

## **Pedagogies of Transformation for High School Study Abroad Programming**

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*This autoethnographic case study examines the ways in which high school students and teachers' behaviors, values, and attitudes were transformed during their participation on a semester-long study abroad program in Central America. The study found that an integrative pedagogical approach in which place-based content was paired with place-based experience as well as critical reflection was the most effective process by which teachers facilitated transformation in students' behaviors, values and attitudes. Additionally, an interdisciplinary approach developed by faculty-members resulted in a high degree of student transformation as well as a transformation in teachers' own behaviors, values, and attitudes. This study is valuable for administrators and course planners in grades 9-12 as well as in higher ed. in devising curricular and pedagogical approaches for study abroad programming that effectively facilitates student transformation.*

### **Introduction**

Secondary schools have followed the trend set by institutions of higher education in dramatically increasing the volume, scope and complexity of their international activities during the past two decades (Altbach & Knight, 2007). They have at the same time engaged in conversations around expanding intercultural competence as well as opportunities for global learning and global citizenship (Deardorff, 2006; Musil, 2006; Nussbaum, 2006). There is near-consensus on the necessity of reorienting policies and programs from the national to the global (IAU, 2014) and many secondary school and universities are making a variety of commitments to study abroad programming as a primary means by which to do so (Musil, 2006; Morais & Ogden, 2011). However, there is little understanding amongst program planners and faculty about what constitute "best practices" for study abroad programming (e.g. immersive language training, experiential vs. academic focus) nor how to apprehend and measure the impact of study-abroad experiences for student-participants.

This article is intended to offer insight with regards to "best practices" to administrators and faculty on planning, implementing, and assessing study abroad programming for secondary schools; as will be later discussed the implications are applicable to higher ed as well. We do so by: 1) describing the curricular and pedagogic processes utilized by administrators and faculty of The Traveling School,<sup>1</sup> a semester-long accredited high school study abroad program for girls ages 15 to 18; 2) explaining findings from our qualitative study conducted during a TTS semester in Central America; and 3) discussing the applicability of TTS's curricular and pedagogic model to a wide range of other study abroad programming, particularly those offered by institutions of higher ed. We proceed by providing a brief overview of the design of TTS's on-course programming, review and identify key gaps that our study aims to address in currently delimited literatures on transformative education, critical pedagogy, and study-abroad education, and then present our empirical findings and discuss the implications of these findings for future research and programming.

#### TTS Programming

TTS takes a small cohort of sixteen female students and four female teachers to Southern Africa in the fall and South or Central America in the spring for approximately fifteen weeks. The student cohort always differs from one semester to the next as students matriculate from a wide range of public and private high schools to which they return at the conclusion of the semester. TTS's curriculum and pedagogy are built on three core areas: 1) place-based content; 2) place-based experience; and 3) community service/service-learning. This three-pronged, integrative approach is designed to facilitate student awareness and openness to understanding "real-world" issues (e.g. migration, conflict, environmental degradation) through providing students with unmediated, first-hand experiences in developing countries.<sup>2</sup> Students' experiences are framed within an academic context that allows for critical reflection and discussion. The readings for each academic course include overviews of either historical or current trends for each country in which the cohort travels, topical articles from newspapers or journals on specific historical or contemporary events, and scholarly articles intended to foster analytic dialogue. Additionally, the readings students are provided address the same topical issues from oppositional or contradictory frameworks.

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<sup>1</sup> The Traveling School will be referred to hereafter as TTS.

<sup>2</sup> The countries in which TTS travels are as follows: Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico, South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Zambia, Mozambique.

Students regularly take site-visits that directly correspond to their academic studies (e.g. indigenous villages, sweatshops, coffee fincas, etc); students also regularly hear from guest lecturers who have first-hand experience with the events or themes students are studying. These experiences are intentionally designed to facilitate intellectual and emotional dissonance for students. Teachers' also guide two or three activities per week that challenge students to consider ways they personally impact or are impacted by the issues or concepts to which they have been exposed through their academic coursework and place-based experiences. The academic curriculum and teacher-guided activities are intended to provide a framework that allows students to critically and analytically consider the theoretical and practical possibilities by which they can address the issues with which they are confronted.

At the conclusion of the semester, the student cohort, with minimal oversight from faculty-members, plans a summative "zenith project" of their choosing that requires sustained collaboration and participation between students once they return to their home high schools. The zenith project requires students "give back" in a "meaningful way" to one or more of the communities in which the cohort travels throughout the terminal semester. TTS administrators and faculty conceptualize the zenith project as a passing of the torch in which students are empowered to be "agents of change."<sup>3</sup> Given that this definitive programmatic goal is realized through a diverse range of processes that differ from one semester to the next, the two primary research questions (RQs) that guided this inquiry were: 1) What, if any, notable "transformation" occurred in students' and teachers' behaviors, values, and attitudes during their participation in TTS's fifteen-week study abroad program Central America (RQ1)? 2) What are the processes by which faculty members and administrators, intentionally and incidentally, facilitated student "transformation?" (RQ2)

## **Literature Review**

Four distinct bodies of literature have outlined, analyzed, and explained various dimensions related to the intentions and impacts on student-participants of transformative education and/or study abroad programming: 1) transformative learning literature; 2) literature on critical pedagogy; 3) internationalization literature; and 4) empirical studies related to

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<sup>3</sup> These terms are utilized by the administration in the TTS Teacher Handbook, which is reviewed by administrators and teachers during teachers' pre-departure orientation.

participants' experiences on study abroad programs. Terms, concepts, and approaches from each of these delimited literatures inform and are utilized in the design and implementation of study abroad programming, but have not been collectively and systematically analyzed in empirical research on study abroad programming for secondary school students.

Transformative learning literature provides a broad conceptual framework and working definition for the term transformation, where "learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162). Mezirow's conceptual framework and definition were designed to account for adult learners and the majority of empirical studies that explore particular dimensions of transformative learning take place in formal institutions of higher education (Jarvis, 1999; King, 2004; Sinclair and Diduck, 2001; Berger, 2004; Cohen, 2004; Lange, 2004). This study extends Mezirow's definition of transformation to changes in secondary school students' behaviors, values, and attitudes in a non-institutional, field-based study-abroad trip.

A handful of studies examine the impact of critical pedagogy and critical reflection, both primary components of TTS's pedagogical approach, as cornerstones in facilitating transformative learning (Liimatainen et al., 2001; Cranton and Carusetta, 2004; Kreber, 2004). Critical pedagogy is defined as:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking, which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand deep meaning, root causes, social content, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse (Shor, 1992, p: 129).

Critical reflection, a process by which students' are asked to discursively consider continuities and discontinuities in their intellectual and emotional understandings of the themes they are studying, is inherent in critical pedagogy. The aforementioned empirical studies and several theoretical works (Shor et al., 1993; Sleeter & McLaran, 1995; Lather, 1998, 2001; McLaran, 2000, 2003) examine critical pedagogy and reflection in traditional classroom settings, particularly in urban schools in the United States. This study examines the same processes and

impacts of critical pedagogy and critical reflection in a field-based, study abroad trip where students confront many of the same themes as those in previous studies without the mediating walls of a classroom.

Internationalization literature provides a range of rationales that account for the dramatic rise in international programming across institutions of higher education (Scott, 1992; Warner, 1992; Davies, 1992; Johnston & Edelstein, 1993; Knight & De Wit, 1995). Warner, in particular, offers an explanation for internationalization that suggests the most important goal of internationalization is to give students a deeper awareness of international and intercultural issues related to equity and justice and to give them the tools to work actively and critically towards social transformation (1992). Warner's exposition specifically and the body of literature on internationalization more broadly tend to focus on the impetus underlying the intentions of institutions of higher education to expand international programming. These studies reflect an implicit assumption made by institutions of higher education that simply sending students abroad in and of itself facilitates "transformation." However, the curricular and pedagogic processes by which transformation happens are unknown and the impact of this supposed transformation are under-theorized and under-researched. This study was designed to apprehend both the pedagogic processes of educators facilitating study abroad programming as well as the impact of those processes on student-participants in order to shed light on this gap in the literature.

A handful of empirical studies on study abroad programming for both high school and college students have also sought to address this gap by offering various accounts of the "lived experiences" of student-participants. These include outcome-based studies of students-participants' acquisition of a broader awareness of global issues (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Bellamy & Weinberg, 2006; Paige et al., 2009; Chmil et al, 2012), enhanced intercultural sensitivity (Kitsantas, 2004; Williams, 2005; Anderson et al., 2006), as well as accelerated language acquisition (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Engle & Engle, 2004; Freed & Segalowitz, 2004). These outcome-based studies tend to explain the impact of study-abroad programming on student participants without explaining the processes that facilitated these impacts, thereby excluding consideration of critical pedagogy and critical reflection. A handful of studies examine the pedagogical approaches taken by educators on study abroad programs (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2003; Dwyer, 2004). However, these studies do not focus on identifying best-practices that yield an enhanced understanding of the most effective ways study-abroad

educators can realize programmatic goals, particularly the most frequently stated goal of "student transformation."

Considering these delimited literatures collectively and noting the gaps that exist within and across them offered a comprehensive framework that we utilized to devise our study that focused on both processes and outcomes of TTS's study abroad program for high school students.

## **Methods**

The study was framed as an autoethnography as it situated the social and historical context of our own participation in the Central America semester as central to our processes of making meaning of the data we gathered (Langelier & Peterson, 2004). The study was also framed as an ethnographic case study as it was interpretive of a bounded system (i.e. the TTS cohort of students and teachers on the Central America 2011 program), overtime, involving multiple data sources (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1988). The majority of research conducted on study abroad programming tends to rely on pre and post trip interviews and surveys. However, capturing the processes that facilitate student transformation necessitates researchers actively collect data throughout the study-abroad program. As such, we were embedded as participant observers throughout this study; the primary author was a faculty-member for the semester-long program in Central America; the second author, TTS's Executive Director, was present for the first two weeks of the semester and afterwards as a point of contact in TTS's office for the field-based faculty.

### ***Field Sites; Data Sources; Sampling***

The study was conducted between February 5<sup>th</sup> and May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2011 as the cohort traveled throughout Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Chiapas, Mexico. Data was obtained through observations of students and teachers in a variety of settings, including academic classes, experiential activities, group meals, and group activities. The faculty-member considered her own teaching practices and personal interactions with students and other teachers in a reflective

journal at the end of each day. These entries were guided by a set of questions,<sup>4</sup> developed prior to the start of the study, regarding both obvious and subtle changes in students' behaviors, values, and attitudes as well as the activities and approaches faculty were utilizing that corresponded to these changes. She also conducted thirty audio-taped, semi-structured interviews with students and teachers at various points throughout the semester. Students answered a series of open-ended questions regarding changes in their own perceptions, expectations, values, and beliefs. The other three faculty-members answered a series of open-ended questions regarding their approaches to facilitating student transformation. Additionally, copies of students' weekly reflection papers were analyzed for the ways they revealed changes in students' behaviors values, and attitudes.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the ED considered and recorded the evolution of her own administrative practices and the ways in which her interactions with faculty members impacted their approaches to facilitating student-transformation during the semester the study took place. Through these multiple data sources, we sought to reflexively examine the role that faculty and administrators play in facilitating student transformation.

The sample population included the thirteen female students and four female teachers comprising the TTS Central America spring-semester of 2011 as well as TTS's Founder/Executive Director. The students, disaggregated for academic year, include: five seniors, four juniors, and four sophomores. Students and teachers are from a variety of states throughout the United States, representing a cross section of the country. Three of the four faculty members had extensive teaching experience with TTS prior to leading the Central America semester.

### ***Data Analysis***

For the purpose of attempting to separate our own assumptions regarding student transformation that formed during and after the semester, we utilized Charmaz's (2006) coding methodology designed for grounded theory studies in order to identify emergent themes across all data sources. The remainder of the article will be devoted to explaining and discussing these themes.

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<sup>4</sup> Questions included: 1) What moments or events stood out to you today and why? 2) What particular changes did you notice in individual students or amongst the student body? And 3) what particular events or classes did teachers facilitate today? 4) What was the intended outcome of these activities and was that intended outcome realized? How and in what ways?

<sup>5</sup> Students' weekly reflections were guided by prompts relating to particular activities and their own related experience.

## **Results (RQ1)**

The fifteen-week semester in Central America between February and May 2011 can be divided into two distinct periods. In the first five weeks, students expressed a desire to “be transformed” and “to understand more deeply,” though often showed distress at prolonged emotional and intellectual disorientation to their previous worldviews. In the sixth week of the course, most visibly demonstrated on day thirty-two, there was an identifiable "tipping point" signifying a marked transformation in students' behaviors, values, and attitudes. During this particular week, in the town of San Cristobal in Chiapas, Mexico, teachers intentionally organized an intensive series of guest lectures, field visits, and sustained dialogues in order to facilitate and accelerate student transformation. The structure of this week reflected TTS's three-pronged integrative approach as well as the interdisciplinary approach teachers' had devised. In the remaining nine weeks, students demonstrated sustained willingness to receive and critically analyze complex and challenging information. Changes in students as well as teachers' behaviors, values, and attitudes are presented below. Further explication of the concept of the "tipping point" and events that preceded and followed it will be presented in the discussion section of this article.

### ***Behaviors***

#### ***Students***

Students' demonstrated an increasing capacity to pose complex questions to their teachers and fellow classmates in their academic courses and experiential site visits as well as participate in dynamic and complex dialogues with guest speakers. As the semester progressed, students also took significantly fewer pictures in an attempt to “capture the moment,” and instead journaled or spoke in small groups about their observations and experiences. Upon leaving San Cristobal in the sixth week of the semester and for the remaining nine weeks, students explicitly and repeatedly requested that teachers expose students to intellectually and emotionally challenging events and concepts. They also requested that teachers facilitate activities that allowed students to make interdisciplinary connections between topical themes they were discussing in their academic courses.



### ***Teachers***

Both in class and during their free time, teachers engaged more frequently in dynamic and complex discussions about academic content with students that were on par with the discussions that teachers had amongst themselves. Following San Cristobal, teachers also scaled back from exposing students to guest speakers and site visits that were particularly intellectually and emotionally disorienting. They instead sought experiences that allowed for students to witness activism and advocacy first-hand (e.g. a backpacking trip guided by a woman who had grown up in the same forest but had been forced off her land for tourism). Finally, teachers convened an increasing number of group meetings and debriefing sessions following site visits in order to better assess and manage transformations in students' behaviors, values, and attitudes.

### ***Values***

#### ***Students***

Students demonstrated an increasing ambivalence towards concepts of "progress" and "development." Students also openly questioned and compared the merits different political orders (e.g. liberalism vs. communism) as well as a perceived greater valuation in the "global North" of the individual and competition versus that of the community and cooperation in the "global South."<sup>6</sup> Finally, students increasingly questioned governments in the "global North" and the policies and practices they pursued in the "global South."

#### ***Teachers***

Teachers demonstrated an increasing ambivalence towards their own abilities to manage student transformation.

### ***Attitudes***

#### ***Students***

Students demonstrated an increasing awareness of the ways in which their attitudes in response to challenging situations impacted the group. Students' attitudes were more consistently positive and less anxious or irritable. Students also demonstrated an increased capacity in their

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<sup>6</sup> Faculty-members discussed amongst themselves the broad generalizations that accompanied students perceptions related to characterizing geographic locales as "the global North/global South." They ultimately allowed students to continue utilizing these terms as they are frequently utilized in academic and popular literature.

ability to be emotionally impacted by guest speakers and site visits, particularly those that addressed topics related to immigration or the Guatemalan or El Salvadoran civil wars.

### ***Teachers***

Teachers demonstrated increasing irritability and anxiety though were careful not to display these emotions in front of the students. Additionally, teachers, like the students, also demonstrated an increased capacity in their ability to be emotionally impacted by guest speakers and site visits, particularly those that addressed topics related to immigration or the Guatemalan or El Salvadoran civil wars.

### **Results (RQ2)**

Administrators facilitated student transformation by providing pre-trip training for faculty-members, mandating rules, policies, and procedures that students and faculty observed in Central America, and providing faculty members with feedback on their pedagogy throughout the trip. The most effective process by which faculty members facilitated student transformation was by regularly utilizing TTS's three-pronged, integrative approach to pedagogy in which place-based content is paired with place-based experience, followed by regular debriefing sessions and opportunities for students to reflect. Faculty members also facilitated student transformation through a sustained focus on student cohesion and by providing students with opportunities to reflect upon how students' behaviors, values, and attitudes immediately impacted the group. The specific processes utilized by administrators and faculty-members to facilitate student transformation are presented below.

### ***Administrators***

Immediately prior to the beginning of the semester, faculty-members participated in a mandatory five-day orientation that was planned, organized, and facilitated by the administration. Faculty-members reported that this five-day orientation prepared them to effectively utilize TTS's pedagogical model in Central America. Through didactic lectures, discussions, and simulations, the administration trained faculty-members to provide students with critical analytic frameworks in their academic courses that enabled student to understand and explain their place-based experiences. During orientation, the administration also trained faculty in safety, risk management, student rules, policies, and procedures, and facilitated

cohesion and camaraderie amongst the faculty through a variety of team building initiatives. Several training modules were also devoted to discussing ways that teachers could effectively manage and utilize spontaneous learning opportunities that would occur frequently throughout the semester.

The Executive Director and Program Director regularly communicated with faculty-members through phone calls or emails during the fifteen-week course. Faculty-members discussed upcoming readings and assignments specific to the academic courses they were teaching and the corresponding experiential activities they had planned. Faculty members reported that these recommendations were critical in helping to facilitate student transformation.

### ***Faculty***

Throughout the semester, faculty members met regularly to discuss how they would utilize the three-pronged integrative model. Place-based academic content was always paired with a corresponding place-based experience; faculty-members consistently included a 40 to 60 minute student debrief following each place-based experience. Faculty members also enforced student observation of TTS's rules, policies, and procedures. Faculty-members reported that these rules, policies, and procedures helped to facilitate student transformation by encouraging particular behaviors, values, and attitudes (e.g. "critique and feel comfortable asking respectful yet probing questions of guest lecturers") and prohibiting others (e.g. students are not allowed to wear sunglasses in indigenous villages that prevent students from greeting a villager by looking him/her directly in the eye).

The teacher-team also facilitated two to three team-building activities per week that students reported helped to improve cohesion amongst the cohort. Once per week, teachers facilitated a group meeting in which students and teachers openly reflected upon both the positive and negative ways the group was living and working together as well as collective behaviors, values, and attitudes the group would try to improve upon in the upcoming week. Students and faculty reported that these activities and meetings significantly improved group cohesion by allowing students to critically consider the impact of their own actions and change actions that were negatively impacting the group.

## **Discussion**

Between the beginning and conclusion of the study-abroad semester in Central America, seemingly abstract, fragmented, and immutable themes and events (e.g. conflict, poverty, environmental degradation) became a coherent whole for students, as well as immediately and personally relevant. Most importantly, students came to perceive these issues as able to be acted upon or changeable. TTS's three-pronged, integrative approach to pedagogy is the consistent organizational structure intended to facilitate this process from one semester to the next, regardless of the differing geographic locales in which the semesters takes place and the changing composition of students and faculty-members.

During and after the Central America semester, faculty-members and administrators reported an unusually high degree of transformation in students' behaviors, values, and attitudes. We understand and explain this degree of change as a direct outcome of the teacher-team's interdisciplinary pedagogical approach to teaching the core course themes of: immigration, civil war, colonization, indigenous rights, land and resource management, education rights, and international trade-relations. The teacher-team, independent of the administration albeit with the administration's approval, devised their interdisciplinary pedagogical approach for the Central America semester during their pre-trip orientation. The administration offered minimal oversight or assistance in planning specific interdisciplinary coursework either before or during the semester.

We account for the teacher-team's interdisciplinary approach to teaching as an incidental result of having worked several previous semesters with TTS and with one another on previous TTS semesters. Additionally, each faculty-member possessed a high degree of familiarity, comfort, and expertise with the academic courses they were teaching in Central America. Faculty-members discussed upcoming possibilities for interdisciplinary lessons and place-based experiences at their weekly staff meetings. They coordinated the assigned readings to mutually reinforce concepts across all courses. They also team-taught a number of interdisciplinary courses (e.g. a History/Science course where students analyzed how the loss of indigenous rights to land and resources impacted the ways in which land is utilized for agribusiness throughout Central America).

The teacher-team's previous work experiences with TTS as well as their expertise with the academic courses they were teaching enabled them to develop and implement an

interdisciplinary pedagogic approach that amplified the effectiveness of TTS's three-pronged integrative approach to pedagogy. However, the teacher-team's previous experience and expertise did not prepare them to anticipate at what point in the semester they would witness significant transformations in students' behaviors and values. Nor did they anticipate the ways in which their own behaviors, values, and attitudes would be changed.

In the first four weeks of the semester when the group traveled throughout a variety of towns and indigenous communities in central and northeast Guatemala, students were observed and reported feeling intellectually and emotionally disoriented. Throughout that time, faculty-members facilitated place-based experiences while students were simultaneously acquiring the critical analytic frameworks in their academic courses that enabled them to understand and explain those experiences. Students became visibly irritated when asked to engage in complex analytic discussions, particularly in their history course. In the third week of the semester at the conclusion of her history class, one student, without being prompted, stated, "I just want to know the answer. I hated my history course at my high school, but at least it was simple—memorize and regurgitate. I am exhausted having to think about all of this all the time."

During the initial four weeks of the course, faculty-members expressed amongst themselves frustration at students' reluctance to critically analyze place-based experiences. One faculty-member stated, "they say they want to know and we are putting everything in front of them and they shut down. They say they want to 'change the world' and yet they want to stay in the same comfortable place!" Faculty-members regularly discussed amongst themselves their experiences in facilitating student transformation on other TTS semesters. They also deliberated upon how to best utilize the three-pronged integrative approach to pedagogy and interdisciplinary assignments to facilitate student openness to complexity and engage students in critical analysis about their place-based experiences. During the fifth week of the semester, faculty-members planned a series of intense place-based experiences paired with a small number of readings and daily debriefing and reflection sessions during the six days that the group visited the colonial town of San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas, Mexico.

In San Cristobal, students visited an indigenous boarding school founded on principles of liberation theology,<sup>7</sup> engaged in a two-hour dialogue with a former Zapatista leader,<sup>8</sup> engaged in

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<sup>7</sup> For further readings on liberation theology, see Berryman, Phillip, *Liberation Theology: essential facts about the revolutionary movement in Latin America and beyond* (1987).

a separate two-hour dialogue with a former political prisoner who had spent over fifteen years in jail without trial, and attended a lecture on North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA),<sup>9</sup> Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), and trade relations between the United States and Central America. In the debriefing sessions that followed each experience, students reported grasping connections between events and concepts that had previously appeared to them as unrelated or distinct. As one student explained, “I see it now. I see how trade regulations, privatization and de-regulation, corporate lobbying, NAFTA and CAFTA—all of it impacts peoples’ ability to earn a living in Central America and how and why Central Americans try to immigrate to the US for work.” Students were observed posing an increasing number of analytic questions to guest speakers and also engaging in discussions related to their place-based experiences with faculty-members and fellow students during group meals and in their free time.

During the faculty-facilitated reflection sessions that followed each place-based experience in San Cristobal, students openly expressed for the first time that semester feelings of anger and guilt that they had not been made to know of or understand what they were learning about in Central America in their home high schools in the United States. “Nothing I’ve learned has meant anything and I’m angry. People are capable of doing something if they know...but maybe that’s the whole point...nothing can be done if people don’t know.” During the final reflection session in San Cristobal, each member of the group, including the faculty, shared one goal she had for the rest of the semester. In a variety of ways, students repeatedly expressed a commitment to learning as much as they could, regardless of how intellectually and emotionally challenging it might be. One student stated, “as much as it scares me, I want to know. These are peoples’ lives. Don’t hold anything back from us.” In a faculty-meeting following the reflection circle, teachers expressed excitement and relief at students’ new willingness, and ability to engage in critical analysis and demonstrate an openness to receive complex and difficult information. “This is what we have been waiting for,” one teacher stated. “It’s now up to us to take them to the next level.”

In subsequent weeks, as the group traveled throughout central and southwestern Guatemala and central and western El Salvador, students continued to critically analyze events,

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<sup>8</sup> A revolutionary group based in Chiapas, Mexico. For further readings on Zapatistas, see Harvey, Neil (1998). *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy*. Duke University Press.

<sup>9</sup>For further reading, see M. Angeles Villarreal (2010) *NAFTA and the Mexican Economy*, Federation of American Scientists Congressional Research Service.

themes, and concepts related to the Guatemalan and El Salvadoran civil wars and immigration. Students' sustained intellectual engagement with these topics corresponded with observed increases in students' expressions of anger, frustration, and sadness. In a history class in central Guatemala during week eight, one student stated, "I just...I don't know how to explain these stories to my parents. How do you explain war? How do you explain U.S. involvement in the wars here? I can't sleep...I can't stop thinking about it." While faculty-members had previously expressed irritation at students' reluctance engage in critical analysis, for the remainder of the semester faculty-members were observed and reported feeling uncertain about their own abilities to manage student transformation. One teacher recorded, "all they can think about is despair. And we brought them here. The thing is...I don't know how to pull them out—how to get them hopeful again because I feel the same way they do."

Teachers' ambivalence and growing anxiety towards students' emotional dissonance was accompanied by a temporary, albeit marked decline in communication between the teacher team and the administration. Amongst themselves during the second part of the semester and then with the administration at the conclusion of the semester, the teachers (in a manner similar to the students) expressed difficulty explaining to those not in the field what was happening and the challenges they were having. One faculty-member explained, "we keep trying to find experiences for the girls so they can hear of hope and resilience. We think we've found one and then we go and again and again it's about violence, death, exploitation...they're starting to think that's all there is."

By week nine, teachers resumed speaking with members of the administration approximately once or twice per week via phone. The administration helped the teachers plan activities that resulted in students' considering and understanding the tangible ways they might turn their despair into activism and advocacy. These included a number of outdoor activities (e.g. backpacking and kayaking) that allowed students to still engage in interdisciplinary, place-based learning but temporarily minimized students' engagement with issues related to warfare and immigration. In the final weeks of the semester as students traveled throughout Honduras, students reported that they had considered and understood tangible ways they were going to address particular issues they had become aware of in Central America when they returned to their home high schools. These included gaining expertise in a topic that was of particular interest to them through self-guided study, selecting a major in college that would allow them to

focus on that topic, and volunteering in the future with one of the many organizations with which we had volunteered during the semester in Central America. Students also reported that they intended to focus on small changes in their own behavior, particularly related to consumption (e.g. using less water and making a conscious effort to shop at stores that engage in fair trade practices). As one student declared, "you have to look at yourself and make a change first."

Teachers reported feeling relieved that students' were no longer exhibiting sadness, anger, and frustration and that students were instead critically considering ways to advocate for and act upon challenging issues. However, amongst themselves, teachers continued to question the role they had played in facilitating student transformation and the unanticipated changes in teachers' own behaviors, values, and attitudes. One faculty member stated during the last faculty meeting of the semester, "we ruptured their entire worldview—which is what we had intended. But once it happened, we are the ones who had to put their world back together—not artificially, but genuinely. And if we hadn't managed to do that, we would be sending thirteen girls home who think that the world is an awful place."

## **Conclusion**

We asked two primary questions in our study: 1) what, if any, notable transformations occurred in students' and teachers' behaviors, values, and attitudes during their participation in a fifteen week study-abroad program in Central America? (RQ1); and 2) What are the processes teachers and administrators utilized to facilitate student transformation? (RQ2) We framed the study as an autoethnographic case study and utilized a coding methodology primarily utilized in grounded studies for the purpose of separating our own embedded assumptions that formed as a result of our active participation in the study. We found that TTS's three-pronged approach to pedagogy in which place-based content, paired with place-based experience and regular debriefing and reflection is the most effective process faculty-members utilized to facilitate student transformation.

On the Central America semester, teachers' interdisciplinary approach, paired with TTS's three-pronged approach, resulted in an unusually high degree of transformation in students' behaviors, values, and attitudes. Students came to see connections across themes and tangible ways they might turn their own emotional dissonance into activism and advocacy. Teachers intentionally facilitated student transformation via academic and experiential activities that were



intellectually and emotionally challenging. However, teachers did not anticipate that their own behaviors, values, and attitudes would change along with that of the students, nor that they would become ambivalent about their responsibilities and capabilities.

This study is valuable for administrators and course planners for both high school and college study abroad programs in planning curricular and pedagogical approaches that effectively facilitate student transformation. Many existing study-abroad programs utilize one facet of the three-pronged approach (e.g. place-based content without place-based experience or place-based experience without place-based content); reflection is notably absent from both approaches. However, findings from this study suggest that all three facets are mutually reinforcing and necessary to facilitate student transformation. The study is also valuable to administrators and course planners in structuring pre-departure faculty orientation and training and in offering support and advice to faculty-members while on-course. Understanding better the particular challenges faculty face in the field offers expansive possibilities for further research. Finally, this study's findings related to changes in students' behaviors, values, and attitudes might be utilized by study abroad program facilitators as guidelines for alternative formative and/or summative assessment.

By way of conclusion, we offer the words of a former TTS faculty-member who stated that, "the promise of study abroad programming is that it makes life and learning indistinguishable for students, such that they cannot objectify what they learn, because it becomes part of them."<sup>10</sup> Our study suggests that realizing this promise is not an incidental outcome of simply going abroad. Rather, rather it is an intentional process, facilitated by field-based faculty, of intellectual and emotional dissonance that remains amplified once students return home.

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<sup>10</sup> 2012, June 28. *Claire Hirschmann; TedXDirigo: Making Life and Learning Indistinguishable*. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMPcEsNZBF8>

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