



STUDY ABROAD  
CONFERENCE

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# Transformational Learning: Re- envisioning the Impact of International Study Abroad Programs

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A stylized graphic for the Paris 2023 logo, featuring a white 'A' shape with various colored horizontal bars (orange, green, blue, yellow) and curved lines (orange, blue) crossing it.

PARIS 20  
23

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# Table Introductions

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Please introduce yourself and your organization to the people at your table. Next, discuss the following questions while we check in with the tables.

- What is your interest in study abroad?
- What do you want to get out of the presentation?

# What We Hope to Share with You Today

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- An understanding of what prompted us to look at the concept of Transformational Experiences in Study Abroad.
- Information on our context- our university setting and components of our study abroad program.
- A definition of Transformative Learning and our findings on student's Transformative Experiences.
- An opportunity to discuss and share your thoughts on Transformative experiences in study abroad.
- A brief comparison of Transformative Experiences in two countries

# A Study Abroad Program

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- Background

- California State University, San Bernardino School of Social Work Study Abroad Program

- The Vision

- To offer students an opportunity to travel internationally and immerse themselves in a country's culture outside of the United States



## Two Countries—Two Immersions (Panama & Italy)

# Planning and Development



Planning



Course  
Development &  
Focus



Student  
Preparation

# Planning

Visited the country: Panama or Italy

Established relationships: local universities and discipline specific organizations

Developed 12-day immersive experience

Created an agenda: balance cultural experiences and discipline specific exposure

Developed a 10-week course



# Course Development & Focus



Pre-trip course content

In-Person Sessions

Asynchronous Sessions

Course Assignments



# Student Preparation



Information Sessions

Course Application

Administrative tasks



## Frames of Reference

- Mezirow's learning theory (1978, 1991, 2008) posits that people give meaning to new experiences using their frames or reference, i.e., their accumulated ideas, concepts, values, emotions, & conditioned responses that guide their behavior.
- People tend to reject ideas that do not align with their frames of reference as they may be viewed as strange, unrelated, or misinformed.
- However, some circumstances can alter people's frames of references by targeting their habits and points of view leading to transformation.



# Transformative Learning Discussion

- What types of transformation have you seen in study abroad students?
- What do you believe led to this transformation?
- How did you make this happen?

# Experiences With Greatest Transformational Impact

Professional Experience  
Personal Experience  
Cultural Experience  
Differences in Systems



# Professional Experience

## Meeting with Organizations

- Visit with Professional Organization and listened to inspiring presentations.

## Community Professionals

- Connection with professionals in the community  
Open to share their day-to-day experience

## Fellow Students

- Visited with fellow students observing their passion for learning





# Personal Experience

## Outside of their comfort zone

- Obstacles they overcame (language, new environment and change in roles) (vocal student felt frustrated that she could not speak the language)

## Learned about themselves

- Eye opening experience
- Change their perspectives
- Ability to overcome

## Gratitude

- Grateful for the experience
- Not take things for granted

# Cultural Experience



## Language Barrier

- Not understanding the language motivated student to commit to learning the language
- Humbling

## Appreciation

- Appreciation from learning about a different culture
- The beauty of the culture and the country

## Cultural Connection

- Religious similarities

# Differences in Systems

## University Systems

- Affordable Education

## Health Care Systems

- Free health care
- Expensive procedures free of charge

## Resources

- Available to EVERYONE regardless of income
- Doing much with less resources
- Foster care provided by community

## Professional Roles (seen differently)

- Social workers do not do Therapy





# Themes & Subthemes of Transformative Learning

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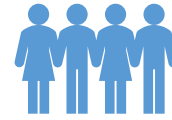
## Culture

Cultural Humility  
Cultural Connection  
Cultural Appreciation  
Religion



## Adaptation

Overcoming  
Challenges  
Role Change  
Fun



## Empowerment / Inspiration

Increased self-  
awareness / insight  
Systems Contrasts  
Eye-opening  
Experiences  
Gratitude  
Future Action



## Community

Professional Unity of  
Social Work  
Personal  
Relationships

# Culture

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“...experience was extremely humbling, reinforced my own values and served as a reminder to not forget where I come from, remember your roots.” (Cultural Humility)

# Culture

“This trip provided many insights on how culture affects not just the individual but the society as a whole, and when reaching out to others what needs to be taken into consideration.”  
(Cultural Appreciation)

# Adaptation

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“The largest limitation for me during the trip was the language barrier. It took a while to change my thought process from feeling like my voice wasn’t valued at the table to one of a learner and observer. Since leaving Panama, I have practiced my Spanish EVERYDAY.” (Overcoming Challenges)



# Adaptation

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“Throughout the trip, I struggled with my personal feelings toward unequal distribution of resources among countries, However, I hope to continue advocating for the marginalized and more vulnerable in order to reduce distribution among groups.” (Overcoming Challenges)



# Empowerment / Inspiration

“To me Panama was a place of growth. I truly feel different after returning home, I feel stronger, open, and mindful.”  
(Increased self-awareness / insight)

“As an American we grow up with the concept that we as a nation are the best. We grow up believing that our way is the best way...however...Panama has changed that by seeing the different agencies and how they run their successful program was really eye opening. Maybe the American way is not always the best way.” (Systems Contrasts)



# Empowerment / Inspiration



“Little did I know that it would shift my perspective both on a personal and professional level ...learned a new way of life, ...once in a lifetime experiences lie right outside my comfort zone, met new people who became good friends and fellow colleagues, now view everything through a different lens....To me, this trip taught me more about myself in 10 days than the last 25 years of my life. To me, this trip meant discovering that I really don't have any limits and that I can overcome any experience that might be scary and nerve racking.” (Eye-opening experiences)

# Community



“In our visit to La Asociación de Trabajadores Sociales de Panama, we got to listen to a beautiful speech given by the president of the association, she gave a strong and honest speech that highlighted her passion for social work and the importance of serving others. Her speech was perhaps the one thing that had the biggest impact on me as a social worker.” (Professional Unity)



# Differences in Transformative Experience

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- What differences are there, if any, in transformative experiences based on destination?
- Is transformation different for students when studying abroad in a well-resourced country versus less well-resourced country?
- In other words, should we focus our efforts on one type of destination over another to achieve maximum transformation?
- Please share your thoughts with a discussion partner for one minute!

# We Had a Near-ideal Natural Experiment

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- Two groups of similar students, same in-class teacher, similarly formatted study abroad experiences (as described earlier).
- One group went to Panama and one group went to Italy.
- What, if any, were the differences and similarities?

# Guess the quote

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- In the next slides there will be one comment from a Panama study abroad student and one from an Italy study abroad student.
- Guess which is which!

# Transformation in Professional Perspective

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- #6 “After studying abroad I can envision where I can fit macro perspectives of legislation or changing agency practice into my life.”
- #4 “This trip was life changing. My interest has shifted...interested in really learning about macro level social work and the impact it can have.”

# Inspiration and Community with Universities and Agencies Visited

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- #3 “Every social worker that we met was passionate and very inspiring as evidenced by their tone of voice and stories they shared.”
- #9 “The university and agency partners were so welcoming, and it was clear that their heart was in their work as they were giving us tours.”

# Overall Transformative Effects

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#7 “There was a feeling to everything, a special meaning that in some cases cannot be described. It was just a feeling that solidified why we were there.”

#3 “This experience is something I haven’t been able to stop talking about because of the huge impact it has made in my education and personal life.”

# Transformative Realizations in a Less-Resourced Versus a More Resourced Country

- #4 “This was my first of many big “wow” moments in [County] This experience allowed for me to see how a pretty confident super-power like the United States, can learn so much from a country that is smaller and would be considered having less than us but are doing work that we have not yet figured out.”
- #8 The environment, and the values that the staff from [Agency] expressed felt completely different to me than the foster care facility that I worked at...It made me realize the different approaches that the United States could be using when working with foster children.”

# So did the Destination Matter?

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- The more I looked, the fewer differences in the types of transformation in Panama versus Italy I saw.
- If a program is developed with diverse experiences related to discipline, prepares students of all backgrounds in advance, and builds in reflection during and after study abroad, transformation can occur in any destination!



# Key Elements of Transformation

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- Preparation and commitment are key regardless of destination (pre-trip course content).
- Active learning & participation required
- Cultural immersion (get students out of their bubble)
- Reflect, reflect, reflect!

# Active Reflection

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- How might you use any of the information presented today in your work?
- In what ways might you promote transformative learning as a feature of study abroad?

# Final Student Reflections

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- *“What I got from this trip was life changing! It surpassed any expectations I did have.”*
- Email from student three years after study abroad *“I want to reach out to both of you and let you know the trip was my favorite part of the MSW program. I thought you both did an excellent job of planning and chaperoning the trip. I enjoyed learning and exploring social work topics, especially learning about how social work is done in other countries.”*



# STUDY ABROAD CONFERENCE

November 9, 2023

An aerial photograph of Paris, France, centered on the Arc de Triomphe. The image is overlaid with a large, stylized white graphic of the Eiffel Tower, accented with orange, green, blue, and yellow horizontal bars. The text 'Thank You!' is centered in the middle of the image.

Thank You!

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