

## What is “Transformative” about Study Abroad?

Undergraduate students from institutions in the United States assert that their study abroad experience is “transformative”. Yet the learning measurements used to assess study abroad, the IDI, BEVI, and their derivatives, fail to empirically show this transformative learning in many cases (Milton, 2012 & Bennett, 2012). Therefore, what is transformative about study abroad? This paper seeks to answer this question through textual analysis of the words of students.

When students describe study abroad their language is about co-curricular learning. Co-curricular learning in study abroad is not the same as schooling (Cremin, 1972) in study abroad, though co-curricular learning can be intended or unintended, as long as the co-curricular agency to learn is that of the student, and not that of the curricular authority to compel by teaching. The data consists of student essays, presentations, narratives, and other artifacts that describe co-curricular learning during study abroad. In their own words, this paper will let students describe why they think that co-curricular learning during study abroad is transformative.

It is therefore notable that institutional assessment and psychometric research often fail to measure these student accounts about the meaning of their co-curricular learning experience in study abroad (Vande Berg, Paige, Hemming Lou, 2012). Higher education often responds by building schooling (i.e. cultural orientation, online cultural adaptation courses, student co-curricular support

services) to improve results on these assessments. This paper will put forth a point of view that, in context of study abroad, administration and faculty are doing something akin to 'teaching to the test'.

Study abroad is the pedagogy of undergraduate teaching in higher education in the United States, and as such, it is part of the movement to internationalize teaching and learning. As anthropologists of education, and as educators, we must take notice when students describe a learning experience as transformative. In this role, the methods of anthropology can help to make clear the deep meaning that students make in negotiating co-curricular learning during study abroad, and this paper will make the case for the power of this source of data to inform decision making in the study abroad field in higher education.