

Mentored Undergraduate Research and Creating Lifelong Transformed Learners: An Interview with Doreen Sams

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This editorial interview was conducted with Dr. Doreen Sams, who is a professor in the department of management, marketing, and logistics at Georgia College and State University (GCSU), where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses along with a Global Marketing course in Spain every other summer. She is the faculty coordinator for Mentored Undergraduate Research and Creative Endeavors (MURACE) at GCSU and serves as a Council on Undergraduate Research Councilor. She was interviewed by editorial research assistant, Anna Doré.

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Anna: *Tell me a little bit about yourself.*

Doreen: I came out of the business world where I worked in management and marketing for both government and private sector companies over my career. I became part of the Georgia College & State University faculty in 2005 as a tenure track assistant professor. In 2010, I was tenured and promoted to Associate Professor, and in 2015 became a full professor. I have been the faculty lead for the global business course in the Georgia WebMBA since 2008. I have taught 15 different marketing courses since 2003, but predominately teach Marketing Research and Digital Analytics to undergraduates. I have been a graduate professor for the Masters of Business Administration courses both on-campus and in the Georgia WebMBA since 2006. I teach a Global Business course and Advance Marketing course for Masters' students. I also teach undergraduates every other summer in Spain during the month of June. I take between 12-17 GCSU students to Spain to study Marketing in Spain and also a course in Global Marketing. We arrive in Madrid and visit cultural sites, then travel to Granada, again visiting cultural sites. We then move on to Sevilla for the rest of the program where I lecture, we visit companies, marketers visit our classroom, we work on our marketing projects and blogs, and we also visit more cultural sites. It is my firm belief that business does not occur in silos and in order to be great at marketing or doing business in other countries, researching the country and its culture and subcultures, are imperative. While teaching in Spain, I also teach Global Business for the Georgia

WebMBA. I serve on the Graduate Curriculum committee, the Institutional Review Board, and lead a Professional Learning Committee on undergraduate research. I have served on several Faculty Search Committees (chair two), the University Senate & chaired a Senate subcommittee, Promotions and Tenure committee, and was a Faculty Advisor for the International Business Club for years. I have served on various other committees at GC.

I became the faculty coordinator for MURACE in 2012. I handle a \$100,000 budget that supports student presentations at conferences including Campus SRC, COPLAC, GURC (steering committee), NCUR and discipline specific conference, supports summer research with funding, student research circles, CUR Councilors, annual faculty/student symposiums, planning and implementation grants, and research on a regional journal to name a few things. I attend many CUR Institutes and bring the knowledge back to GC. I also present at CUR conference. I am the first marketing professor in 13 years at Georgia College to receive paid professional leave to conduct research. My professional leave begins in January 2019 ending at the end of May 2019. I will be conducting research on brand communities.

I seriously began my undergraduate degree once my children were in school. I took courses part-time while working full-time at a university. Then, after a devastating automobile crash in 1996, I returned to school in 1997 full-time and finished my BA in Marketing (1998), MBA (1999)—finished in Costa Rica, and PhD (2005). Since 2004, I have authored or co-authored 23 journal articles (many are interdisciplinary). Many of those articles are pedagogical. I have presented and been published in 67 conferences and conference proceedings since 2001. My very first presentation was in Hong Kong, China. Since then, I have presented across the USA, in Puerto Rico, France, Greece, Portugal, and Spain. I serve on the editorial review board for several journals and am a reviewer for several journals, conferences, and textbooks. I love being involved as an editor and reviewer because I am able to see the forefront of research that is happening.

Anna: *Tell me about your definition of transformative learning.*

Doreen: TL is an active process of learning that encourages seeing new things, seeing old things differently, and re-conceptualizing mindsets for everyone, including me as the teacher/mentor, by creating a shared vision for a course (I provide the clients and they select the project that best fits with their interest for marketing research). It is a form of learning in which we, as professors, provide a safe space where students are able to learn through various lenses and not just the lens that their life has afforded them. One of the greatest and most important factors as far as I am concerned as to transformative learning comes from working and learning with people in places where others are “not just like me.” My courses have been described

as challenging, but fair. I provide my students with experiential learning in all courses and promote reflection (looking at what the project is, will mean to the client, will mean to them) and reflection using mind mapping.

For example, study abroad. It has opened the world to my students as they see the old and the new come together providing a depth of understanding that books and lectures cannot provide alone. Hands-on, not hands-off! I am always thrilled to hear them say things like “wow, I had no idea,” or “I would have never learned this in a classroom.” Several of my study abroad students have reflected on the experience, stating, “I learned more in a month than I have learned in a year in the classroom.” As to undergraduate research, it is often a struggle to help students realize there are so many factors that impact decisions. Once they are introduced to research, they start the process of realizing that life is not the ying or the yang, but everything in between matters. They learn to take personal feelings out of their work and base their statements on scientifically collected facts. It is a life changing experience, which moves them forward in self-efficacy and self-awareness.

Anna: *How were you introduced to transformative learning theory and/or practice?*

Doreen: I was first introduced to formally to transformative learning theory when I began working at Georgia College (a liberal arts university). Although I had engaged in transformative learning in the last years of my undergraduate degree and my MBA, I was not aware of the “theory” behind it or that it was an official teaching style until arriving at GC.

Anna: *How did you decide upon transformative learning as a useful theory for your personal research and/or practice?*

Doreen: I didn’t. It was already part of my life and I just learned there was a theory behind what I already did and believed. Ph.D. programs do not typically teach you how to teach; they teach you to research. I was fortunate to have a teaching component to my Ph.D. program and to have great mentors. If they mentioned transformative learning theory per se, I believe I would remember it.

Anna: *Tell me about your program of research and/or practice, how it is linked to transformative learning, and what made you care about it?*

Doreen: I approach my research with an openness to alternative approaches to living and the sense of possibilities that one discipline alone cannot offer. Co-authoring with others from different disciplines allows me to expand my knowledge and avoid biases from examining a topic from one perspective. You ask what made me care about TL, well, one of my colleagues once said that the research conducted by theatre professors isn’t real research. That

narrow minded thinking made me even more determined to be sure my students and mentees realized how important the perspective of all disciplines are to learning. I have started a student research circle to start in August 2018, in which students from multiple disciplines share how they research what they are researching and how their research could be related. No one in the circle is permitted to say anything negative toward any student researcher. There will be faculty at the circle (new and experienced) to observe but not to comment. Further, they will be asked to bring freshmen or sophomores to the circle and then mentor them.

Anna: *What other experiences have you had with Transformative Learning along with your program of research?*

Doreen: When teaching, I use business clients (international, nonprofit, or for-profit). They partner with my students in which they learn from the students, the students learn from them, and I provide a safe space to learn. The students benefit by working with others “not like them.” This provides the opportunity for shifts in consciousness and changes their relationship with others, and through exploring projects with people of varying levels of power, they learn about the social structures that they will work in once they graduate.

Anna: *Why is research and mentoring research at the undergraduate level important to you? How does it differ from mentoring students/professionals beyond the undergraduate level?*

Doreen: Because I was a first generation college student. I came from a home where education was not valued if it was acquired by females. I grew up in a very negative household in which my great grades in school only served to cause embarrassment because it set me apart from my friends in a not-so-positive way. It wasn't until I started helping my husband study for his college degree that I realized I could do it too. I earned honors all the way through college. My champion and role model was my husband. I did not have any other role models in school until I was in master's program. I had several mentors in my Ph.D. program, but one who believed in me as a researcher the most did what she could to be sure I succeeded was Dr. Miriam Stamps. So, it matters because I did not have a mentor when I was an undergraduate and believe I could have accomplished even more if I would have had a mentor sooner. My husband was my champion, but he spoke the language of “computer programmers” and I was a marketing student. I mentor students in getting good jobs in our discipline, but that is about taking the right courses, networking, and resumes, not about life skills to be lifelong learners that mentoring in undergraduate research is.

Anna: *I read that you “emphasize synergy and balance between service, research, and researching.” What advice would you offer to faculty seeking to integrate undergraduate research mentorship into their workloads?*

Doreen: My advice is find the balance that works best for where they are in their career path, but to commit to all three, not just one or two aspects of their job, and to do it because you love it and want the next generation of graduates to love it too. Most schools dictate the balance needed for tenure and promotion. This is a very important guideline as a newly minted, yet-to-be-tenured faculty. However, it is just a guideline. How a faculty member balances their work life will depend on the type of institution. Although we are a balanced school, our first focus is teaching, then research, and then service. What many miss is that research and service can be a strategic part of teaching when combined through experiential learning projects. There is service in mentoring and supervising students who are providing a deliverable for a client. Mentoring an undergraduate student’s research and co-authoring with them encompasses teaching, researching, and providing a service to the student. Often, as in our case, there is no pay for mentoring undergraduate research. Although there are discussions at the T&P committee level, it is not fully embraced across campus yet and for some universities it is not moving toward the T&P process yet. A couple of examples for you: I had a student that was considered a “throwaway” by others. I took her under my wing and we worked on research together; before she graduated, she was published in a conference and a journal, and her GPA increased significantly. She has gone on to be the head of marketing for an international company. I had another student who was struggling a bit, but was still a great student who found his footing in the collaborate research that we conducted. He just needed to find his passion in life to move him from good to great (FYI, I use the book, *Good to Great*, in many of my MBA classes). He is now a top salesperson in the Business-to-Business world just two years out from graduation. Mentoring student research is a way to share your love of learning while serving students and society serving the greater good, which demonstrates that you really do care about the students and the communities’ future, and it improves your teaching. See my work with the City of Milledgeville’s Waste Water Treatment Facility (FOG). It shows that as faculty you are not just a sage on the stage in the classroom. You get to change lives.

Anna: *What role has teaching, both in your classroom and study abroad experiences, played in the development of your current beliefs/practice in Transformative Learning?*

Doreen: Study abroad informs my classroom teaching, and teaching in the classroom informs my study abroad. The study abroad is a combination of experiential

(visiting companies and cultural venues), classroom lectures, and projects that finish with a reflection piece. One or two students typically conduct research while we are there as they are seeking additional credit in the Honor's program or just want to participate in research. We work to publish their research at a conference (E.g., Kate Butcher presented our research at the GC Gala for donors last year). Then, I bring the knowledge from the study abroad programs back to the classroom and share it where appropriate and use it to inspire others to study abroad.

Anna: *What impact do you believe your work has had on the transformation of your students as well?*

Doreen: I have been fortunate to see at least one to two students each semester go on to get their Masters in Marketing Research at the Terry College of Business at the University of Georgia (very hard to get into). This behavior is very unusual for our students, most in Marketing head straight to business careers. I have had many of my study abroad students go on to travel the world and seek international job placements. Many of my students stay in touch through LinkedIn and Facebook and share with me how much my teaching style and mentoring has changed their lives. I do not look for any one type of student to mentor as to GPA, I look for students hungry to learn, even if their GPA is at the danger level. I also provide an internship through MURACE and the students who have engaged in that internship credit what they learned to helping them get good jobs after graduation.

Anna: *What differences do you see in how college courses are taught when you were an undergraduate student vs now? How many elements of transformative Learning theory (even if they didn't have a name for it at the time) did you see as a student vs now?*

Doreen: Well, since I have been in college off and on virtually all of my adult life, finishing my Ph.D. in 2005; I have experienced many different learning styles. In the 70s and 80s, it was a lot of memorize and spit back and I am great in that role. That is evident by my GPA and honors (Alpha Sigma Lambda, Golden Key, Beta Gamma Sigma, Phi Kappa Phi, Omicron Delta, University Honors – I may have missed one or two). But I am also the queen of core dumps. If I do not need it or do not perceive needing it, the information is gone to the deep recesses of my brain not to be raised to consciousness again. It was pretty much the same at the research institute I studied at in the 90s except for my international marketing strategy and my Marketing Research course where Dr. Miriam Stamps and Dr. David Ortinau gave us real world projects. Once I entered my MBA in 1998, it was track-based and our capstone was a “real world” project that crossed two semesters. This is where I fell in love with experiential learning. And, I

was also able to take two courses in Costa Rica (although not the best experience as I was sick a lot of the time), and I fell in love with understanding how business was conducted in other countries. The one missing element was “culture”—going to the hot springs was not culture or going to the beach on the Pacific side was not culture (I am a Floridian so beaches are beaches). Living there on a college campus in dorms was not culture. So, I decided that culture would be a “key element” in the study abroad course I teach because without the cultural aspect it is just another set of business tours. That is not to say that I did not learn about the business culture, but I needed to understand the *why* behind what they did differently from how we in the US do things and that was missing.

Anna: *Do you think it is realistic to think of a future where most companies incorporate Transformative Learning theory while emphasizing social responsibility into their business? If so, what will it take to achieve this?*

Doreen: As I am guessing from your questions, you know where most of my passions are housed. Corporate social responsibility is a big part of most college curriculums in business today. It is typically taught in Business Ethics and Business and Legal Environment; however, many of us infuse it in all of our business courses (especially in marketing). Since, we at GC are all about the GC Journey of Transformative learning and other colleges and universities have an increased emphasis on experiential learning, study abroad, undergraduate research, leadership, etc.; the leaders of the 21st century will hopefully take that learning style into their businesses. I have seen many changes in the business world itself over the 20th and 21st centuries and most of those changes came right out of MBA programs. Although, these days, I primarily teach MBAs online, I wrap as much transformative learning into their program as possible. I do not give quizzes for credit only, but for practice to assure that students are gaining an understanding of the material (no points). I have discussions that do *not* permit opinions, that *only* permit interpretation of facts gathered from reliable, relevant and valid sites. The purpose is to add value to my lectures and the textbook by exploring research and not believing through fake anything. I provide them with a journal article that I have paraphrased, give them a set of questions, and encourage them to add their own questions as they find articles pro or con to the topic. I also strategically choose their case studies to include social responsibility in every case study.

Anna: *How do you see Transformative Learning, as a theory and practice, evolving in the upcoming years?*

Doreen: I am not sure what you mean by “evolving,” but I do see it becoming mainstream in the field of college education. I am not familiar with what is occurring in K-12 now, but I would think it should start there as well. Unfortunately, some see it as too much work and may push back, but so be

it. Although, I had a Dean once tell me we need all styles of teaching, I do not agree that we need teaching that doesn't allow the learner to retain knowledge and learn to love learning.

Anna: *That's all of my questions, thank you for participating in the interview.*

References

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Author's Note: Anna Doré is a JoTL editorial research assistant and Diverse Student Scholar pursuing a master of arts in English Literature at the University of Central Oklahoma.

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