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Studying International Students' Cyclical Transformation

Fujian Tan, University of Wyoming

Abstract: *Research on transformation has focused mostly on linear transformation in one direction. Little research has been conducted regarding transformation that can occur as a result of international students re-entering their home cultures, and the continuing potential for transformation as this cycle repeats itself. Further research should be developed to include more complex concepts of cyclical, as well as traditional linear transformation. This research acknowledges and discusses the need, benefits and possible directions of such research.*

Studying International Students' Cyclical Transformation

Substantial research has been published regarding the transformation of international students as a result of studying in foreign countries (Hoff, 2008; Hunter, 2008). This research is very pertinent. Cultural transformation because of the “study abroad” experience needs to be nurtured and has become a challenge for both students and educators (Hunter, 2008). However, current research focuses mostly on linear transformation in one direction, or the transformation that occurs as a result of emersion into a culture other than one’s own. Little research has been conducted regarding the transformation that can occur as a result of international students re-entering their home cultures, and the continuing potential for transformation as this cycle repeats itself. Underlying the call for such further research is the notion that transformative research and thinking should be expanded and developed to include more complex concepts of cyclical, as well as more traditional concepts of linear, transformation.

First advanced by Jack Mezirow in 1978, transformational theory identifies a process of learning that includes a disorienting dilemma, self examination, assessment of assumptions, the exploration of new options, the formulation of an action plan, and reintegration into the triggering experience with a new, transformed, perspective (Mezirow, 1991). “Transformative theory is about change -- dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p.319). Transformative learning involves critical reflection that reassesses presuppositions on which beliefs are based and acts on insights derived from transformed meaning perspectives (Mezirow & Associates, 1990).

“Study abroad” experiences, which provide disorienting dilemmas that hold more promise for “nurturing transformation in learners than if they were to stay on campus in a home country,” have been identified as having great potential for inducing transformation (Hunter, 2008, p. 101). Such transformation has “the outcomes of which can alter how students see the world” (p. 106). Though some research has been conducted concerning “reverse culture shock,” or the culture shock international students experience upon returning to their home cultures after substantial time spent learning in another (Martin, 1984; Christofi & Thompson, 2007), no attention to the transformation that might ensue as a result is evident in the literature. Such instances are fertile ground for transformative research, as the cursory, even incomplete, linear transformation occurring when one studies abroad, is challenged upon reintegration into the home culture where new values are questioned and resisted. Moreover, such “cyclical

transformation” can occur indefinitely as one travels and spends substantial time in one culture and then another, until world views and perspectives become stabilized.

International students who come to study in the U.S. may easily experience discomfort, or disorienting dilemmas, because of the difference in cultures, educational systems, or any number of other aspects. As they become more familiar with the environment, they engage in critical reflection, explore options for forming new roles, relationships or actions, and gradually reintegrate themselves into the new experience with new transformed perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). At that time, they become more accustomed to the environment and feel more comfortable. Their worldviews have been further developed because of their experience. However, this is not the end of transformation. When these students return to their own countries for a period of time, their perspectives or worldviews formed from the previous transformation are subject to change. They may feel that their home cultures have become strange to them and that their values and perspectives conflict with those of others. As a result they again experience a disorienting dilemma, which prompts them to undergo the transformative process again, emerging with an entirely new perspective. When they reenter the U.S. to continue study, they potentially face even further transformation. What they have experienced in their home countries may hinder reintegration into the foreign environment, and they may become obsessed with their values and cultural roles. As they continue to engage in reflection and make necessary adjustments, the discomfort dissipates as they form new roles, relationships or actions, and reintegrate into the environment. As this occurs, their perspectives or worldviews become more stable than before. Rounds of transformation may take place until their worldviews and perspectives become more fixed and are not easily challenged due to changes of physical or cultural environment.

In order to complete successful and smooth cyclical transformation, international students should first recognize it as a normal (transformative) process. They should remain open-minded and willing to discuss their experiences and thought processes with others, especially those who have the same experiences, in order to help understand this process and engage in effective reflection. To recognize that others have gone through similar processes is of great significance for transformative learning according to Mezirow (1991). International students’ advisors and instructors should demonstrate understanding, patience, guidance, and encouragement in support of critical reflection, which is central to transformative development. Being observant and available for discussions are helpful practices.

Studying international students’ cyclical transformation undergirds more discussions that are intended to illuminate and develop more aspects of the concept, nature, process, and research approaches as such transformation occurs.

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