Transformative Growth in an International Experience through Cultural Humility

SHERAH BETTS CARR
Mercer University

S. MICHELLE VAUGHN
Mercer University

Abstract

After six years of experience in an international project with educators in the Dominican Republic, team members critically reflect on assumptions about the cultural and transformative dynamics of the work. As Mezirow (2009) asserts, "the most personally significant transformations involve a critique of premises regarding the world and one's self" (p.22). The experience details the work of faculty members at a US college of education and partner schools in the Dominican Republic (DR). The deep level of transformative learning was a humbling element, especially for those who considered themselves the culturally relevant educational "experts." This essay additionally examines the depth of the transformative process and the lessons learned as participants came to accept the realization that a more honest evaluation was needed to transform from deficit to asset thinking (Valencia, 2010). Four phases of transformation from an intercultural perspective are explored including disorienting dilemmas, critical assumptions, competence in relationships, and the reintegration of new perspectives (Mezirow, 2000). Experiences from other international projects will examine and compare the challenges of cultural competence and the impact of transformation on individuals. An essential component was listening to the voices of our DR partners. Through contemplative practice, critical reflection, and honest conversation about cultural capacity, transformative learning through cultural humility is recognized as the most significant area of growth.

Keywords: transformative learning, international experience, cultural humility, disorienting dilemmas, critical assumptions, cultural competence, professional learning

Background

This essay details the complexities, challenges, and transformative learning experiences encountered by educators from the United States of America and the Dominican Republic (DR) during a six-year long collaborative partnership aimed at supporting student learning. During the stages of reflection in gathering and reviewing feedback as well as composing this essay, we have come to realize that it is through cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998) that we have experienced the most transformative growth from this international encounter. As Mezirow (2009) asserts, "the most personally significant transformations involve a critique of premises regarding the world and one's self" (p.22). Our international project has demonstrated ways that deep transformative learning takes analysis of assumptions (Mezirow, 2000) and creates extensive critical reflection (Mezirow, 1990; Brookfield, 2010, & 2017). Moreover, we learned through cultural humility that what seemed like cultural roadblocks turned into cultural bridges.

This project began in the fall of 2013 at the request of our university leaders who had been exploring a partnership with The McDonald Center for the Advancement of Global Education. The project focus was to work with Dominican schools to set common goals and strategies for improving student learning. By the fall of 2019, we were working with four schools and by the summer of 2020,

three additional schools will be added to the endeavor. Our university team ranges from four to six faculty members as well as numerous college students who help with various components of the project.

During an initial visit in 2013 to what would be our first partner school in San Pedro de Macorís, the cultural challenges became apparent. The visit was primarily designed to meet the educators, talk with them, visit classes and find out if they felt we could help in any way. We listened as they voiced concerns about their needs; some very concrete in terms of professional learning or resources but others reflected systemic issues of poverty in their communities.

In talking with the school leaders, they expressed desires to share ideas with teachers about ways to help students better understand content. They were particularly interested in strategies for classroom management. As the project moved forward, we found ourselves developing learning modules and providing professional learning. The project progressed quickly and now, in retrospect, we were looking more at ways to improve student learning based on our Americanized view of instruction rather than through the lens of the needs of the Dominican cultural mores. Interestingly, as faculty teaching courses that embedded cultural competency and transformative learning theory, we now humbly realize we were discounting some of the key tenets of these premises in our international experience. There is poignant truth in Mezirow's comments that "the more reflective and open we are to the perspectives of others, the richer our imagination of alternative contexts for understanding will be" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 20). It became clear that we needed to question our cultural competence for the project to move forward.

The next sections of this essay will look at some specific pieces of this international project and how transformative learning experiences worked in various ways to provide new understandings and practice through disorienting dilemmas, sets of assumptions, and reintegration of new perspectives combined with the power of reflective practice and cultural humility.

The Disorienting Recognition of Ethnocentrism

Most of the faculty involved in our project had taught about Mezirow's theory. We knew Mezirow's key tenets of transformative learning theory "as the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) – sets of assumption and expectation – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2018, p.116). The question became: were we enacting the elements of the theory with fidelity in our intercultural experience?

International projects like ours, have many intertwining levels of cultural and implementation complexity. Mitchell and Paras (2018) have eloquently expressed the concerns of the dissonance in international initiatives and how this challenge can have the positive outcome of transformative growth. In our project, the notion of meeting the expectations of our project funding source as well as the demands of the Dominican educational authorities promoting and supporting our work all generated elements of disorientation. In conversations and interviews with Dominican educators, especially those teachers on the frontline of day-to-day instruction, we realized the project presented dissonance and dilemmas for them as well. Nevertheless, our ethical sense of examining our own preconceived assumptions about the purpose and mission of our work was a task that we could not avoid.

When critically reflecting on our experiences over time, it seems that the initial signals we were getting from our Dominican partners were ones that indicated they welcomed our educational innovations. We had the impression that we were advancing their methods of instruction. The feedback on professional learning evaluation forms was always glowing and complimentary. However, we would notice that during our next instances of communication or observation that the educators had not really embraced the ideas and, in many cases, their familiar Dominican teaching methods had remained the same. There were times when we were totally puzzled by this. We found ourselves worrying about our partnership and questioning the commitment to the project. It became clear that deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010) and what Mezirow (2018) labels as "ethnocentrism" were getting in the way. Kohlbry and Daugherty (2015) detail findings related to the ways that new cultural perspectives can lead to the realization of unconscious ethnocentricity that is part of the process of transforming into a deeper level of

cultural competence. We experienced this same awareness of hidden ethnocentrism and, in the process, it proved to be a disorienting manifestation of our own cultural competency.

Disorienting dilemmas can be a common experience when participating in international projects especially when there is a stark contrast in the cultural mores of the partner country. Numerous authors have conveyed the unsettling experiences felt by participants encountering international settings especially for the first times. McDowell, Goessling, and Melendez (2012) specifically looked at the experience of disorienting dilemmas in the students participating in an international immersion. They noticed that what the students saw and experienced led them "to inspect their values and understandings of the world—sometimes affirming their cultural perspectives and sometimes challenging and/or broadening their systems of assumptions" (p. 377). This introspection is a common occurrence when one encounters disorienting dilemmas. Mezirow (1991) explains that without the disorienting dilemma, the process of self-examination through reflection and discourse might not even happen. We inherently knew this premise but were taken off guard when we encountered it ourselves.

Mezirow (2018) mentions the issue of ethnocentrism as an example of a habit of mind that can lead to regarding others outside your own cultural realm as inferior (p.116). Mezirow further explains that having a positive experience with someone outside of your group "may change an ethnocentric point of view but not necessarily one's ethnocentric habit of mind" (p.117). If someone would have asked us about our beliefs or cultural sensitivity regarding the international project at its inception, we would have been appalled at the mere insinuation that we were not fully culturally responsive and fully accepting of our Dominican partners. However, over time, and deeper reflecting during our late-night conversations within our group and our closest Dominican friends, we realized that we did in fact have some sets of assumptions that needed examination and transformation.

In conversations with our Dominican partners, we noticed that they were worried that they were not meeting "our" goals. We noticed that they were talking about the work as if it were solely ours and not their project. We also learned that there were more than a few teachers who thought the project was creating more work for them and that they were not sure of its effectiveness. In fact, one of the Dominican school leaders commented "I was discouraged every time I felt like the efforts of the project were met with resistance or complacency." This seemed alarming since we thought we had worked extremely hard at planning and helping our international partners establish their own goals and maintain ownership of the initiative. Mezirow (2012) mentions how disorienting dilemmas are many times "situations that take us by surprise and cause us to question assumptions … and in the process we alter how we see ourselves…" (p.142.) Our critically reflective conversations with our partners and among our university colleagues led us to reassess our thinking. We came to the realization that we did indeed have cultural biases that we had not clearly identified in the beginning stages of the project. Clapp-Smith and Wernsing (2014) noted that self-reflection in international cultural experiences can serve as transformational triggers. Certainly, our critical reflections caused what we now label as epochal disorientations. The notion that we were not culturally sensitive to the needs of the educators was indeed a hard pill to swallow.

Critical Assessment of Assumptions

Recognizing and transforming cultural bias takes deep introspection and reflection. As Mezirow commented in his conversations with Dirkx, Mezirow, and Cranton (2006), "Those of us who take seriously the 'transformative' in transformative learning are interested in a kind of 'deep' learning that challenges existing, taken-for-granted assumptions…" (p. 126). When designing and implementing international experiences there can be the tendency for those from the dominant culture to think of the work with those in international settings as less fortunate and needing our help. This work can make those more privileged participants think of themselves as being on a higher moral plane and not really in need of assumption examination. In our case, along with recognizing cultural biases, there was the admonition that we had to humbly accept the idea that our project was not as culturally relevant and impactful as we initially had hoped. Our sense of participating in a project that would be a way of helping others and

increasing learning experiences for less fortunate groups of international students and educators in a sense fed our moral belief that we were doing "good work." As Brookfield (1998) asserts, "We learn to recognize the dimensions of selfishness that attach themselves to moral action and come to distrust the pleasurable feelings we experience in acting 'morally.' Moral behavior is scrutinized for the selfishness it sometimes represents" (p.293). During our critical assessment, we realized that there was this element of selfishness in our thinking.

As we look back over these periods of critical reflection there is the additional realization that we sought not only internal reflection but external input as well. We were fortunate to have other scholars not involved in our project who were well versed in cultural competence. Some deep conversations about the challenges we were facing and our apprehensions about meeting the needs of our international partners led to honest and sometimes humbling critiques from our colleagues. O'Dwyer, Bowles, and Chróinin (2019) noted that external critical friends can extend our internal reflection and extend the ways we challenge our assumptions and ideas. In a recent study by Ceo-DiFrancesco, Dunn, and Solorio (2020), the process of experiencing dissonance through group reflection promotes new perspectives and builds the self-awareness necessary for enhancing intercultural competence. We found these factors at play in our personal growth in cultural competence. A trusted peer that is not deeply connected to your work can help in the identification of frailties that insiders may not be able to recognize.

After deep critical reflection and honest examination, we realize with humility that our assumptions about our unbiased thinking about the Dominican culture were unfounded and that we did indeed possess cultural biases that had to be recognized and owned. The positive result is the power of transformative experience and the capacity to use this learning to share our experiences with college students who work with marginalized populations. Research by Nerstrom (2017) reiterates our belief that transformative learning "has a long-term effect and that truly transformed people do not eventually revert to their prior ways of thinking and being" (p. 36). For us, the test of transformation is the ability to maintain constant examination of cultural relevancy and to ensure that new members of the project are included in reflective asset thinking (Valencia, 2010) about our Dominican partners.

Community and Growth Through Relationships

Despite the initial struggles of facing assumptions and uncovering bias, eventually there were many positive transformative elements in our international project that supported transformation. One aspect that stands out is the way that deep personal relationships within our team and with numerous Dominican educators developed over time. In our many discussions and interviews, we learned that our DR partners were experiencing transformative learning along with us. Taylor (1998) described the way that establishing relationships with others was one of the essential factors in transformative learning. Taylor (2007) additionally noted that we grow in our sense of community "through trustful relationships that allow individuals to have questioning discussions, share information openly and achieve mutual and consensual understanding" (p. 179). It was through more open, honest, and culturally sensitive conversations that we came to develop relationships with our Dominican partners. One key descriptive element of the DR culture is the importance of spending time strictly on social discourse. We learned to relax, slow down, stop looking at the clock, and enjoy chatting about the weather, family, and life in general before jumping into business talk.

In collaborative international projects, it takes time for both sides to navigate the cultural landscape. There can be misinterpretations and cultural nuances that can be either deliberately or unconsciously misread. Of course, many times it is strictly a language translation problem. In our conversations with our partners, they acknowledged that our inability to speak fluently in Latin American Spanish was a roadblock. Also, sometimes our translated instructional materials did not convey meaning that made sense. It took several rounds of translation with their support to get our educational jargon in sync with their pedagogical customs. These interactions uncovered our realization that despite reading, talking and listening about their culture, in our small private conversations, we came to understand that we still did not really understand them. This would lead to deeper, personal and sometimes very

individual reflective moments. Chang, Chen, Huang, and Yuan (2012) talk about this same concern they experienced with an international project in Taiwan. They found the participants in the project faced deeper inner personal growth. "When they interacted with the new environment, new challenges increased … consequently, there was a strong motivation for introspection from a deeper and closer perspective." (Chang et al., 2012, p. 241). Cultural conversations revealed differences, but it was also in some of those quiet, reflective moments alone that we faced the most honest recognition of our hidden deficit thinking.

Reintegration of New Perspectives

Over time the process of self-examination and critically reflective conversation, we came to identify the assumptions and biases that were holding us captive and preventing us from fully appreciating all the cultural assets inherent in our international work. These new sets of thinking proved to be beneficial to our closest Dominican partners. We took time to more closely attend to their insights and did more observing and listening than talking. Three of the teacher leaders that we were working with came to stay with us in the US. This time together opened new avenues for discussion since they visited numerous schools and had a better understanding of the commonalities and differences in the structure and cultural dimensions of our educational system. The trip was also full of social and family events. In interviewing these teachers, a few years after their visit, they mentioned that this trip was a turning point for them in the project, because we built deeper relationships in this intensive time together. One teacher wrote about the impact of this visit and that it was a transformative moment in the partnership since we were connecting with each other on human levels rather than professional levels.

Facing philosophical dilemmas did indeed lead to transformed behavior. Our American team transformed in specific ways. The planning of visits to the Dominican schools altered in the ways we approached our partnerships. Having a pre-established filter to look at the work from a more culturally responsive stance changes the focus and the outcomes. There is now more deep analysis about the assumptions related to our goals and actions. There is a more profound sensitivity to the needs of our partners. We realize now that we are the learners. These are good lessons that we have been able to pass on to new members of this international project as well as sharing with our college students.

Power of Reflective Practice and Cultural Humility

There are many elements of transformative learning that have occurred over the course of this international adventure. In this final section, there are two points that seem most salient to this essay. The first is the importance of open and contemplative reflection and the second is the power of recognizing cultural humility as a transformative area for growth when making assumptions regarding others who have backgrounds and ways of knowing different from your own.

In the case of this international experience, we believe that without critical reflection there would not have been the extent of transformative growth or the positive benefits of the goals of supporting international educational endeavors. Brookfield (2017) probably says it best when he describes critical reflection as the "sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of our … assumptions" (p. 3). It is never easy to conduct a deep examination of assumptions especially for adults who may think they have mastered bias recognition. However, many times assumption examination happens on a superficial level. Many of us are truly unaware of deep-seeded biases. In fact, some will swear they have none. However, when confronted with an international setting, when one is away from what is familiar and comfortable, sometimes, if you are fortunate enough and receptive enough, you may come to grips with your menacing biases and face them head on.

It is also through the tasks of listening and creating respectful conditions that one opens the doors to growth. Butterwick & Lawrence (2009) beautifully express these concepts:

How we ourselves illustrate respectful listening through our bodies and our words is important. We can create an environment where transformational learning can occur; however, without care and attention to the power we have and the working of creating conditions for respectful speaking and listening, we can also contribute to oppression and silencing. (p. 44)

There is a fine line we walk when involved with international experiences. We can approach the precipice with open and receptive frames of reference, or we can plunge ahead arrogantly thinking that we are the most culturally responsive ones in the room. We have come to believe that one of the ways we must begin each new international encounter is with a strong sense of cultural humility.

Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) originally considered cultural humility as a needed perspective for medical staff working in culturally diverse settings. These authors defined the concept as a "process that requires humility as individuals continually engage in self-reflection and self-critique as lifelong learners and reflective practitioners" (p.118). As the idea of cultural humility has evolved, recent work has examined the transformative capacity of cultural humility in the context of law (Hamman, 2017), library science (Andrews, Kim, & Watanabe, 2018), and nursing (Kako & Klingbeil, 2019). In addition, cultural humility naturally has many relevant applications for international experiences.

Hockett (2018) asserts that "the concept of cultural humility furthers the building blocks of transformational theory by also addressing one's previously held biases and assumptions regarding culture and diversity" (p. 124). As detailed in our international experiences, the disorienting dilemma of realizing our hidden cultural biases was the impetus for our transformative growth and revitalization of our cultural exchanges with educators in the Dominican Republic. What has become more apparent is how humbling an experience this can be. We believe that is that very sense of humility that brought about our deep analysis of our hidden cultural biases. There is power in knowing that transformative learning can occur even with those who are highly educated if they are willing to deeply examine their assumptions, critically reflect, and be open to change. Mezirow (1998) labeled transformative learning as emancipatory. We concur.

References

Andrews, N., Kim, S., & Watanabe, J. (2018). Cultural humility as a transformative framework for librarians, tutors, and youth volunteers: Applying a lens of cultural responsiveness in training library staff and volunteers. *Young Adult Library Services, 16*(2), 19-22.

Brookfield, S. (1998). Understanding and facilitating moral learning in adults. *Journal of Moral Education, 27*(3), 283–301.

Brookfield S. (2010). Critical reflection as an adult learning process. In Lyons N. (Eds.), *Handbook of reflection and reflective inquiry* (pp. 215-236). Boston, MA, Springer.

Brookfield, S.(2017). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Butterwick, S., & Lawrence, R. L. (2009). Creating alternative realities: Arts-based approaches to transformative Learning. In Mezirow, J. & Taylor, E. W. (Eds.), *Transformative learning in practice: Insights from community, workplace and higher education* (pp. 35-45). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Ceo-DiFrancesco, D., Dunn, L. S., & Solorio, N. (2020). Transforming through reflection: Use of student-led reflections in the development of intercultural competence during a short- term international immersion experience. *Internet Journal of Allied Health Sciences & Practice, 18*(2), 1–11.

Chang, W., Chen, C.L., Huang, Y., & Yuan, Y. (2012). Exploring the unknown: International service and individual transformation. *Adult Education Quarterly, 6*2(3), 230-251.

Clapp-Smith, R., & Wernsing, T. (2014). The transformational triggers of international experiences. *The Journal of Management Development, 33*(7), 662-679.

Dirkx, J. M., Mezirow, J., & Cranton, P. (2006). Musings and reflections on the meaning, context, and process of transformative learning: A dialogue between John M. Dirkx and Jack Mezirow. *Journal of Transformative Education, 4*(2), 123–139.

Hamman, E. (2017). Culture, humility and the law: Towards a more transformative teaching framework. *Alternative Law Journal, 42*(2), 156–161.

Hockett, E. (2018). Teaching and learning in Kenya: Examining the shifts in cultural learning of experienced educators. *Journal of Research on Christian Education, 27*(2), 121–144.

Kako, P. M., & Klingbeil, C. G. (2019). Facilitating cultural humility and attunement for nursing and health professions students through a study abroad program in Kenya. *Nursing Education Perspectives, 40*(5), 278–282.

Kohlbry, P., & Daugherty, J. (2015). International service-learning: An opportunity to engage in cultural competence. *Journal of Professional Nursing, 31*(3), 242-246.

McDowell, T., Goessling, K., & Melendez, T. (2012). Transformative learning through international immersion: Building multicultural competence in family therapy and counseling. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 38*(2), 365–379.

Mezirow, J. (1990). How critical reflection triggers transformative learning. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: A guide to transformative and emancipatory learning* (pp. 1-20). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1998). On critical reflection. *Adult Education Quarterly, 48*(3), 185-198.

Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 3-34). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (2009). Transformative learning theory. In J. Mezirow, E. Taylor, and Associates (Eds.), *Transformative learning in practice: Insights from community, workplace and higher education.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (2012). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In E. W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (2018). Transformative learning theory. In K. Illeris (Ed.), *Contemporary theories of learning: Learning theorists in their own words* (pp. 114-128). New York, NY: Routledge.

Mitchell, L., & Paras, A. (2018). When difference creates dissonance: Understanding the "engine" of intercultural learning in study abroad. *Intercultural Education, 29*(3), 321–339.

Nerstrom, N. (2017). Transformative learning: Moving beyond theory and practice. *International Journal of Adult Vocational Education and Technology, 8*(1), 36–46.

O'Dwyer, A., Bowles, R., & Chróinin, D. N. (2019). Supporting collaborative self-study: An exploration of internal and external critical friendships. *Studying Teacher Education, 15*(2), 139-159.

Taylor, E. W. (1998). *The theory and practice of transformative learning: A critical review.* Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education.

Taylor, E. W. (2007). An update of transformative learning theory: A critical review of the empirical research (1999–2005*). International Journal of Lifelong Education, 26*(2), 173-191.

Tervalon, M., & Murray-Garcia, J. (1998). Cultural humility versus cultural competence: A critical distinction in defining physician training outcomes in multicultural education. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved, 9*(2), 117-125.

Valencia, R. (2010). *Dismantling contemporary deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Author's Note: Sherah Carr is an associate professor at Tift College of Education at Mercy University in Atlanta, Georgia. Dr. S. Michelle Vaughn is an associate professor for the Tift College of Education of Mercer University.