative data analysis. Framework Analysis, which is not a research paradigm such as ethnography, is a relatively new approach to analysis of qualitative data and is increasingly being used in health-related studies (Ward et al., 2013). Framework Analysis provides a clearly defined analytic process and provides a pragmatic approach for “real-world researchers,” according to Ward et al. This investigation involved an actual study abroad course with the major focus on the actual teaching of the course. The pragmatic approach aligns well with this real-world study abroad experience.

There are five stages to Framework Analysis:

1. Familiarization through immersion in the data,

2. Developing a theoretical framework by identifying recurrent and important themes,
3. Indexing and pilot charting,
4. Summarizing data in analytic framework; and
5. Synthesizing data, mapping, and interpreting (Ward et al., 2013, pp. 2426-2428).

First, two of the authors (Burman and Jarman) began the analysis by individually immersing themselves in the data by reading and reviewing each of the student essays, the focus group transcripts, and their faculty journals. The two authors then highlighted key phrases and words. These were next condensed into their individual initial themes. In the second stage, the two aforementioned authors compared common themes which were generally similar between them. Table (1) provides a summary of these initial themes and subthemes. Third, these themes were indexed with relevant and supporting quotes from the transcripts and essays. Charts were created that included the themes and sub-themes along with supporting study. When there was agreement between these two researchers, the themes and charts were provided to two other researchers (“author” and “author”) with experience in qualitative research and/or global studies. Each provided their individual response to the initial themes and sub-themes based on their review of the focus groups and student essays. Fourth, based on the feedback from the two experts, the other two authors reworked the themes. Moreover, the feedback emphasized the need to separate the themes from underlying learning process based on transformative learning (See Figure). Finally, another immersion in the data was conducted to ensure that the themes and sub-themes were consistent with the data.

Theme	Sub-theme
Experiential Learning	Disorienting experiences including juxtapositions and paradoxes Deepening learning and personal connection to history Learning through primary sources, e.g., personal narratives
Reflection and Dialogue	Deepening historical understanding Process, e.g., dialogue, journaling
Outcomes	History as teacher Learning to learn Troubling US-centric global-mindedness Personal transformation

TABLE (1): INITIAL THEMES AND SUB-THEMES FROM STAGE 2

Findings: The Journey

The study abroad course led to a complex journey for students (see Figure). Students experienced a journey of intense emotion (Theme I) and meaning making (Theme II) sparking profound developmental changes (Theme III).

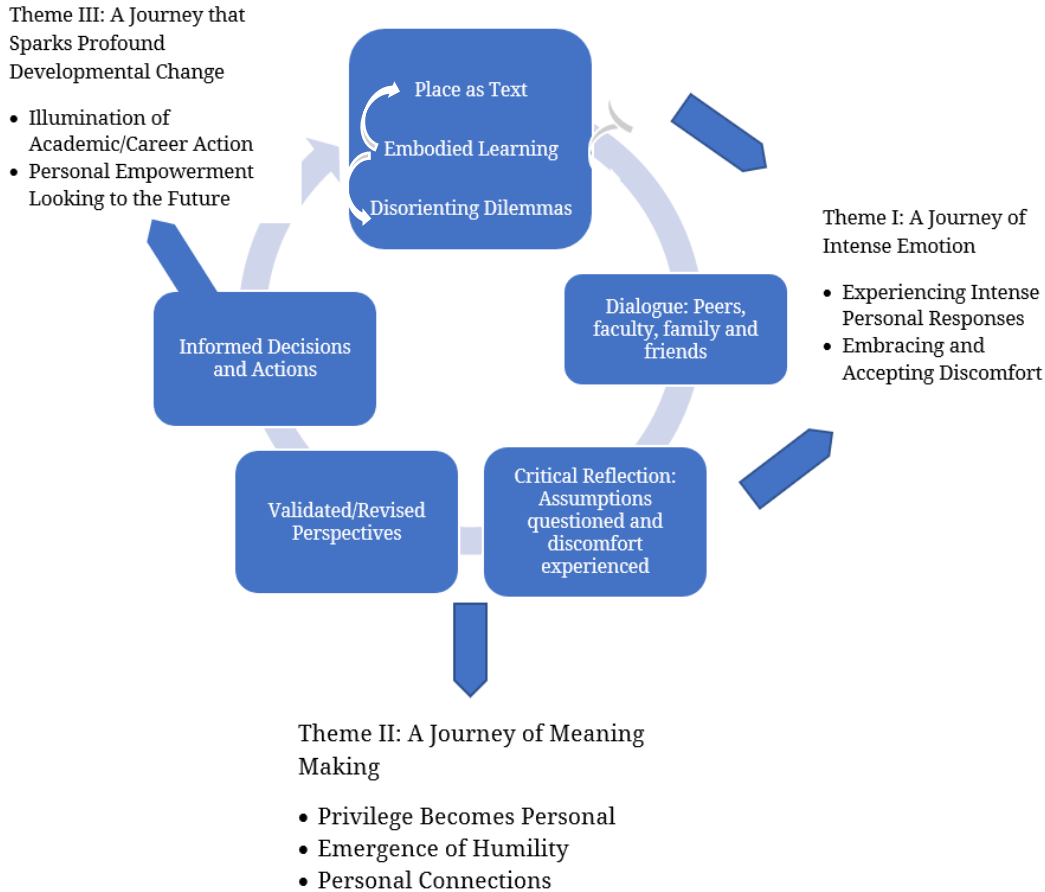


FIGURE (1): THE STUDY BROAD JOURNEY TO DEVELOPMENTAL CHANGE (ADAPTED FROM MEZIRROW ET AL., 2009)

Theme I: A Journey of Intense Emotion

Two sub-themes emerged illustrating the intense emotional journey that the students undertook during the course: experiencing intense personal responses and embracing and accepting discomfort.

Experiencing Intense Personal Responses

As students reflected upon their learning processes, nearly all described how the emotional intensity of visiting sites such as memorials, museums,

archives, and landmarks deepened their understanding of history. Several students recalled the Imperial War Museum exhibit on World War II and the Holocaust, specifically as providing a stirring, troubling connection to contemporary political resurgences in nationalism. On the day of the visit, British survivors of WWII were talking to museum visitors about childhood memories of the war years, and these stories of rationing, bombings, and everyday survival were viscerally moving. The WWII exhibit featured video interviews of several Holocaust survivors and documented the years leading up to Hitler's rise to the end of the war. As one student observed, seeing documentation of the everyday cruelty and sudden demonization of Jewish friends and neighbors in the early years of Hitler's reign made her more cognizant of the danger of "nationalism, isolationism," and similar elements "present in our current political climate." One student was overcome with "extreme sadness" as she revisited this history, especially the treatment of Jewish people in ghettos: "I felt the need to read everything...out of respect of these millions of people who died in horrible ways and in deplorable conditions." Another student described feeling this familiar history much more viscerally within the excruciatingly detailed, multi-media exhibit. She explained, "There were times when I was so overwhelmed, I had to sit down and cry, because that was the only way I could begin to reorient myself in the moment." Like her peer, she felt an obligation to digest the pain, suffering, and death, out of respect for survivors and those who perished.

As instructors, we encouraged students to embrace "place as text," and students were struck by the emotional power of being in the places where massive historical events happened, or to walk on the streets, visit the buildings, memorials, and spaces marked by the figures and histories we were studying. Our visit to a former workhouse in Leeds, for example, had an intense emotional impact on everyone in our group. One student remarked:

No amount of reading could have prepared me for actually walking the streets along where the workhouse was located and realizing how massive of a building complex it was, seeing how tiny the houses were...it was oppressive in a way I have never felt before.

Echoing this theme, another student explained, "I had read countless textbooks and fictional writing, watched movies, and sat through many lectures. However, all of those lessons learned went right out the window once I was atop the soil where it all happened." Visiting the D-Day battlefield sites and numerous WWI

graveyards and memorials along the Somme elicited deep feelings and reflection for students. For many of them, the WWI poetry took on new life; they began to understand the unique ability of art or poetry to capture the immensity of loss.

Several days in France were spent visiting gravesites and memorials where we saw remnants of trenches and were able to envision the front lines, or “no man’s land,” as we gazed across incongruously beautiful fields of grasses and farmland. While some wondered aloud how many cemeteries we were going to visit, this protracted attention to gravesites and memorials ultimately made WWI and the people involved more intimate and real to them. They were haunted by a need to make meaning out of so much death. As one student explained, reading the numbers did not compare “to seeing waves of gravestones and realizing how much death is concentrated in that soil.” Further, she explained, “The personal experience of standing in the middle of death, mass death, and no chance for family to say goodbye was more than disorienting—it was staggering.” Other students echoed this intensity of emotion as they visited these sites: “Though I didn’t know any of the people whose graves I saw, I wept”; “I felt as though I was being buried by a lingering grief with each [cemetery] we visited. It left me heart-sick.” Students were struck by the immensity of the loss, by thousands of graves, by tens of thousands of names inscribed to memorialize those soldiers never found.

As they processed the sheer numbers, many focused on individual stories to ground themselves in the real lives lost. This movement from immensity to individual shone through in several written reflections after the trip. As one student explained:

War will always be war...Lives will always be on the line, families will always be disrupted, and someone will always need help. I am haunted with the question of what would I do. I don’t have a clear answer, but ... I am certain I would do what I had to, [which would include being forced to] “stand in the rubble and personally experience the loss and heartache” [of war].

Embracing and Accepting Discomfort

A key element of the emotional intensity and emotional learning was embracing and accepting discomfort as part of the process. Students identified many site visits as disorienting, but ultimately, these experiences deepened

their understanding. One student explained: “Throughout the... course, I encountered many feelings of disorientation. The disorientation challenged me to new ideas, altered my perspective of the world and of war, and ultimately expanded my knowledge of war and of myself.” Several students reflected on the process of integrating discomfort as they went through the travel experience. One student made a point of reading individual inscriptions on gravestones and to try to put herself “in the shoes of those living during the wars.” Focusing on individual stories allowed her to ground herself within the juxtaposition between the beauty and “peace of Northern France in contrast to the chaos of the fighting that happened there” a hundred years earlier.

As mentioned above, several students engaged with their discomfort by taking responsibility to digest as many individual stories and names as possible. As one student remarked, “It was the individual stories that started to impact me more and more as the trip continued.” She found the sheer numbers overwhelming, but individual stories allowed her to find meaning in the discomfort of loss. Ultimately, the pain and discomfort in these histories were important because the emotion stayed with students, forcing them to make meaning for themselves. On this journey, the past became more than a story, but a living, breathing force. As one student proclaimed, “history should be used as a method of self-reflection and a constant reminder to learn from our past mistakes as well as a constant question of how we can do things better this time around.”

Theme II: A Journey of Meaning Making

Connected to the emotional intensity discussed above, the following subthemes emerged for students as they engaged in a process of meaning making from the experience: a more personal understanding of privilege; an appreciation of humility in learning; and applying insights to a renewed engagement with history, global issues, and interpersonal relationships.

Privilege Becomes Personal with Emergence of Humility

During the trip and in reflections afterward, students articulated a more nuanced sense of privilege. The visit to the workhouse graphically demonstrated how economic forces pushed many young men to go to war to escape “the vicious cycle of poverty, sickness, and death.” Reflecting on these insights, one student stated, “it made me aware of my own privileges in life, that I often don’t even think of as privileges.” Similarly, as another student reflected

upon what she learned about soldiers' lives, she became more "aware of myself and the privilege that I do have here...it [has] just changed my perspective, I guess, on how I view my own life." Recognition of privilege seemed deeply connected to a sense of humility, both in relation to global history and current events, and in relation to empathy and compassion for others. Many students were humbled by the courage, bravery, and practical resilience of soldiers, nurses, and civilians involved in the war effort.

As these stories became more real to them, they began to wonder how they would have responded in similar circumstances. One student pondered, "Throughout this entire trip, the major thought that always came back to my mind was what would my role be? What would I do? [...] Would I be able to leave my family to fight or serve in a foreign country? [...] Would I be prepared to help those who needed me the most?" Students had a much more tangible understanding of the sacrifices people made, or were forced to make, and several wondered if they would make those choices, or how they would cope with such loss. As one student explained, "What was two to three hours of discomfort for me when compared to the proof of the horrors they had suffered through?" Students were also humbled by the vast scope of human drama within the world wars. One student described how her viewpoint expanded by "walking back" into history, but that she also felt "so small in comparison to... the past world... I am one little piece to the puzzle of the world and its history."

In focus group discussions when students had been home for a few months, several students articulated that being able to take advantage of this study abroad opportunity was in itself a privilege, and this insight allowed them to consider other people's perspectives with more patience and compassion. One student explained that she has become more patient with people who have views that are less informed because she realizes "not everyone has had the opportunity to have... this exposure... so it makes me be a little bit less quick to anger when people have prejudices or biases that I don't agree with." Another student talked about having more patience as well, and even more willingness to have challenging conversations with people in hopes of understanding their perspective as well as sharing her own. As she explained, instead of shying away from conversations with people she thought were being insensitive or even rude, "Now I'm like, why do you think that? Let's talk about what you're feeling." Another student echoed this change in perspective: "I found myself being a much more patient person... I've been making an effort to... learn about the

complete other side of the story for people with opinions or just situations that I don't understand." Ultimately, their recognition of privilege allowed an openness to learn, not only from more travel, but from people and situations in their lives at home.

Personal Connections

The meaning making process of this journey also entailed a renewed and transformed appreciation of history and investment in understanding national and global issues going forward. One student explained, "I cannot deny the deep impact this trip had on my life... these experiences truly changed my way of thinking and gave me a new appreciation of war and life itself." Many students were touched by individual stories of nurses, soldiers, and others caught up in World War I, and they realized many of them were young adults like they were, and they were struck by imagining what they would all do if they and their peers were faced with such a world-wide conflict. As one student remarked, they were "everyday people" caught up in extraordinary circumstances, and many of them ended up being "heroes" or "legends." One student, who had served in the army, gained a deeper appreciation for the values impressed upon her during her training—that they were willingly volunteering to surrender some freedoms, even their lives, in the service of the country. When she visited the gravesites of so many soldiers in France, she processed the experience through that lens: "These soldiers fulfilled the ultimate level of obligation... to their country... While it was a horrific loss of life, I was struck with a sense of respect for their honor rather than grief."

As students reflected, there was an ongoing movement from the personal to the larger collective and back again. Notably, many of them embraced these deep personal insights with a commitment to take advantage of more learning opportunities. Describing a sentiment shared by many students, one explained that the trip "made me more aware of current events, and not just restricting it to the U.S., and really trying to pay attention to what's going on in the rest of the world." One of our guides often told us to see the "past as a mirror" into the present, which struck many students, so as they talked about history, they made connections to their personal lives in the context of our current socio-political context. This became a key take-away for many students, one of whom summed it up this way: "I hope that this deeper understanding I received of the past... will allow me to recognize when history repeats itself and help me to make a difference in not repeating the mistakes of the past... [T]his will happen not only

from what I learned but from the underlying need I have to question things and to try to make connections between different events,” from history and our current era.

Theme III: A Journey that Sparks Profound Development Change

The course sparked a journey that impacted student development and resulted in change through personal empowerment and illumination of academic and career goals.

Illumination of Academic and Career Action

For some of the students the course illuminated their academic and/or professional interests. One student switched from pre-pharmacy to pre-medicine wanting more patient interaction. As she explained, “... after going through this course, it just showed me that my heart really is ... more on the medicinal side, in the human interaction side.” A nursing student felt the course reaffirmed her decision as well: “This experience allowed me to refocus on what it means to be a nurse and the importance of being capable of providing quality care, especially considering the reputations of nurses throughout time,” which has not always been positive. Another felt the course gave her confidence about her career choice: “I want to go into physical therapy and I knew that and it’s not so much that it’s changed what I want to do with my career, but ... there’s not one in [in the state], so I’m going to have to go outside of the state somewhere, and I’ve ... always known that I want to go ... somewhere kind of further away and try something new and be in a new place ... [G]oing on this trip and being able to adapt to a new place and a new city has kind of just increased my confidence in myself to know I’ll be able to do something like that and enjoy it.”

For others, the course altered their commitment and approach to learning. One student wrote in her reflection paper, “this tiny bit of knowledge, this small loss of naivety will forever effect how I approach the study of history, both in my personal life and my academic and professional career.” Several others took away from the course a renewed obligation to “bear witness to things that should never be forgotten.” Another student put it this way, “Now it is simply my responsibility to take what I learned from this one memorial (the Canadian war memorial on Vimy Ridge) and from this entire course to educate the future generations about the most inhumane conflict humanity can participate in, war.”

Personal Empowerment and Looking to the Future

A key part of the developmental change process is personal empowerment and being able to look to the future. One student talked about upcoming vacations with her family emphasizing that she still wants to be sure to have learning as a part of her travel. Another echoed this saying, “everywhere I go I’m going to be expecting to learn as much.” Students also noted that they were more attentive to national and global events, especially those that could lead to war. One student wrote about how learning about war had made her realize their impact today: “This [the course] helped me realize how recent World War 1 and World War II are and how much that impacts our culture.” For some it brought war home literally with one student realizing that “most of my brothers would probably end up going (if there was war now)... my boyfriend... I don’t want that to happen to the people I love.” Students also made connections between the past and the present.

One student wrote, “I started to feel an eerie resemblance to American’s recent political events”. Another felt “disappointed about our current... situation politically and environmentally.... But also just recognizing the really amazing things that people did and fought for... that’s part of my heritage, too.” Referring to a visit to Kew Gardens and our class discussions about the role of plants in historical conflicts and Empire, another student wrote, “opium, although it had positive medical value, was sold to the Chinese with the intent to addict them ... so that there could be a profitable market.” The student connected this to tobacco and began asking important questions about profit and public health: “I began to understand the extent in which countries, governments, and corporations are capable of using vulnerable populations, the relationship suddenly became less confusing and more disheartening.”

Students also expressed a much greater appreciation of the broad sweep of history and their connection to it, exemplified by this student who wrote, “I suddenly realized every event in time, every building, every street is related and connected in some way through history. While walking the streets of London with the feeling I was walking back in history, my viewpoint expanded. I personally felt so small in comparison to the present world today, but especially the past world as well. Simple, I am one little piece to the puzzle of the world and its history.” Another student put it this way, “at first I just saw these as memorials to the fallen. I began to see them as a reminder of the resilience of the communities and lessons to be learned. The memorials stand as a

commemoration of the dead and missing soldiers and their bravery in the field, but also stand as a reminder of how people move on after such massive loss. They show that people learn to move on and live with their grief, but the loss should still be remembered so we, as a society, can learn to avoid deadly situations like these.”

Discussion: The Learning Process

In order for students to experience the study abroad journey, the teaching and learning process is critical. Transformative and place-based/place as text learning theories were foundational in course development; however, in the iterative data analysis process, we found that embodied learning theory was a bridge to transformative and place as text learning. In this section, we discuss the overall teaching and learning process that undergirded the student study abroad journey, highlighting the underlying theories and student perspectives that reinforced transformative, place as text and embodied learning process.

Overall, learning became a whole-body experience, with students referring to visceral sensations. These bodily sensations were stimulated by specific places visited during the course. Together, the places visited and the bodily sensations evoked disorientation and discomfort, which in turn prompted a transformative learning process. Frequent formal and informal dialogue with family, friends, faculty, classmates, and others led to critical reflection in which the students questioned their assumptions and thought about the discomfort they experienced during and after the course. In the end, students validated and/or revised their perspective which led to informed decisions and actions.

Place as Text, Embodied Learning and Disorientating Dilemmas

Students repeatedly talked about how being in place, encountering “the richly contextual array of diverse, sensory experiences” as Edmonds (2010) puts it, was instrumental to their learning. One student talked about place this way:

... all those lessons learned over the years went right out the window once I was atop the soil where it all happened. Walking along the Somme battlefield that now consists of agriculture fields and a number of cemeteries really resonated the enormity of WWI for me. The Great War was always sort of glazed over in school, mostly due to the fact that the United States was not as involved in WWI. I was aware of the first world

war, but I never truly felt the intensity and realness of it all until the Somme. This rather small battlefield was home to around a million casualties... One cannot get those sort of learning experiences in a classroom.

Taking the notion of place as step further, this student directly connected place and text: "It's almost incomprehensible until you are standing there in person. Words and photos do no justice to the actual experience of being there. It becomes a physical ache that makes you understand why war poetry and war art are a thing."

However, place as text was closely linked to embodied learning with physical sites stimulating bodily sensations integral to learning. Although embodied learning was not used to guide development of the course, it was a key finding in the study. The human brain is embodied which is critical to understanding how brains function and, in addition, how students ultimately learn. Learning has been seen as a mental/cognitive process; however, embodied learning theories assert that the sensorimotor system is fundamental to learning (Sullivan, 2018). As Taylor and Marienau (2016, p. 36) contend:

Between perception and knowing is the embodied brain busily constructing what we eventually recognize as thought – that is, meaning we are aware of and can attempt to articulate. What we call thinking, therefore, is just the final step in a long process of knowing that goes on within the body – the body-brain – before we can discover that we know something. Learning is a whole-body experience.

Sensorimotor stimuli arise from the outside world through the ears, eyes, skin, nose, tongue, and movement (Macedonia, 2019).

Highlighting the nature of embodied learning, one student wrote in her reflective essay that, "... when we stood on Omaha Beach and I looked up the hill and imagined what it must have felt like to run through gunfire and up the hill to safety or [to continue] fighting, it was really unfathomable and I felt sick to my stomach." Another wrote about her heart aching saying, "I was overcome with emotion. I could not imagine what it would have been like to be a US soldier landing on Omaha [Beach]... Walking into the American cemetery, after being on the beach, having a glimpse of what it was like for those that did not make it out, was utterly heart wrenching." Another wrote about feeling numb as she thought about her experiences: "While we were there looking at the numerous

graves and memorials, several of the other students understandably began getting emotional and crying at seeing the sacrifice that was made by so many. I was a bit surprised by the fact that I could feel myself completely shut down and actually become a bit numb.” She later attributed this to her previous military experience and the training to focus on honor not on grief.

Finally, another described a physical feeling of silence as she walked through a military cemetery:

It was haunting. The silence that took over my body as I stood under the draping violet Wisteria. Staring out at row after row of cold white headstones, I tried to listen to Peter [our guide] talk about the Bayeux Cemetery and the 4,648 men who found their peace under the grass before me. I tried to take notes so I could reflect on the statistics and numbers that were given to us. I tried to do anything that would break the silence that flooded my body. But I couldn't. How can you break a silence so deafening you can't hear yourself breathe?

The intensity of bodily sensations—which have been documented in other study abroad courses (Kirshnan et al., 2016)—were not only focused on grief, mourning, and death. Students also noted how these intense emotions deepened their learning, allowing them to find hope in the midst of loss and to better cherish the shared experience with each other. One student pointed to the simultaneous sense of despair and hope. From reading and visiting these sites, she found that “stories of bravery and resilience seemed to go hand in hand with despair and loss.” Another was struck by German soldier's gravestones in the Somme cemeteries, which indicated acts of decency within such a vast landscape of death. It was crucial, as well, for students to have time on their own to process what we had learned each day, and to simply engage with contemporary local experiences. Being able to explore beyond the class helped them “connect to the culture of where we were...compared to how it would have been” in the past. Time together in the evenings also allowed them to take a break from thinking about war and conflict, and simply enjoy being in England and France. This group was very inclusive, so their outings allowed them to build relationships and have fun—which carried over into our class interactions and group sessions, allowing us all to share more with one another.

As described in transformative learning theory, disorienting dilemmas are a key to initiating learning. For the study abroad students, place as text and

profound embodied experiences led to discomfort and disorientation on the part of the students. One student simply said, “I feel that my thoughts are sort of all over the place,” which captures essence of disorientation. Typical of this discomfort, one student was deeply distressed by the Holocaust exhibit at the Imperial War Museum in London. She said:

I definitely felt that way on the Holocaust exhibit at the Imperial War Museum, because you know, we talk about after Hitler came to power but not a lot about what kind of led to that rise, and his background in that in the states. And so reading about that, and kind of seeing ... the nationalism, isolationism and some things that are kind of present in our current political climate. That was really jarring to me.

Students also described being distressed as we toured Leeds and visited a low-income neighborhood near a now closed workhouse. One student said, “The ‘day in the life’ (name of the tour) because it was very uncomfortable being in that neighborhood... being stared at.” Finally, one student summarized the disorientation she felt this way:

I knew when I signed up for this class abroad that some of the things I would learn about and come face to face with would be challenging, both on a mental and emotional level. However, I have loved history since grade school, and World War I and II have held particular interest for me. My sister and best friend are both nurses, so medical talk is something I am used to, and consider myself fairly immune to discussion of even the most horrific medical procedures. These few facts led me to believe that while the trip would be challenging, I was fairly well equipped to handle anything that might come up, despite the fact that I am not in the medical field at all, like the rest of my classmates are. I was slightly mistaken in this belief.

Dialogue: Peers, Faculty, Family and Friends

Also consistent with transformative learning theory, students engaged in dialogue with each other and the faculty in the course, but surprisingly one of the most important types of dialogue was with family, both while abroad via email, text, and social media and after the students returned home. This finding is consistent with other studies that have found that students stay in close contact with friends and family abroad using technology (Coleman & Chafer, 2010), and although concerning to some faculty, this study suggests this type of

contact can be an important part of critical reflection. One student called her family at the end of each day specifically to talk through what she had experienced. Another student said:

I have a very large, very inquisitive family, and so I have to tell them all everything about it. And so every time I have to ... rehash it all ... getting to do that with my family has kind of made me appreciate it more.

A third student talked about coming home:

[L]ike all my family talked about was the uncomfortable things that they didn't want to talk to me about before. Like I made sure that like anything I wanted to know that we talked about it at the dinner table. I didn't care if it was uncomfortable, but ... just 'cause I know how important it is to stay informed ... and so that was like how I processed it and how like I had those conversations that I felt like I needed to have to like, come to some sort of conclusion.

A fourth student said that immediately upon landing in the United States:

... [I] visited my twin brother... and he LOVES studying war, And so I got to go back, and we've been like talking about ... World War II and World War I and the Vietnam War and how they are so connected and all of the terrible things are happening just like learning more from each other.

But she also talked to a veteran:

I work at an assisted living facility, and I was talking with one of my residents who served in the Vietnam War, and we were talking about World War II and Normandy ..., and it was really cool to get to hear it from like, you know a veteran—not of the same war, but like a veteran nonetheless, and so that was really interesting to get to ... connect with people on a different level that I would never be able to connect with.

Critical Reflection

Critical reflection is foundational to transformative learning and use of reflection was built into the course with regular student debriefing sessions, student journals and the reflective papers. We probed specifically about students' experiences with reflection in the focus groups. Consistent with other studies, critical reflection was key to student learning (Bell et al., 2017; Cotton & Thompson, 2017; Dorsett et al., 2019). Edmonds (2010) talks about reflection as

crucial to self-recognition, as a process through which students become aware of their own biases and uncover deeper meaning from intense, sometimes jarring, embodied experiences.

One student emphasized the importance of working through the discomfort of situations as an important take-away from reflecting on the study abroad course: "I think now I'm more willing to embrace it and stick through the uncomfortableness to get to the end... take in the bigger picture once I get to my social comfort zone." One student noted the role of journaling and the paper in her critical reflection:

...journaling was good for me because it pushed me out of my comfort zone.... But the reflective paper really helped me as well because it helped me get my thoughts out on a paper and just think [and] feel ... where I was disoriented and how that made me grow as a student and learner.

One student felt that it was important that time in the evening was unstructured, saying:

...we were taking in a lot and it (the learning experience) was mentally draining, so I feel like if we were supposed to go back to the hotel and we were supposed to sit there and journal and talk about it and then do these assignments and reflection right then and there, I think it would have been too much... So I think having that time off at night allowed us to take a break and step back and then subconsciously process everything."

One student acknowledged that although she had spent time critically thinking about a man killed in one of the wars, she was not sure she would fully understand war. She wrote, "I would like to believe that Curtis' family was eventually able to understand... I continue to hope that someday I will understand." In a sense, she points to the spiral, never-ending process of reflection; she has worked to gain one level of understanding that will invite further contemplation and deeper learning in the future.

Informed Decisions and Actions

Through their critical reflection, students validated and/or revised their assumptions and perspectives about war and other aspects of the course similar to the transformative processes outlined by Moorefield (2018) and Morgan (2019). Ultimately, these revised/validated perspectives lead to action on the part

of the students. One student struggled with the language in France, despite being bilingual in English and Spanish. She wrote, "I was ready to leave and go anywhere that spoke a language that I understood. Finally, going back home helped me truly realize what happened and how easily I took communication for granted." The course forced her to resist her impulse to leave, and her committed reflection on her intense discomfort allowed her to integrate a more meaningful insight from the experience.

A nursing student wrote that the course experience had challenged her to rethink what she thought about nurses:

Throughout our time learning about nurses throughout history, I really struggled to understand how people, nurses especially, were capable of not caring about their patients enough to show up to work drunk. However, as we learned about other nurses like Florence Nightingale, I slowly was able to reorient myself and take a look at how far nursing has advanced over time.

Another student wrote about how her perception of war had changed: "War is ...usually seen as an event of mass destruction and simply a major loss of lives, which it is, but it is also something that brings a country together..." As these students processed broader knowledge about the history of nursing and the world wars, they gained tools for critically embracing nuances, contradictions, and troubling elements of history in ways that enrich and inform their engagement with new learning opportunities.

In the end, as discussed in the description of the Journey and as noted in other studies (DeGraaf et al., 2013; Dorsett et al., 2019), students were beginning to see how the learning process informed their decisions and action. For one student the course reaffirmed her decision to become a nurse noting, "I think a lot of this is still happening today which is part of the reason I'm excited to be a nurse but also part of the reason I feel a faint sense of unease knowing there will always be diseases and wounds we don't know how to properly treat. In other words, our job will never be done." She also realized that she needed to stand up for what is right: "because all we need to do to make a difference is to stand up for what's right and oppose what is not." This student internalized a sense of ethical humility for the profession she is pursuing, paired with a firm commitment to take action, if needed, against injustice or harm.

Implications for Educators

This course found that embodied, place as text, transformational learning is really an interconnected process, a spiral, and a scaffolding for ongoing critical engagement. In conclusion, study findings reveal the complexity of learning that results from strategic use of theoretical frameworks. Moreover, findings contribute to a deeper understanding of these complexities inherent in transformative learning to include embodied learning as a bridge to text in place and disorienting dilemmas. As educators, we hold the privilege of creating conditions that support and enrich students not only cognitively, but also emotionally in their educational journey.

Four implications for educators are offered that are consistent with study findings and theoretical underpinnings: 1) embrace a holistic approach to teaching and learning, 2) foster an awareness of the study-abroad learning environment, 3) develop authentic relationships with and among students, and 4) role model critical thought. Note that these implications require intentionality on the part of the educator. A holistic approach to teaching and learning entails embracing embodied knowing (e.g., senses, and emotions and feelings) (Taylor & Marienau, 2016). Fostering an awareness for the contextual learning environment enriches an appreciation for socio-cultural influences (Taylor, 2009). Developing authentic relationships (Cranton, 2006; Taylor, 2009) and role modeling critical thought (Brookfield, 2012) offer the support and guidance necessary for a transformative experience. Authenticity entails building trusting relationships that allows for questioning self and others, and for honest, open, and substantive dialogue (Taylor, 2009). Moreover, authentic relationships offer a means for critical self-reflection to thrive without judgment and is consistent with the educators' goal of facilitating the growth and development of learners. Lastly, educators can role model critical thought and the difficult work of identifying assumptions through the demonstration of humble, yet questioning dialogue with another educator (Brookfield, 2012).

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