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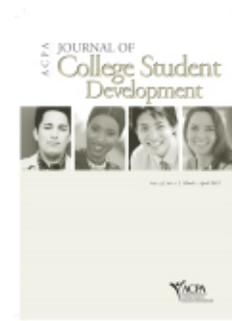
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Journal of College Student Development, Volume 53, Number 2, March/April
2012, pp. 201-220 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/csd.2012.0026



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The Meaning Students Make as Participants in Short-Term Immersion Programs

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The purpose of this article is to present the results of a multi-site case study designed to investigate students' experiences as participants in four week-long immersion programs (New York City, Peru, the Czech Republic, Chicago). Results highlight the significance of the context of the trips and specific characteristics of the trip (e.g., getting out of the bubble, boundary crossing, and personalizing), which served as the springboard for learning and meaning making. In particular, meaning making focused on developing new understandings of social issues, privilege, and stereotypes, reframing experiences upon participants' return, and shifting sense of purpose and career planning.

Over the past decade, two related but distinct trends have emerged in higher education. The first is the increased emphasis on internationalization, particularly through study abroad (e.g., American Council on Education, 2002; Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship, 2005; Stearns, 2009). Despite this push, very few U.S. students study abroad, and those who do are increasingly going for short periods of time (1 month or less); in fact, in 2007 and 2008, 56.3% of students who studied abroad did so through a short-term program (Institute for International Education, 2009). A second trend is the focus on education for citizenship

and civic leadership, particularly through service-learning (e.g., Campus Compact, 2007; Dey et al., 2009; Jacoby, 2009; Kezar, 2002; Musil, 2003). One increasingly popular form of service-learning is alternative breaks, week-long service-learning immersion trips addressing particular social issues (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004; Break Away, n.d.; Ivory, 1997). Alternative breaks are different from study abroad in many ways, but are similar in that both are characterized by immersion in a different culture (Parker & Dautoff, 2007).

Clear definitions of short-term immersion programs are difficult to locate and the research on these types of experiences is limited. However, common characteristics of those programs categorized as short-term immersion include brevity in duration (typically less than one month), intentionally designed learning experiences, and a possible service-learning component. Both alternative break programs and short-term study abroad fall under this definitional umbrella (e.g., Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Kehl & Morris, 2007; Keith, 2005; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005; Milofsky & Flack, 2005; Parker & Dautoff, 2007; Rhoads & Neurerer, 1998). Despite the trends toward increasing prevalence of these types of programs, and the accompanying research on the outcomes associated with them, little is known about the meaning students

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make of their experience and the nature of the immersion that shapes such potentially transformative learning outcomes, which serves as the purpose of this study.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Although the research on short-term immersion programs (either through alternative breaks or short-term study abroad) is limited, the research on study abroad and service-learning more generally points to a number of positive outcomes associated with these types of experiences. Outcomes associated with service-learning include academic gains (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Sax & Astin, 1997), increased knowledge of and tolerance for diversity (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Jones & Hill, 2001; Sax & Astin, 1997), personalizing “the other” (Neururer & Rhoads, 1998, p. 323), improved ability to work with others, including leadership and conflict resolution skills (Sax & Astin, 1997), increased knowledge about social issues related to the service-learning experience (Jones & Abes, 2003), and enhanced critical thinking and problem solving (Eyler & Giles, 1999). However, much of the service-learning outcomes research is based on campus-based programs in neighboring communities and is somewhat dated.

The study abroad literature points to a number of potential positive outcomes of cultural immersion experiences. For example, research documents that study abroad leads to increased students’ flexibility and openness (Black & Duhon, 2006), knowledge of cultural relativism (Sutton & Rubin, 2004), cultural adaptability (Williams, 2005), ability to personalize people from other cultures (Drews & Meyer, 1996), improved ability to recognize and appreciate cultural differences (Bates, 1997; Hutchins, 1996), increased student interest in learning more about global and cross-cultural issues and international affairs

(Carlson et al., 1990; Hadis, 2005; Hutchins, 1996), improved student understanding of global interdependence (Sutton & Rubin, 2004), and substantive knowledge of other cultures (Williams, 2005). This literature is ultimately about the impact of immersion in a different place and culture and most of it focuses on traditional, semester-long, academic exchange programs. Researchers are beginning to examine short-term study abroad programs, but many are at least one month long (e.g., Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004).

The outcomes associated with service-learning or study abroad participation for a month or semester are well-documented, yet it is difficult to know whether similar outcomes could be achieved through immersive experiences of a much shorter duration, namely one week. The purpose of this study was to investigate students’ experiences as participants in short-term, week-long immersion programs, their perceptions of outcomes associated with their immersion program participation, and the meaning students made of these experiences.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

One of the advantages of immersive experiences, whether through service-learning, study abroad, or both, is the potential for these experiences to be transformative in nature (e.g., Kiely, 2005). Mezirow (1997) defined transformative learning as fundamentally a question of how educational experiences (very broadly) change individuals’ frames of reference, or ways of looking at and interpreting the world. According to Mezirow (2000), frames of reference serve as “filters” through which we see the world; they provide “the context for making meaning” (p. 16). The process of changing these frames can be quite challenging. As Mezirow (1997) pointed

out, “we have a strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit our preconceptions, labeling those ideas as unworthy of consideration—aberrations, nonsense, irrelevant, weird, or mistaken” (p. 5). To transform frames of reference, the individual must experience something that does not make sense using current frames.

Although experience is critical in transformative learning, the particular type of experience matters a great deal. Parks Daloz (2000) specifically identified the importance of “a constructive engagement with otherness” (p. 110) in transformative learning, which resulted in the challenging of assumptions and crossing of boundaries. Mezirow (2000) argued that experience must be paired with critical reflection in order for transformative learning to occur. Mezirow further suggested that critical reflection enables students to become more aware of their own frames of reference. Belenky and Stanton (2000) expanded on the idea of critical reflection in transformative learning, claiming that critical reflection must happen in discourse with others. As they explained, “When our old ways of meaning making no longer suffice, it behooves us to engage with others in reflective discourse, assessing the assumptions and premises that guide our ways of constructing knowledge and revising those deemed inadequate” (p. 71).

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THROUGH SHORT-TERM IMMERSION

The limited research that does exist on short-term immersion programs, such as alternative break and international service-learning trips, points to the potential for these programs to promote transformative learning. For example, in a case study of 22 participants in a local alternative break program, McElhaney (1998) found that students reported a variety

of outcomes, including “the challenging of previously held beliefs, attitudes, and values; the broadening of career and educational options; issue knowledge . . . and learning new ways of learning” (pp. 110-111). Similarly, in a case study of 24 alternative break participants, Rhoads and Neururer (1998) noted that students reported discovering new abilities, increasing their self-confidence, and questioning their previous values and sense of responsibility. International service-learning, a similar experience to alternative breaks, also provided transformative potential. King (2004), using an interpretive case study investigating the experiences of four participants on a week-long cultural immersion service-learning trip to Tijuana, Mexico, reported that students identified coming to know, understand, and care for people they met as the biggest factor in prompting the questioning of their previously held beliefs. Using an online survey of thirty-two past participants in a 2-week study abroad and service-learning experience in Costa Rica, Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005) reported that many students noted changing their major, taking courses they otherwise would not have taken, or participating in subsequent study abroad or international travel as a result of their study abroad experience.

The one study that points directly to the connection between international service-learning and transformative learning is Kiely’s (2004) longitudinal case study of twenty-two students who participated in a 2-week January term international service-learning course in Nicaragua. Using Mezirow’s (1997) theory of transformative learning, Kiely identified three themes in his study—envisioning, transforming forms, and chameleon complex. Envisioning incorporated students’ intentions to work for social justice upon returning to the United States. As Kiely explained, “participants initially ‘envisioned’ changes to their lifestyles, relationships, and social policies to coincide

with their newly found critical awareness of the systemic forces underlying the economic disparities, health problems, and poverty witnessed in Nicaragua” (p. 10).

Kiely’s (2004) second theme, transforming forms, involved changes in students’ worldview along one of six dimensions: Political, moral, intellectual, cultural, personal, or spiritual. This theme also included evidence of action or intended action; political transformation included advocacy on behalf of the poor or efforts to raise awareness about poverty, and personal transformation involved efforts to live a more socially conscious lifestyle and to change career or educational goals. Finally, the chameleon complex describes the difficulties that students faced upon returning to the United States in attempting to integrate their transformed perspectives into their lives.

Kiely (2005) later revisited these data using a grounded theory approach and developed a learning process model of transformative learning through international service-learning. Five learning processes or themes are described in the model. The first theme, contextual border crossing, “describe[d] how personal, structural, historical, and programmatic elements of the service-learning context frame the unique nature and impact of student service-learning experience” (p. 9). The next theme, dissonance, illustrated how students experienced a disconnect between their own personal context and the context of the international service-learning experience. The third theme, personalizing, portrayed how the relationships that students built with community members allowed them to put human faces on previously abstract ideas, such as poverty. Finally, students made sense of their experiences by processing and connecting. Processing involved students’ intellectual engagement with the issue of poverty and challenging of their assumptions and connecting described a more affective

process prompted by students’ relationships with community members. One of the central contributions of Kiely’s (2004, 2005) work is his call, based on his results, that “researchers should also generate knowledge of, and develop theories about, the contextual, visceral, emotive, and affective aspects that enhance transformative learning in service-learning” (p. 18).

The study presented herein expands on Kiely’s (2004, 2005) work by exploring students’ experiences as participants in four different week-long immersion programs, their perceptions of outcomes associated with their immersion program participation, and the meaning they made of these experiences. Although drawing upon Kiely’s transformative learning model, we were careful not to presume that transformation occurred for participants, thus research questions were developed as open ended and to bring forth student perceptions on their own transformative (or not) learning experiences. Specific research questions included: (a) What is the nature of the short-term immersion experience? (b) What meaning do students make of their participation? (c) What do students learn about themselves, others, and complex social issues through their participation? and (d) How is sense of agency in relation to their learning through these short-term immersion programs promoted (or not)?

METHODOLOGY

To investigate the meaning students made of their experiences as participants on a short-term immersion program, we utilized a multisite case study approach in naturalistic settings. This methodological approach is anchored in a constructivist theoretical framework; thus, highlighting the central role of context (Flyvbjerg, 2001) and presuming multiple social realities and participants’

interpretations of these constructions of the social world (Guba & Lincoln, 2001). Case study methodology is a “preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (Yin, 1994, p. 1).

Case study research is characterized by “the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (i.e., a setting, a context)” (Creswell, 2007, p. 73) and draws on multiple sources of data to produce an in-depth understanding of this bounded system. The bounded system, or case, in this study is short-term immersion programs, investigated through four different sites. Consistent with the research questions that guided this exploration and given the real-life context of the short-term immersion programs, a constructivist case study methodology was most appropriate because meaning making is “not readily distinguishable from its context” (Yin, 2003, p. 4). A constructivist framework situates the focus of the investigation on the research participants’ meaning making of their experiences and perceptions of outcomes related to their participation in these programs (Jones et al., 2006). The design of the study was contextually dependent on and bounded by each site of this multisite case study (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2006).

Research Context

The context for this research project was four short-term immersion programs sponsored by a large, research-intensive university in the mid-Atlantic region. Three of the programs were described as service-learning and one as a study abroad program. The purpose of the service-learning trips was to promote new perspectives on social issues while engaged in community service, whereas the purpose of the study abroad program was to prepare students for civic

leadership through an international immersion experience. All four trips were characterized as short-term immersion programs because they included week-long intensive experiences that took students to locations unfamiliar to them and organized around a specific theme. Trip participants in each of the programs were selected based on a written application and in-person interview by the staff and student coordinators of these programs. Before leaving, students were prepared for their trips, although the nature of preparation varied from weekly class meetings for one group (Czech Republic) to monthly trainings for the Alternative Spring Break (ASB) trip leaders who then in turn organized pretrip meetings with participants on their trips. During the week on the trip itself students lived, traveled, and worked together. Trips included faculty/staff advisors who, for the purposes of this study, served in a dual role of researcher and advisor. Most trips were student led and the advisor role existed primarily for money management and emergency purposes. Every participant was aware of the dual role played by the researcher, who participated fully in the activities of the trip.

Sampling

Consistent with case study methodology, sampling occurred on two levels: Selection of the case(s) and then the participants within each case. Selection of the sites within this multisite case study was based on criteria of diversity of trip focus, geographic representation, and the presence of a researcher on each trip serving the dual role of participant observer and faculty/staff advisor. Because our focus was on short-term immersion programs rather than specific kinds of these programs, we sought maximum variation among the sites. This led to the purposeful sampling of four trips; two trips to cities within the United States (Chicago and New York City) and two international sites (the Czech Republic and Peru); three

trips identified as service-learning and one as study abroad. The trips were organized around the issues of HIV/AIDS (New York City), affordable housing and homelessness (Chicago), leadership (Czech Republic), and community development (Peru).

Within each of these cases, participants were then selected with a letter of invitation from the primary investigator. Because of the small size of these trips, all students were invited to participate in the research project. This resulted in a total sample of 37 out of 48 students (5/9 NYC, 11/13 Chicago, 13/16 Peru, 8/10 Czech Republic) and included 27 women and 10 men, 18 participants of color and 19 White participants, first-year students to seniors, and a wide range of academic majors (see the Appendix). All participants signed informed consent forms and chose pseudonyms for the purposes of confidentiality.

Data Collection

Characteristic of case study research, in-depth data collection involved multiple sources including interviews, participant observation, and document analysis (Creswell, 2007). Student applications to the short-term immersion program and journals kept during the trip were the documents collected. The applications included a question about student motivation for participation in the program for which they applied and basic demographic information. Every study participant was provided with a journal and asked to record their observations, experiences, insights, questions or any other reflections on their experience. Semistructured, in-depth interviews were conducted shortly after students returned from their trips by the researcher/advisor on the particular trip. Interview questions were developed based on the transformative learning literature and focused on students' motivation for

participation and expectations for the trip, the nature of the students' experiences on the trip, what they learned from the specific context of the trip, and specific outcomes they associated with their participation. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Finally, extensive participant observation was conducted by a researcher who served a dual role of faculty/staff advisor and researcher. Observations included descriptions of the settings in which participants were engaged, group dynamics, interactions with others they encountered, reactions of students to the setting, and researcher reflective memos on our own experiences, insights, and surprises (Glesne, 2006; Hui, 2009). This strategy of recording and analyzing researcher observations was particularly important to monitor our own preconceived ideas and judgments.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by the entire research team, with each transcript coded individually and then compared with the coding of another researcher. Every transcript was coded by two researchers and each researcher coded transcripts that included all the trips, not just the one with which they were most familiar. Drawing from a constant comparative method of data analysis (Charmaz, 2006) we generated codes, compared codes with one another, and looked for relationships and patterns in the data to create more abstract categories. In pairs, we then engaged in a thematic analysis which included both examining emergent themes within each case and across the cases (Yin, 2003), that is, focusing on individual meaning making within each site as well as on the aggregation of meaning for the purpose of understanding the larger case (Stake, 2000, 2006). As data analysis proceeded, we came together as a research team to compare the results of the analysis conducted in pairs. We continuously returned to the transcripts

themselves to ensure that our interpretations of the meaning students were making across the cases were true to students' words and experiences. Finally, at numerous points throughout the analysis process, the research team revisited the work of Kiely (2004, 2005) and other work on transformative learning to make connections between the findings and the conceptual framework.

Trustworthiness

We utilized several strategies to ensure trustworthiness of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because we functioned as a research team and collected multiple sources of data, we were able to both triangulate data sources and data analysis to enhance the credibility of results (Creswell, 2007). The presence of multiple researchers also enabled us to function as auditors of the overall process and to check our interpretations of the overall case against the individual cases of our own trips, which we knew well. In addition, we conducted member checks with participants to ensure that our interpretations matched their meaning. We developed a summary case report of our initial findings and sent this to every participant asking them to review the report and let us know what they thought. Nearly all responded with enthusiasm and affirmation.

FINDINGS

We present herein the findings of this multisite case study investigating the meaning students made of their experiences in a short-term immersion program in three parts. First, through rich description, we provide a glimpse into each of the individual sites because they serve as the contextual springboard for what follows. These were written by the researchers on the particular trip and thus reflect our participant observations. Second, we describe what emerged as characteristics

of the day-to-day dimensions of the trips that helped students to make meaning from these experiences. These include getting out of the bubble, boundary crossing, and personalizing. Third, we present the themes that emerged when analyzing across the sites and that illuminate the meaning students made of their short-term immersion experiences. The first major theme focuses on new understandings as a result of trip participation and the second explores how students reframed the experience after coming home and developed a new sense of purpose. Because the primary focus of this research was on students' meaning making, we draw from students' voices' most directly in the third part of the findings. The characteristics discussed in the second part also emerged through analysis of data, but in the interest of space, we present them here as a summary.

Introduction of the Sites: Location as Context for Learning

New York City (Author 1). "ASB New York" became the mantra claimed by participants as soon as we boarded the Greyhound bus early on the Saturday morning of spring break for New York City. The anticipation, excitement, and anxiety were palpable as we looked forward to our volunteer work at one of the oldest service providers in the city for people living with AIDS. During our time at this health center, we assisted recreational therapists in organizing and providing activities for the patients, visited with individual patients, and helped the staff to get ready for several major events. We primarily spent time on two floors of the health center, referred to as the "discrete unit," because it housed those patients with AIDS and some of us worked on the "elopement floor," so called because the individuals there were deemed at risk for flight. By night, we took up quarters at a youth hostel, sharing bunk rooms that housed twelve people and enjoyed all aspects of communal living. It was

here that the nightly reflections occurred, each facilitated by a different participant.

Chicago (Author 3). Traveling throughout the city, encountering new sights, meeting new people, and confronting stereotypes and fear, in Chicago we volunteered with organizations and learned from community members about the issue of affordable housing. Many of the organizations with whom we worked addressed issues of low-income housing, hunger, and homelessness through their temporary shelter, elderly care facility, and immigrant–refugee support center. In addition to daily volunteer activities, we met with several people who represented varying perspectives on the issue of affordable housing, such as a guided tour of historical high-rise, low-income buildings and a meeting with community coalition members from the notorious Cabrini–Green neighborhood. Group reflections were held nightly at the hostel where we all stayed and were facilitated by a different pair of participants.

Czech Republic (Authors 2 and 4). After spending a semester and a half together learning about global leadership, this group of ten students was ready for the culminating experience of their year-long program—a 10-day trip to the Czech Republic. The focus of the trip to the Czech Republic was on culture and leadership; each day students participated in lectures focused on Czech leadership, history, politics, and culture. Students visited local government and university officials and took field trips to visit a Czech high school, a paper mill, an environmental center, and student-run nongovernmental organizations. During the week, students lived in a university residence hall and had many opportunities to interact with Czech students. Although we spent a day and a half at the end of the week in Prague, an international and tourist-oriented city, for the majority of the time in the Czech Republic we were in a smaller town immersed

in the Czech culture, ate Czech food, and had to figure out how to communicate across a vast language barrier.

Peru (Author 5). “Team Lima” embarked on an adventure-filled flight bound for Peru on Saturday afternoon. Because of a flight cancellation in Miami, Florida, the team quickly bonded on the beach of the Atlantic Ocean and made the best of an unpredicted situation. After much anticipation, we finally arrived in Lima nearly 48 hours after beginning our travel. With early mornings painting a local school that served children whose families earned less than U.S.\$1 and afternoons in the neighborhoods and local communities visiting with community leaders, Team Lima experienced more in 5 days than most individuals would experience in a month of travel. The school provided more than walls to paint, as it also became a way for students to witness the very strong commitment to family, community, and education in the neighborhood that stood in stark contrast to our expectations. This disconnect between expectations and reality provided the material for nightly conversations in which the group convened after dinner for reflection facilitated by student trip leaders.

Characterizing the Day-to-Day: Experience as Context for Learning

Getting Out of the Bubble. From the moment these four trips started, participants were transported from the comfortable “bubble” of campus life to unfamiliar locales with team members whom they did not know well. Getting outside the bubble included interacting with individuals whose life circumstances did not much mirror their own, encountering language barriers they needed to negotiate, and confronting complex social issues such as poverty, HIV/AIDS, and homelessness in far greater proximity than ever before. Getting outside the bubble also had to do with getting

to know other trip participants and crossing boundaries of race, social class, culture, religion, and sexual orientation in ways not traversed on campus. The bubble reflected both how life in college was experienced as a comfort zone and traveling to the unfamiliar places took them “out of my element.” As students crossed boundaries they began to personalize their experiences in order to make meaning of what they were experiencing.

Boundary Crossing. Participants crossed boundaries between the familiar and unfamiliar and made sense of their experiences from the context of the people they encountered. Two of the groups visited countries where English was not the primary language, students in Chicago had the experience of sleeping in a homeless shelter, and students in New York experienced firsthand the prejudice that those with AIDS face on a daily basis. Students reported hearing the stories and perspectives of community members whom they never would have met if not for participation in a short-term immersion program. These boundary crossing experiences helped students to gain more knowledge about social issues and cultures, and to challenge the stereotypes they brought with them to the trips.

Students also had boundary crossing experiences with participants from their own college campus. The diversity of the trip members was often very different from the homogeneous groups in which they tended to spend most of their time on campus. Although participants of color were more accustomed to crossing the boundaries of race and culture, the trips took both White students and students of color outside boundaries of familiarity. Peer learning and sometimes intense group dynamics shaped each trip. Participants recognized benefits in these experiences, discovered peers whom were not like them, had deep conversations about topics such as race and religion, and embraced a broader

worldview. At times, these were challenging conversations turning into heated discussions, often during reflection sessions, that sometimes spilled over to impact the overall group dynamic.

Personalizing. Through connections made with the community members in each location, participants personalized the issues that were the focus of each trip. Students commented that getting to know people and learning from them in a few days definitely changed their lives. One example was how participants on trips focusing on homelessness and HIV/AIDS were able to personalize their understanding of the social issue after meeting people in hospitals and shelters. For these students, actually being able to put a name and a face on issues such as HIV/AIDS or homelessness helped “to see people as real individuals” and to “tie it all together.” Students on the other trips also compared their own lives with the lives of the people they met, or had a new view of the country they visited as more than just a “dot on a map.”

“A Larger Understanding” of Me and of You

Prompted by getting out of the bubble, crossing boundaries, and personalizing experiences, students gained new or larger understandings about themselves as well as the issues and cultures that were a focus of their immersion experiences. They also recognized falsity in stereotypes and came away with a clearer understanding of their own privilege.

Knowledge and Understanding About Social Issues and Cultures. Many students reported that the trips opened their eyes to issues that they only knew about on the surface, and cultures that they had only read about in a textbook. José, who visited Peru, shared, “I think [the trip] gave me a better understanding of personal accounts which a textbook or a website doesn’t tell you.” Aerial, a participant

on the New York trip, further described her new understanding of HIV/AIDS relaying:

My understanding of AIDS was that all the treatment and medications and everything were so advanced that while it still wasn't pleasant having AIDS you could still pretty much live a normal life. So the fact that there were people in this long term treatment facility, so obviously I'm misinformed. I really wanted to learn more and see what it was like and actually see people living with it and how their actual day-to-day is affected by it.

Some students also shared how their worldview was changed as a result of intense interaction with other group members during the trip. Kathy, when asked if her worldview changed, noted:

I'd say yes because of the people that I met on the [Peru] trip and just continuing that interaction and having them always influence the way that you see and think about things. . . . I think that reflection time allowed for us to look back at things and be more serious and then allow for dialogue and personal time to occur.

What students learned from the community and group members helped them to translate these experiences to the classroom upon returning, as well as provided the confidence to share new knowledge with others. Multiple students reported having conversations in their classes during which they could apply what they learned on their trip. After his experience in Chicago, Andrew had the confidence to speak up in his law class and share his new knowledge about homelessness and challenge others about their views. He explained:

There are a lot more issues and just because you're homeless doesn't mean you're not protected by the law. Being able to tie it back into your life and being informed enough to do that. . . . I think when these issues pop up, having a larger understanding and being informed

enough to speak confidently and hopefully accurate[ly] on the subject.

Other students felt the need to educate others based on their new knowledge, and demonstrated an emotional investment in what they had learned. As Abigail explained of her new knowledge of the Czech Republic:

I will definitely, if ever someone starts something about Czechoslovakia, I'll be like "Are you ridiculous? How do you not know they're different?" And I mean it's kind of hypocritical, because I didn't really know, but now that I do, I want to tell people "they're important, and they're an important country, and the people there are great, and the Czech Republic, not Czechoslovakia," like I'll be offended when I hear someone refer to Czechoslovakia.

While being able to educate others about the issues, students also reported learning about the complexity of social issues as a result of trip participation. Students realized that there was more to learn and that there are no easy solutions to the issues with which they came into contact. Stephanie shared: "I think the [Chicago] trip made it more complicated. I already had the notion that there are a lot of problems that are so complicated and no easy way out of them, but this just leaves, there's so much more than just the housing. It's not such a simple thing."

Breaking Down Stereotypes. By learning more about the issues and cultures that were a part of their short-term immersion experience, students also broke down the stereotypes they held about other members of their group and the people they met at the trip site. This varied from students becoming more open to interacting with people not like them to greater cognizance of the concept of hospitality. Dawn conveyed the following about her experience in the Czech Republic:

I didn't expect the people to be as genuine as they were. I definitely thought like the Czech Republic . . . was like 'communist bread line' and I thought everyone is going to be like very like grumpy and 'uhhhh,' but like everyone is so nice . . . that just made my experience that much better because it changed my perception of the people and just like the differences between Americans and foreigners.

Several of the New York participants admitted that they thought of AIDS as "like some poor dying child in Africa," as Sasha described. But her experience on the trip introduced her to "the face of HIV and AIDS" as "something that I don't think any of us have experienced before and it's kind of shocking." Similarly, Aerial conveyed her surprise after interacting with the patients, stating:

So I thought I would come home every day and be very sad and be like "Oh, these people are barely living and stuff like that." But they're not. They're really living life as much as they possibly can. I didn't expect it to be as uplifting as it was in the end.

In working through these stereotypes, many participants came to see individuals who were homeless or living with a life-threatening illness as "people just like me" (Julia, Chicago). Some of these experiences influenced how participants interacted with others after the trip. Angela (Chicago) shared, "Everybody is a human being. Everybody deserves the same kind of respect that I command from people or I ask them to respect me as a human being."

By interacting with members of the group, students also broke down stereotypes of their peers. Because the home institution is so large, many of the students in the groups had never met before applying for a trip, with the exception of the Czech Republic students who spent the year together in class. Cristina talked about her first impressions of one of the people

she ended up becoming closest to on the Peru trip. She thought:

I'm just not going to get along with [her] because I don't have friends like [her] here. I just don't know anyone like her—being in a mainstream sorority, just White in general. I don't have that many friends like that . . . it's just that I don't go out of my way to speak to people like that.

Alex, who also went on the Peru trip, responded that his group helped him to dispel stereotypes, "You can't really judge anybody before you know them because I probably would have never talked to half the people on our trip before I knew them and now, I'm friends with everybody." Although breaking down stereotypes of people at the sites may have been an expected outcome of the trip, doing so for peers from the home campus was more surprising.

Understanding of Privilege. Although all students reported learning about the issues and cultures that they experienced, many students also gained an understanding about themselves, particularly an understanding of their own privilege. Students commented on how thankful they were for what they had after experiencing poverty-stricken areas or meeting people with terminal illness. Rachel, a Jewish student on the Czech Republic trip recounted the following after visiting the Jewish Quarter in Prague:

I mean, going [to Prague] and seeing the gate that the Jews were allowed to walk through isn't fun, you know, it's, I mean it's important, . . . but seeing a little corridor . . . where the Jews were allowed to be, like, I don't live a life like that, thankfully I live in America where I am allowed to live wherever I want.

Alex (Peru) also concluded, "a lot of people have it worse than us and that really needs to be taken into perspective."

Lee shared how his experiences with individuals with AIDS in New York caused him to reflect on his own privilege. He shared, "I am very wrapped up in my middle-class identity and having privilege and being able to do what I want when I want to." Lee compared this experience with the lives of the patients at the health center and concluded, "They couldn't leave most of the time. They weren't well enough or they were at risk of leaving and not coming back. That changed me." Some students recognized this during the trip while others students had that realization once they returned to their "regular" lives. Angela confronted her privilege when she returned from Chicago stating, "I came back feeling I was very much more privileged than the majority of the world. . . . I think class-wise I am very, very privileged."

Going Forward: Reframing and a New Sense of Purpose

Reframing. Upon returning home, participants encountered another boundary to cross when they sought to integrate their experiences with their life and friends at home. Many participants returned with a new perspective on what was important in the world. This came in the form of reexamining technology and its place in their lives, reconsidering their role in the world, challenging the bubble in which they found themselves on campus, and determining how their experiences would influence future plans.

For many participants, reentry was challenging as they attempted to convey the experience to others and adjust to life at home, particularly as they struggled to process the experience for themselves. For some participants, the bonds formed with peers during the trip continued upon returning home and helped to ease the difficulty of conveying the experience to others who had not participated, especially students on the

New York and Peru trips. Aerial was thankful for the support system of her New York trip friends as she struggled with reentry. She reflected, "You're calling each other and you're like 'how are you doing' and they're like 'people just don't understand' and you're like 'I know exactly what you mean.'" Some participants noticed changes with friends with whom they did not share the experience. Upon returning from New York, Lee described that the trip was "so intense" that there was no way you can capture the "whole picture of what it was to be ASB New York. You can't really convey that in a take home message."

Many participants reflected on their new understandings in relation to their lives. Angela (Chicago) reframed her privileged life within the context of her home community. Kate also shared how she was challenged to put her Peru experience in the context of her life, shifting her perceptions, and allowing the trip to influence her. She expressed,

[I]t was really challenging to know what to think everyday about the things we experienced, . . . and I had a lot of trouble like looking at it I guess, seeing how I was looking at the situation through my lens of Western thinking . . . and knowing what to think about the things I was seeing . . . and then why did I think that?

As Kate's statement exemplifies, new understandings were not easily integrated into the lives of some students. For some participants, like Ashley, who traveled to the Czech Republic, returning home meant realizing that the trip had been similar to a dream world. Other students were overwhelmed by all that needed to be done. Becca (Chicago) grappled with how to affect change after discovering greater awareness about the reality of social issues:

I guess that what I thought about the most, is how do you go to the social problems and fix that because volunteering every single day at the soup kitchens in DC

or in a homeless shelter is great, and it's helpful, but it's a Band-Aid for a bullet wound. So you need to kind of have that idea of how do you fix this. It really takes a lot to fix something like that.

Reentry was confusing and challenging for participants as they attempted to reframe their experience and new understandings within their home context. This process of reframing, as a result of getting out of the bubble, boundary crossing, and personalizing helped many students to develop or refine their sense of purpose.

Sense of Purpose. Many participants shared that they wanted to learn more, make a difference in the world, and have additional experiences to try new things and travel to new places. This new sense of purpose manifested itself through both short- and long-term intentions. In the short term, many students indicated that they wanted to participate in another short-term immersion. At least six of the participants declared that they wanted to become trip leaders for these experiences. Others wanted to get more involved in community service closer to home and planned on participating in service activities on a regular basis close to campus.

Participants also expressed a desire to travel more and learn about other cultures in the future, especially those who participated in the two international trips. For many, this was a broad notion "to travel," "to study abroad," or work abroad. Participants mentioned that they gained confidence about their ability to survive on their own. They spoke about the desire to visit new places that placed them further out of their comfort zone. Tony shared:

[B]ecause the Czech Republic was such a different locale from what I'd been used to, I think it's definitely made me wanna test my limits a little bit more. So, I'm looking at Asia considering, you know, going to China . . . seeing all of the things that are

happening there. Japan, Philippines, and just all these different countries. So, I'd definitely say it has reaffirmed my goals and it actually made me want to push myself farther.

Across the trips, participants reported being motivated to seek out opportunities for learning. These learning opportunities came in many forms such as internships, courses, and second majors. Abigail (Czech Republic) shared, "I know I will take a more active interest in learning about other places, like I want to know more, I want to not be that stupid American, like I want to know more about other countries."

A number of the participants mentioned how this experience influenced longer-term intentions. For some, this trip motivated them to think about future career choices. Scott (Peru) shared:

It has made me think more about what I want to do with my life . . . and it makes me really want to do something other than just go to the office and make some money all day. I want to do something rewarding and I would be happy to get up in the morning and go to work.

Joseph concurred with this idea conveying his commitment to being "humanitarian minded" in his future career as an engineer after his experience in Chicago. Multiple students noted how this experience motivated them even more to participate in long-term service opportunities such as the Peace Corps, Teach for America, and Doctors without Borders. Sasha, who planned to attend graduate school in public health after her experience in New York, affirmed:

It furthers, just pushes, my drive to want to work more, to volunteer more with people who have HIV and AIDS, lobby more for federal laws, make medication more affordable and everyday just stand up for people who are suffering with this

disease and not turn it into a joke. . . . It ties everything together for me after volunteering there. . . . It kind of shifts what I want to do overall.

Other students added new twists to old plans. A student interested in finance became interested in microlending. A student interested in organizational behavior became interested in cross-cultural organizational behavior. Students became more committed to integrating international or “make a difference” emphases to previous career plans.

Although most participants had thoughts about new endeavors or how to make change in the future, some seemed overwhelmed by the fact that they could not make a difference. Several participants conveyed that the relevancy of their current lives was lost as they struggled to find meaning in what they were doing in college in view of the much work needed to address the problems they had witnessed the previous week. As Caitlin (Peru) described:

I just want to help people, I just, I’m like, why am I in school? I just want to, like I don’t need a college education to go and help people, but then if I’m like I can help more if I get my college education.

The nature of these short-term immersion programs all provided participants with a rich context for learning that included an opportunity to get out of the bubble of campus life, to cross boundaries that were unfamiliar to them, and to personalize the issues they encountered on the trips. The immersion context then encouraged participants to develop larger understandings and broader world views about complex social issues and cultures that were unfamiliar to them, to dispel stereotypes, and to reflect on their own privileges in new ways. Finally, participants found themselves struggling to integrate their experiences into their lives upon return and rethinking career plans and aspirations.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

With the recent growth of short-term immersion programs, whether through alternative spring break or study abroad, as strategies to support renewed interest in internationalization and civic engagement, it is important to understand how these programs promote student learning and development and whether or not they deliver intended outcomes. However, very little recent research exists on short-term immersion programs. The findings from this study contribute to an emerging research base and suggest that students make meaning of these trips in ways congruent with educating for civic engagement (Dey et al., 2009) and that the trips reflect many of the components of Kiely’s (2005) transformative learning model for service-learning. In addition, because of the focus on specific sites, contextual influences are significant, a highlight of this study. In particular, the results of this study suggest that several key elements of these short-term immersion programs (e.g., getting out of the bubble, boundary crossing, and personalizing) prompted meaning making among participants, primarily in the areas of new understandings of themselves, complex social issues, and other cultures. In addition, upon return from the trips, participants engaged in processes of reframing in an effort to integrate what they learned into their lives and reflecting on their sense of purpose and future plans. Much of the existing research on service-learning and study abroad focuses on outcomes associated with these programs. Because our study focused on meaning making, which cannot always be detected in outcomes-based research, a more nuanced view of transformative learning as an outcome is possible.

Transformative Learning

Mapping Kiely’s (2004, 2005) findings onto ours illuminates seemingly synchronistic

results. His emphases on student interest in incorporating social justice work upon return, shifting world views, and difficult reentry as participants tried to make sense of incorporating new learning into their lives (Kiely, 2004) are reflected in our findings. Further, the dimensions of his process model, which include the themes of contextual border crossing, dissonance, personalizing, and processing and connecting, are also evident in the themes that emerged in this study. Whereas Kiely's (2005) research was based on data from a longitudinal case study over 7 years, our study provides a glimpse into the meaning making associated with short-term immersion programs and based on data collected soon after participants' return. This then becomes even more compelling evidence of the benefits of short-term immersion programs, particularly in relation to approaching the transformative learning described by Kiely (2004, 2005). However, our findings also suggest the need for caution and intentionality when designing short-term immersion programs as transformative learning opportunities, particularly in the areas of personalizing and contextual border crossing.

Personalizing. Many of our participants commented on their ability to personalize the issues that served as the focus of their particular trips based upon their interactions with those they encountered on the trips. This was conveyed with comments like "I was able to put a face on [an issue]," or that an issue "became so real to me." Consistent with prior research on service-learning and study abroad (e.g., Drews & Meyer, 1996; Jones & Hill, 2001; Jones & Abes, 2003; Rhoads, 1997), these comments are often associated with immersion in a different culture or setting that introduces students to issues and people with whom they were previously not familiar. However, because of the short-term nature of experiences like alternative break programs,

students also tend to essentialize those with whom they interact and come to conclusions like "they are just like me" (Jones & Abes, 2003; Rhoads, 1997). The results of our study suggest that this dynamic is even more likely to occur on those trips with clearly observable social issues (e.g., homelessness, HIV/AIDS) and where direct contact with individuals living these social issues is an integral part of the trip. In an effort to grapple with the dissonance introduced by meeting individuals with whom they are conversing or working side by side, participants tried to close the distance between themselves and community members by jumping to conclusions that "we are all human." Nonetheless, the experience of being "out of my element" led participants to develop a deeper understanding of the individuals impacted by social issues and from different cultures, rather than as abstract concepts and faraway places.

Contextual Border Crossing. The notion of border crossing through service-learning and study abroad has become a taken-for-granted element of the experience and implies a unidirectional process. That is, students cross multiple borders (e.g., developmental, physical, cultural) via their immersion experiences and are transformed. Kiely's (2005) concept of contextual border crossing is an important one because he connects the specific context of service-learning setting (in his study) to the outcomes of students' experiences. For Kiely, these contextual elements are located both within the individual participants' personal biography and social identities, as well as in the specifics of the setting and service-learning program.

Our results also demonstrate the power of border crossing and the influence of context on both the crossing itself and the meaning students made of the borders and the crossing. The contexts themselves were compelling to students, some more so than others, and elicited in students a scrutiny of their own identities, backgrounds, and

privileges in relation to those with whom they were interacting, and a breaking down of stereotypes. This suggests the importance of intentionality when selecting sites for short-term immersion programs and is consistent with early research by Eyler and Giles (1999), which documents the significance of placement quality to producing outcomes. We heard from the students that immediately upon return from their trips the temptation to go back to the lives they left behind on campus was great, in essence crossing the border and then turning around to return to the comfortable life they knew. This is reminiscent of Kegan's (1994) consciousness bridge and by extension, suggests the importance of tending to both sides of the border.

Although the focus of this paper is on themes that emerged from four different sites, had our primary purpose been to examine the differences among the trips we might speculate that border crossing may have varied by trip. For example, as mentioned, for those trips where contact and "engagement with the other" (Parks Daloz, 2000) was more direct, the perception of border crossing was more intense—and, as a result, the ability to sustain the lessons learned upon return to campus more challenging. Further, some evidence exists that border crossing is experienced differently by students of color than White students (e.g., Gilbride-Brown, 2008). Because our unit of analysis was on the sites themselves, we did not interrogate differential perceptions based on social identities such as race, but we did comment on this in relation to peer dynamics. The phenomenon of border crossing for students of color is an understudied and important area for future study.

Perceived Campus Balkanization and Peer Learning

A somewhat surprising finding for us was the prevalent and consistent message that these

short-term immersion programs placed many participants in some of their first intercultural learning experiences ever. Despite their enrollment in a university with a fairly diverse student population (34% of undergraduates are students of color), participants from both dominant and nondominant groups were quick to comment that they rarely crossed the boundaries of race and culture in their friendship groups. Research documents that opportunities for cross-racial interactions increase as compositional diversity increases; however, compositional diversity alone does not ensure that such interactions occur (Milem et al., 2005). Further, our research supports the assertion of Chang (2007) that the issue of balkanization is incorrectly directed toward students of color, who in actuality cross racial boundaries most every day. Nonetheless, both White students and students of color in our study indicated that these trips enabled them to more meaningfully engage across differences. However, we found participants expected to cross boundaries through the settings of their particular trips. They were less equipped to negotiate this dynamic when it emerged with their peers, typically during reflection sessions. This affirms Mezirow's (2000) contention that experience must be intertwined with critical reflection to promote transformative learning and suggests the importance of trained reflection facilitators who can navigate the sometimes intense and emotional discussions on topics such as racism, privilege, homophobia, and other compelling issues that emerge. Training for facilitators must cultivate the skills needed to negotiate group dynamics, create critical reflections that get to the dissonance participants may be experiencing, and acknowledge the differential social identities that influence the meaning students make of their immersion experiences.

In addition to the implications embedded

in the previous discussion, several others are worth noting. First, it behooves practitioners to keep in mind that, although these immersion experiences are short in duration, they are deep and intense. The characteristics of these experiences can be replicated in other programs and may help practitioners to reframe how programs can be created and implemented to produce similar outcomes. Furthermore, the notion of personalizing experiences can be integrated into existing campus programs through local immersions and opportunities to connect classroom-based learning with out-of-class experiences. Intentional reflection opportunities and integrated programming will aid students in linking and relating various aspects of their lives.

The experiences students shared regarding the various boundaries they crossed through their immersion participation indicate that students are not crossing similar boundaries at home. This could be the result of the sheer size of the campus from which participants came, but an important implication of this research is a reminder that work needs to be done on campus to promote intercultural engagement among all students. Further, an opportunity exists to extend the education students receive as participants in short-term immersion programs by explicitly addressing the various boundaries that exist on campus.

A tool to aid in that educative process is reentry programming. Researchers and practitioners have attended to the issue of reentry and reverse culture shock for years (e.g., Raschio, 1987; Uehara, 1986; Wilson, 1987), but little attention has been paid to this issue when it comes to short-term immersion. Students were prepared for their trips, but needed help translating their experiences back to campus and beyond. The participants in this study commented on their meaning making before, during, and after their trip experience, although they were supported least upon their

return to campus. Educators need to capitalize on students' energy upon their return to campus and provide avenues for leveraging their experiences through sustained learning. This includes long-term career planning, negotiating friendships that may change, and creating an action plan for how to use new knowledge in everyday life.

In addition to the important implications for student affairs practice, implications for future research also exist. There is a need to better understand the national picture of who is participating in short-term immersion programs. Little is known about the demographics of this population or if there is a predisposition toward enhanced meaning making among some populations. Given the demographics of previous samples, a question remains as to whether or not short-term immersion is similarly transformative among students from different racial, cultural, and income groups. Additionally, more research is needed on how to sustain the short-term learning that occurs, as well as potential longitudinal impact of participation in short-term immersion experiences to determine the longer term influences. Further, because of our focus on short-term immersion generally, our case study included domestic, international, service-learning, and study abroad programs. Additional insights may be gained by examining each of these programs distinctly. As a new area of study, short-term immersion programs are ripe for investigation.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations existed in this study. First, because our focus was on four sites and the themes that cut across the sites, we lost the distinctiveness and depth of understanding of each individual trip. As noted in the implications for future research, our design may be limited as a result of combining service-

learning programs with study abroad. Our focus was on the connections among the four, but this may have limited our view. The dual role of the researchers as participants on the trips may also be considered both a limitation and a benefit. The rapport and trust established through this preexisting and structured relationship meant that access to participants was easier and allowed the students to share more genuinely about their experiences. However, the dangers associated with backyard research (Glesne, 2006), particularly the vested interest in the success of both the research project and the trip, raise potential questions about assumptions each researcher brought to the study. The researchers paid special attention to this potential shortcoming and took several steps to minimize bias in the interpretation of the findings. Finally, although we emphasized the context or settings in which these trips took place, we did not formally investigate community perspectives on these short-term immersion programs. This is an

often neglected focus of inquiry and in need of further investigation.

CONCLUSION

This study is one of the first to explore the impact of short-term immersion programs in the past 10 years. As programs continue to grow, there is much more to understand with regard to the students who participate, the potential impact on institutions who host such programs, and the communities in which programs are located. As one participant noted, "There are no words to tell people how much it meant to me and how much I learned and just what an amazing experience it was." This study, and future research, represents an attempt to capture the meaning students do make of these experiences with words.

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APPENDIX.

Participants' Gender and Race for Each Trip

Trip	Males	Females	White (M/F)	Black / African American / West Indian (M/F)	Asian / Asian- American (M/F)	Latino/a (M/F)	Total
NYC	1	4	3 (1/2)	2 (0/2)	0	0	5
Chicago	2	9	7 (1/6)	1 (0/1)	3 (1/2)	0	11
Peru	4	9	5 (0/4)	0	2 (0/2)	6 (3/3)	13
CR	3	5	4 (3/1)	4 (2/2)	0	0	8
Total	10	27	19	7	5	6	37

Note. Identifiers used are those provided by participants themselves.

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