Transformative Learning through International Service Work

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Abstract

Transformative learning, and its processes as proposed by Mezirow, has been the subject of much debate. This study contributes to the literature about these debates by examining transformative experiences within a foreign service-learning context. Canadian post-secondary students lived and worked to build a school in solidarity with a community in Nicaragua. Their reflections inform three contentious controversies regarding the nature of transformative learning.

***Keywords*:** Transformative learning; service learning; post-secondary; qualitative.

Transformative learning (TL) has been espoused as the "new andragogy" (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). Mezirow, recognized as the seminal scholar in the field, defined transformative learning as the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs or opinions that will prove more true and justified to guide action. (Mezirow, 2012, p.76).

Although most research about transformative learning has been conducted using Mezirow's conceptual framework as a theoretical basis (Canton & Taylor, 2012), contemporary transformative learning theorists have challenged his ideas, and criticisms have followed three main themes (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). First, Mezirow's conceptualization of transformative learning has been criticized for privileging cognitive processes over affective aspects (Dirkx, 1997). Second, Mezirow has been criticized for his lack of attention to the relational processes that support transformative learning (Baumgartner, 2012; Taylor, 2007).

Finally, scholars such as Collard and Law (1989) and Taylor (1997) have found Mezirow's lack of attention to context and social change to be of concern. This criticism is made on two fronts—that Mezirow privileges individual change over social change (Taylor, 2007) and that studies of transformation have mainly been conducted with a Western world view as the framework (Chilisa, 2011). Moreover, there is a lack of research connecting international service learning (ISL) initiatives by student groups to the processes described in Mezirow's transformative learning theory (2000).

In this paper, we examine the transformational learning experiences of eleven Canadian post-secondary students who built a school in solidarity with a community in Nicaragua. Using grounded theory (Glazer & Strauss, 1967), we analyze the lived experiences of the students in order to shine light on these three debates about the nature of transformational learning, namely its nature as emotive or cognitive; its processes as solitary or communal; and finally its outcomes as individualistic or societal.

Mezirow's Theory of Transformative Learning

Mezirow's notions of transformative learning are based on constructivist and humanist assumptions (Mezirow, 1991). According to constructivist theory, new experiences are interpreted through a framework previously developed from past experiences. Mezirow called these frameworks *meaning perspectives* (1978, p. 108). When new experiences are incongruent with the learner's cognitive framework, they are either ignored, or a process is undertaken that results in an adjustment to the existing framework. This process is called *transformational learning* (TL). TL is not additive but is instead transformative in nature. TL is the result of not only changes to the content of the lived experiences but also to the framework through which they and future experiences are interpreted. Humanist theory is also represented in Mezirow's theory, according to Canton and Taylor (2012), as notions of personal choice and an individual's drive to self-actualize figure prominently.

Based on these theoretical underpinnings, Mezirow (1978, 1985, 1991, 2000) put forward an evolving theory that focused on the processes by which participants experienced transformation. Mezirow (2000) emphasized the importance of the first step, a *disorienting dilemma.* As a result of this dilemma, Mezirow proposed that a series of subsequent steps may take place, not necessarily in sequential pattern (Baumgartner, 2012). They included:

1. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame;
2. A critical assessment of assumptions;
3. Recognition of one's discontent and a process of sharing this transformation with others;
4. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions;
5. Planning a course of action;
6. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan;
7. Provisionally trying new roles;
8. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and
9. Reintegrating this new self into one's life on the basis of the conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22)

It should be noted that these ten steps represented the conceptualization of Mezirow's theorizing in 2000 and demonstrated modifications of his earlier work based on critiques from other theorists.

Three Main Critiques

The 2000 version of Mezirow's model represented a reworking of the 1978 version, and changes to the model were clearly a response to perceived inadequacies of earlier conceptualizations. For example, although not represented in the ten steps, Mezirow in his earliest (1978) paper discussed "dimensions of thought, feeling, and will" as psychological components of "meaning perspective[s]" (p. 108). Again in his 1985 paper, he discussed "cognitive… and affective" components of the meaning perspective as well as "making connections between feeling and action that guide the way in which we experience, feel, understand… and act upon our situation" (p. 22). In both cases, he gave attention to the emotional aspects of TL. These parenthetical observations were not acknowledged by his critics, however, and were later incorporated by Mezirow into the formal steps of this theory. Specifically, Step Two in the 1978 version gave no mention to feelings, while the 2000 version recognized the importance of "feelings of fear, guilt, anger and shame." (p. 22).

Early critics such as Boyd and Myers (1988) contributed to this evolution by calling attention to Mezirow's perceived privileging of cognitive processes over affective processes. Moreover, Dirkx (1997), one of Mezirow's main critics, focused attention on "learning through soul", which emphasized the relationship between cognitive processes and socioemotional aspects in the transformational learning process. Dirkx's work continued to affect Mezirow's thinking, and the two scholars later debated and then published together on their perspectives (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006). In 2006, Mezirow published a manuscript recognizing that his theory had given short shrift to the role of emotion in transformative learning.

A second area of Mezirow's theory that demonstrates modification in response to criticism is the conceptualization of transformation as solitary or relational (Baumgartner, 2012; Taylor, 2007). While early versions of the model focused specifically on the agency of the individual and his or her reflection as key processes in transformation, later versions acknowledged the importance of others as evidenced in Step Four through "a process of sharing this transformation with others" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22) and in Step Nine where individuals learn not only new roles but also new relationships.

A third aspect that provoked criticism was Mezirow's focus on the transformation of the individual over the transformation of society. In 1990, Mezirow differentiated between the political and educational roles of transformation. Mezirow overtly stated that he viewed the role of education as supporting individuals to develop awareness and insights about oppression so that they could take action against it. In contrast, Taylor (1997, 2009) viewed transformative learning from a different perspective. He argued that social transformation "is about ideology critique whereby people transform society and their own reality" (Canton & Taylor, 2012, p. 12). Despite Taylor's criticisms, Mezirow did not modify his stance on transformation of the individual versus transformation of society. As recently as 2006, Mezirow stated that he still viewed individual transformative learning as the prerequisite to taking social action to change society, and he responded to criticism such as those from Collard & Law (1989) by stating that the focus of transformative learning is questioning one's own assumptions rather than questioning political structures.

It appears that in the first two instances, Mezirow responded to critiques by either modifying his theory or drawing more attention to factors he had already represented in existing models. In the third instance, however, Mezirow did move from his conviction that transformative learning is in essence the transformation of an individual.

Applying Mezirow's Model to International Service Learning

Central to Mezirow's theory is the disorienting dilemma, and some recent studies have examined the cross-cultural experiences that provoke disorienting dilemmas (Taylor & Snyder, 2012). Taylor (2009) argued that cross-cultural experiences offer challenges to race-centric perspectives and, although there is a lack of research in this area, the likelihood of experiencing transformative learning in these settings is significant. Indeed, Ross (2010) defined the goals of international service learning (ISL) as *transformative:* "a dynamic sociocultural and uniquely individual process" (p. 54). As such, Mezirow's model has been proposed as a "useful framework for examining how students experience perspective transformation in international service learning" (Kiely, 2004, p. 6).

Ross (2010) observed that few studies have examined the elements of international travel that contribute to the desired transformative goals of student groups. An exception was Lean's (2005) research, which highlighted the aspects of international travel essential to promoting transformation. These included travel destinations where experiences were novel and unlike known experiences; intimate relationships and discussions with those in the host country; reflection; and post-travel activities that promoted further reflection and insight. Like Mezirow (2000), Lean focused on the goal of transformation of the individual and further advocated that these goals could be met through international experiences. Kiely (2005) supplemented these goals by adding that individual transformation should result in the participants' intent to act in ways that promote social change, potentially precipitating outcomes outside of those internal to the participants and their world views. These scholars joined Mezirow (2006) in suggesting that individual transformation precedes potential social change, and they applied this understanding specifically to international service learning contexts.

Examination of the Experiences of Tomorrow's Educators Building Learning Opportunities (TEBLO): Preparation and Work in Nicaragua

In 2010, a group of first-year and second-year University of Winnipeg students met with two professors with the objective of starting a project that would provide educational opportunities for

others. At the same time, these students wanted to develop their own teaching and organizational skills, to promote volunteerism, and to work together to learn how to become good teachers who could bring global perspectives and a sense of social justice to their future classrooms. They chose the name "Tomorrow's Educators Building Learning Opportunities" and called themselves TEBLO.

In late 2011, TEBLO partnered with an international organization called Casa Canadiense that works with disadvantaged communities in Nicaragua. Casa Canadiense identified a small community outside of Managua, the capital city, who had submitted a proposal requesting Canadian partnership in building a secondary school in the rural community of Santa Julia. Although the community was home to an elementary school that educated students up to sixth grade, students who wanted to attend high school had a sixty-minute uphill walk to a nearby community. A high school in their own community would increase the number of students completing formal schooling. The people of Santa Julia were originally coffee plantation workers for the dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle (known as Somoza), who was deposed in 1979. Since that time, they have struggled to rebuild their community, to fight for access to clean water, to improve their living conditions, and to have the right to education. Leading the community's movement against these injustices is the Gloria Quintanilla Women's Co-operative, a group of 16 mothers from the community. Through their partnership, TEBLO and the Gloria Quintanilla Women's Cooperative established a goal to build a two-classroom building that would benefit 270 students from Santa Julia and six surrounding communities.

To fund this project, the TEBLO students worked diligently, meeting monthly to discuss the project and plan fundraisers. They had bake sales and pizza sales, sold vegetables and flowers, cleaned up the planters in their city for remuneration, received donations, and hosted concerts. The Nicaraguan Children's Fund donated over $9,000 to this goal. As of May 2013, TEBLO raised over $26,000 and, with the help of their supporters, exceeded their goal of $25,000.

In the final months leading up to the trip, TEBLO members met more frequently, and began to discuss their expectations and doubts about the trip. The students took preparatory Spanish lessons, organized lesson plans, and prepared a cultural show for the host community. In May 2013, after three years of fundraising, thirteen members of TEBLO-- eleven students and two professors-- travelled to Nicaragua at their own expense.

Upon arrival in Managua, students were greeted by their translator and taken to Casa Canadiense, a dormitory setting where they slept for the next two nights. While in Managua, students took a bus tour around the city, witnessing the wealth disparity within the capital. That night, Casa Canadiense co-ordinators sat with the group to share and to discuss the thoughts and emotions evoked throughout the day. On the second day in Managua, a presenter from the local university spoke to the students about the history of Nicaragua. Students learned not only of Somoza's dictatorship and of the Sandinista rebels, but also were made aware of some of the injustices still faced by Nicaraguans today.

The third morning in Nicaragua, TEBLO members travelled to Santa Julia, where they stayed for the next two weeks. Students lived in pairs with host families from the Co-operative. During this time, TEBLO members spent their mornings divided into two groups, either teaching in the elementary classroom, or building the school. The groups switched tasks half way through the school day, ensuring that every member had an equal opportunity to help with each task. Students aided in the construction of the school by shovelling rock and sand, mixing cement, and carrying buckets of water. In the classroom, students taught lessons that introduced new content, such as basic English, or supplemented learning taught by the local teacher, such as basic arithmetic. Most members spent their afternoons getting to know their host families and organizing activities for the children of the community, such as parachute games or bracelet making.

The living conditions in the community were quite different from those the members were accustomed to in Canada. Students used latrines and bathed with buckets of water. The area was very

dusty, and students were consistently dirty. Students were exposed to alternative means of accomplishing tasks, as electricity was intermittent and there was no running water.

Following the two weeks spent in Santa Julia, TEBLO then returned to Casa Canadiense, in Managua. Over the next few days, the students discussed the events of the past two and a half weeks with the Co-ordinator, and reflected on the emotions and internal conflicts faced during the stay in Santa Julia. After three weeks in Nicaragua, the students returned to Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

Data and Analysis

In this section of the paper, we examine the interview data generated from seven of the students who participated in the project in Santa Julia. All eleven students who travelled to Nicaragua were invited to participate in this writing project. Two students were teaching outside of Canada, and two students declined. The remaining seven students were provided with a list of five questions that roughly followed the model proposed by Mezirow (2000). Each student independently answered all the questions. When each student had submitted her answers to the first five questions, she was provided with the sixth question related to Taylor's (2009) conceptualization of transformative learning as social change. Students' answers to all six questions were then masked and collated. Each of the students was assigned the task of using grounded theory (Glazer & Strauss, 1967) to report on concepts generated by one of the questions. Grounded theory is a qualitative research method whereby data are coded and then grouped into concepts and categories in order to generate theory. Next, the student comments and concepts were organized into categories that captured the students' comments related to their disorienting dilemmas and to the three areas of debate: 1) TL as a cognitive or affective process; 2) TL as a solitary or a relational process; and 3) TL as transformation of the individual or transformation of society. Given that few studies have examined transformative learning from an international service learning perspective nor from the perspectives of students, it was hoped that the data might reveal new insights that would be helpful to resolving the debates. The entire paper was sent back to the TEBLO students several times in order to conduct member checking. Students corrected any misinterpretations and these changes were incorporated into the report. In this section we present the analyses of themes identified in the student responses as they relate to Mezirow's theory (2000) and the debates about it.

Disorienting dilemmas: Cognitive and affective dimensions.

All of the students experienced disorienting dilemmas, some in Managua and some in Santa Julia. It is interesting to note that emotions as well as cognitions figure prominently in the students' responses, supporting that importance of the emotional lens, as suggested by Dirkx (1997).

> *[I struggled with] the complete culture shock I was feeling most days, or the mental and emotional struggle I experienced between what I knew was correct – that life in Nicaragua was just different, not better or worse – and involuntary feelings that snuck up on me– sadness, unintentional entitlement, hopelessness at life circumstances, sometimes pity.*
>
> *The overwhelming smell of warm meat hits you before you can even see any of the products. Slabs of beef and pork...whole chickens, sit in the 40° heat of the tight market stalls. Sides of beef, one and a half by three feet, hung on display, hooked and held by metal barbs. Breathing through my mouth and trying desperately to withhold disgusting first world judgment, I swallowed back bile. I failed at the judgement.*
>
> *I remember feeling angry and confused. These feelings came about when we toured around Managua: we were spectators peering in on so many lives that were completely different from the lives we lived back home. I was mad. I began to feel overwhelmed again because I felt like I had to do something. I'm still not even sure what that 'something" should be.*
>
> *In Nicaragua, the separation between the rich and the poor is so evident. It's so hard not to create an'other' because the lives of the people living in Managua slums are, on the surface,*

so different than mine. I'm trying so hard to be open and accepting, but Nicaragua is so different and overwhelming, I'm having trouble fighting with my gut reactions...

The relationship between the students' experiences, cognitions, and emotions are overt and reciprocal, as evidenced by their comments. This observation gives support to Mezirow's focus on the cognitive aspects of transformation as well as Dirkx (1997) attention to the non-rational components. For the TEBLO students, neither aspect took precedence, indicating that consideration of both is necessary to understand the transformative learning process. Furthermore, strong emotions and thoughts are *parts* of the disorienting events, rather than being solely a response to them. That is, the cognitions and emotions are necessary in living the disorienting event, not only in processing the events in order to come to new understandings.

Evidence of transformation

According to Mezirow (2012), "the human condition may be best understood as a continuous effort to negotiate contested meaning (2012, p. 73). Transformative learning occurs when an individual's meaning perspectives become problematic, and "the most personally significant and emotionally exacting transformations involve a critique of previously unexamined premises regarding oneself" (Mezirow, 2012, p. 87).

The experiences of the TEBLO students in Nicaragua provoked these types of critical self-examinations. Students who viewed themselves as agentic, independent, and competent were forced to examine these self-perceptions in light of their experiences in Nicaragua.

I remember looking outside the window on the other side of the bus and seeing a giant white wall on the top of the hill. It was the wall that separated the rich from the poor. I remember being dumbfounded by this. Imagine waking up every morning and looking up to see that wall as a reminder of what you don't have. And then I started thinking about those who put up the wall. Then I started thinking about the same situation back home. I lock my car doors when I drive through the poorer, rougher areas of the city. I take extra precautions in the more poor areas to keep myself safe. But in that case, wasn't I the same as the ones in Nicaragua who put up that wall? How was I any different from them? What was I doing for the impoverished in Winnipeg? Nothing. So how could I say I was any different? I realized all the ideas and principles I was fighting for in Nicaragua were ideas and principles I was ignoring back home.

I was used to being competent. The first few days I felt so strange. I was always dirty. I had understood that it would be that way before we had even arrived, but I did not expect it to affect me that much. The first few days, not being self-reliant made me feel like I was taking and taking from my household, which conflicted with my ideas that we were there to work together.

I got really sick. I've really come to consider myself an independent person, … and I'd grown to wear this part of my identity like a badge of honour. I had to accept help though, and even ask for it, and feel like a child in front of strangers and mentors. It was important though, because we were all in the experience together.

In addition to critically examining one's premises about oneself, Mezirow (2012) proposed that empathy and trying another's point of view are essential to transformative learning. The students' comments verified this process as relevant to their experiences in

Nicaragua. One student, in response to seeing an old man in Managua selling bags of water so he could eat that day said,

> *He could've been anyone—he could've been my grandpa. I remember that thought being so potent. I remember crying that night when I thought about it. Any person that I love back home could've been that man had they been born in his circumstances, but our birthplace privileges us in more ways than that man had probably ever experienced. I remember really understanding the unfairness of poverty that day.*

An especially poignant event for many TEBLO students occurred when the students were given the opportunity to listen to the stories of the women from the Gloria Quintanilla Women's Co-operative. Although the students had lived in these women's homes for over a week at that point in the trip, the language barriers had prevented some students from the having intimate conversations with their house mothers. After building trusting relationships with both students and community members, a Nicaraguan translator, who had been with the group since their arrival, facilitated the discussion. Having access to the woman's point of view was an essential factor in the students' transformation. Hearing the *doñas* weave their personal narratives into the local and national histories was an overwhelming experience for both the women and the students, and tears flowed freely.

> *One of the most important and treasured memories of the journey was hearing the women of the cooperative get a chance to tell their stories. As the doñas were talking, I felt completely alive and charged. I felt like all the things I had seen, the poverty, the need for education; that could change because there are people in the world like the [people] in that room. There are people with the drive, the heart, the passion and the experience to make this world a better place than where they found it. I was so inspired by the women of the cooperative, and felt such a sense of togetherness and solidarity.*

> *I went from feeling like we were different people to us all working towards the same goal.*
> *There are people everywhere like the strong women of the Co-operative, who will fight for their children and their communities, and that thought makes me hopeful and excited for the future.*

The students' comments recognized the shared humanity and goals of the women of Santa Julia and the student group. Despite the language barrier, hearing the women's stories allowed the students to develop understanding and empathy, which in turn allowed the students to experience the doñas' point of view. It is noteworthy that the evidence of the students' transformations, like that of their disorientating dilemmas, encompassed both cognitive and emotive processes, as well as both solitary and relational processes.

Transformation as a solitary or a relational process.

According to Mezirow (2012) and as supported by student comments, transformative learning is "often an intensely threatening emotional experience" (p.75). Furthermore, the possibility that disorienting dilemmas will lead to transformation is affected by both the individual's opportunities for critical reflection and discourse (Mezirow, 2012). Given that "we interpret our experiences in our own way" (Cranton & Taylor, 212, p. 5) and that this is a highly individualized process, Mezirow described how individuals used *instrumental learning,* including both deductive reasoning and hypothesis testing, during the transformative learning process (1981, p. 18). In addition, Mezirow

described *dialogic learning*, a process by which these meanings were validated by others through discussion (1985). Thus, according to Mezirow, transformation may encompass both solitary and relational processes. Although Taylor (1997) criticized Mezirow for his emphasis on the individualized, cognitive learning aspects, Mezirow (1991) defended his theory by reasoning that just because he emphasized individual processes in his writing, it did not mean that he valued instrumental learning over dialogic learning.

For most of the TEBLO group members, the initial reaction to the disorienting dilemmas was to talk through the events of the day and the days to come. In Managua the students discussed their feelings within the TEBLO group, and many members felt that the Casa Canadiense Co-ordinator was monumental in helping them with the first few days of adjusting to the new climate and environment. For some students it was helpful to discuss the days' events, and for some it was a time to listen, and process their thoughts and emotions.

> *I think the group discussion was most helpful because we could relate to one another and some of us had similar thoughts and feelings as others.*
> *They helped keep the situation in perspective. In a few situations I remember thinking that if [my fellow student] is okay with this, and she is used to the same things I am, then I know I can adapt to this too.*

Berger (2004) recognized support from other students as an important aspect of transformative learning. He proposed that for students who are undergoing TL, the "success or lack of success could rest on the degree of social recognition and acceptance from fellow students" (Taylor & Snyder, 2012, p. 49). However, the group processes that seemed to work well for some students worked less well at other points in the experience.

> *At first I tried to resolve my thoughts and emotions through talking. I talk through every problem in my life, and I thought it would be a great strategy in Nicaragua as well. But I was wrong, because my resolution process was unhealthy.*

What became the most helpful tool for the majority of the students were journals that served as an outlet, a place to put any fears, frustrations, surprises, and memories.

> *I learned how to self-regulate my feelings and thoughts (if that makes any sense). I find myself thinking a lot about the issues and new ideas I encountered. I wrote in a journal every single day, sometimes writing multiple entries.*

Considered together, the students' comments represent what Goleman (1991) called emotional intelligence. According the Mezirow (2012) emotional intelligence is characterized by a "maturity—knowing and managing one's emotions, motivating oneself, recognizing emotions of others, and handling relationships, as well as clear thinking" and is a requisite of transformational learning (2012, p. 79). Similar to the interplay between the emotional and cognitive aspects of transformative learning found in the students' experiences, likewise the individual preferences to depend on either solitary or relational processes or a combination of the two, became evident.

Transformation as social change or individual change.

One of the greatest yearnings in the human experience is to have a sense of agency (Kegan, 1994). According to Mezirow (2012), " A mindful transformative learning experience requires that the learner make an informed and reflective decision to *act* on his or her reflective insight" (p. 87). In this way, Mezirow's theory encompasses Taylor's (1997) ideas about transformation as social change through agency. From the students' comments, it was clear that they had experienced individual transformative experiences. Furthermore, they valued the women of the Co-operative as well as their agency in creating a better world for the families in their community. What remained in question was whether the individual

transformative experiences of the TEBLO students would provoke social agency in the students' future actions.

Although some students left Nicaragua with clearly defined goals, some students expressed difficulty defining potential intentions and actions upon returning home. Each of the students who expressed difficulty discussed an intention of exploring different routes to enhance their own civic engagement, which may or may not lead to the civic engagement of others.

> *I felt that our work was definitely not done…I had every intention to continue [helping others] but absolutely no plan for how I was going to go about that.*
>
> *I'm honestly still unclear on what my intentions are. I haven't figured it out yet. I just know whatever I (we) started, has barely begun.*
>
> *Even though I have not done much for the people in Winnipeg up to this point, I understand that that does not mean I do not have the potential to do anything now.*

Being as most of the TEBLO members were future teachers, a common intention of those who had determined a future path was to use new world perspectives and understandings to enhance civic engagement within classrooms in Canadian communities.

> *I took away more of what am I going to do in my classroom here to educate my students of what they can do to help around the world [but I'm not sure] how I can give this experience to my students.*

Once the students returned to Canada, however, they experienced challenges to maintaining the new perspectives they had developed in Nicaragua.

> *Coming back was frustrating because I felt like I had evolved so much as a person and yet that experience doesn't exist in my realities here. I feel that it's really difficult to fit my new understanding and worldview into my life here, and I really struggle to articulate that.*
>
> *Returning, I've really enjoyed connecting with the TEBLO group members, because I feel in a lot of ways they're the only people in my life that 'get' the experience. I think I get most frustrated when friends or family talk about life here or there in terms of 'better' or 'worse', which is a recurring theme in my reflection. I've had people ask me how the Nicaraguans can be so happy with nothing. I don't even know how to begin to explain that in many ways, they're much richer than most Canadians I know.*
>
> *I do not think it is a matter of explaining it to other people so they understand. The issue is understanding my own thoughts and experiences and processing them.*

These comments collectively speak to the continued and unresolved disequilibrium experienced by the students upon their return to Canada. Rather than normalizing their experiences through talking with family and friends who had not shared their work in Nicaragua, the students found their own feelings and thoughts were still insufficiently developed to help others truly understand the experiences. Both individual reflection and relational processing are continued features of the students' experiences, and cognition and emotions interplay throughout their comments. Subsequently, students began to take tentative, personal actions but did not initiate new actions aimed at societal change.

> *I realize that there are things about my lifestyle that I can't change, but that I can be conscious about the things that I can.*

I need to make peace with the way I live.

I was scared before coming back that I could go back to the way I was before I had left and forget the lessons I had learned. Now, having been back [in Canada] for just over three months, I feel like I've slipped back into my life comfortably, but instead of forgetting what happened, I embrace the experience I have had, and incorporate the new understanding I have into my life.

Students' comments indicated that they did not have a clear direction about how to put their nascent world views into practice. While the students did not want to go back to their previous meaning perspectives, they lacked direction for making social change. One student came to the realization that her actions for social change began in Nicaragua and perhaps they should also continue there.

Building a school is an important development to the community, but it will always need lifelong resources and support, whether it's physically, emotionally, or financially.

These sentiments were shared by seven of the eleven students who travelled to Santa Julia. In August 2013, these students formed TEBLO 2, with the goal of not only raising funds to sustain the secondary school in Santa Julia, but also to recruit new members, so that they too may learn the value of promoting development, both personal and relational, through education. TEBLO 2's hope is that the new members will keep this project alive, and continue to raise funds for Santa Julia long after the present members have graduated.

Although it can be argued that building a school is a societal change that is a sustainable, generative entity when it is built in solidarity and partnership, another truly sustainable and transformational aspect for the TEBLO students related more to the development of their own sense of a global community. The students expressed appreciation for having made

…human connections and learning what it meant to work in actual solidarity for a common goal and understanding.

I hope that I experience the learning and struggle again in my life, both at home and internationally, because I know that I grew exponentially as a person and a member of a global community in the three weeks that I was in Nicaragua.

While these statements of personal growth clearly represent the transformative learning experiences described by Mezirow (2000), critics of international service learning make several arguments about why it is not helpful on a societal level. Kate Simpson (2004) argued that ISL is exploitive of the communities who serve as partners. She argued that the transformational opportunities that are often experienced by the visitors are not equally available to the people of the community due to lack of resources for them to travel. Furthermore, she argued that students' transformational experiences in international service learning are contingent on the injustices and inequities that exist between the context of the visitors' home country and the country they visit. These criticisms capture a critique made by Taylor (1997) in highlighting the inadequacies of Mezirow's (2000) conceptualization of transformation as being focused in the individual process rather than on social change.

When responding to a critique of international service learning, TEBLO members had a very negative reaction to the implication that what they had done was solely for their own gain through exploitation of the community. A term that came up repeatedly in TEBLO members' responses was 'solidarity', as working in solidarity with a community was an explicit requirement of this project to avoid the risk of exploiting a community, or assuming a position of superiority based on Canadian ideals.

If we were going to do this, it needed to be in solidarity. I really and truly believe that we were just a small, small part in the bigger picture of the school in Santa Julia.

They will still continue to be positively impacted by what we did while we were there. It was their own agency that brought us there and it is their own agency that will continue to make good use of that school, as they see fit.

It was extremely important to TEBLO that we work in solidarity with a community, and that whatever project we contributed to would be in response to a community-initiated effort and determined need.

Having better access to education, through the school TEBLO helped the community of Santa Julia to obtain, can work to increase the agency of that community. It is vital that ISL groups align themselves with communities who already have a sense of agency though.

While vehemently defending the results of their work in Nicaragua as a contribution to social change undertaken with the people of Santa Julia, the students also were able to articulate how their own transformation would result in future social change.

The poverty and inequality of wealth distribution that I saw firsthand in Managua changed the way that I think about a lot of things. I think what I choose to do with those transformative experiences is what is important.

I was disappointed that up to that point I had done nothing for those in Winnipeg, but I believe having that moment of doubt in myself was beneficial, as it served to make me more accountable in my everyday life for the wellbeing of others. It made me realize that I had a commitment to helping others that could no longer be put aside.

I also think it's important to understand that I don't have to go halfway around the world to better understand the injustice and inequality of wealth disparity; that fight is happening right on the streets of Winnipeg. I can see the interconnectedness of my 'everyday' life and my experiences in Nicaragua, and my passion for positive change is translated through work with at-risk youth in the North End and city core.

The students responded to the criticism of international service learning on three fronts. First, the students justify the building of the school in solidarity with the local people as an act of social change. Second, TEBLO members propose that their own transformations will result in future social change through their involvement with their own students and through service in Canada. Finally, students experienced several challenges related to putting their individual transformations into social action: 1) they found it difficult to maintain their new meaning perspectives outside of the place of their inception in Nicaragua; 2) they felt inadequate at helping others in Canada understand their experiences and transformation in meaningful ways; and 3) they continued to struggle with resolving their disorienting events. Despite these challenges, the students in time could articulate a clear plan that related to extending their own transformation into social action: they came together to form TEBLO 2 with the explicit goal of sharing their learning with other students and continuing their social action in support of the school in Santa Julia. In this way, the personal became social and the social became personal.

Revisiting the Debates

According to Cranton and Taylor (2012) some of the main tensions in the field of transformative learning relate to the ongoing debates about the nature of transformation as outlined in Mezirow's (2000) theory. These debates relate to 1) the transformational process as cognitive or emotive; 2) the transformational process as solitary or relational; and 3) the transformative process as individual or societal. Analysis of the experiences of the TEBLO students both in Nicaragua and since

their return to Canada sheds light on these debates, as they apply specifically to international service projects. Results of the analysis indicate that, as supported by Cranton and Taylor, these varying perspectives can co-exist.

> It may be that for one person in one context, transformative learning is a rationale endeavor; for that same person in another context, it could be emotional and intuitive; in some contexts, social change may need to precede individual change, in an another context, individual transformation drives social transformation, and so on. (2012, p. 3)

Evidence from the TEBLO students showed that students processed their transformative experiences both cognitively and emotionally, both relationally and in solitude, and that the social change initiated by the Women's Collective precipitated the individual transformations in the students that led to the students' own agency in social change. Findings indicate that the debates may be misguided in their polarity, insofar as they apply to international service projects. Although a careful reading of Mezirow's work substantiates that all these perspectives are considered in the evolution of his theory, his critics focused on his relative inattention to some aspect of transformation as compared to other aspects. These debates have created false dichotomies that have distracted from the development of theorizing about transformative learning. Cranton and Taylor (2012), for example, have acknowledged this fault in stating that the unit of analysis (the person or the society) influences what is examined and discovered. That is not to say one exists and the other does not: "transformative learning theory need not be about individual transformation or social change, it is about both" (p. 10). Likewise, in their 2006 paper, Mezirow and Dirkx agreed that both affect and cognition were necessary to transformation, yet different aspects were of more interest and therefore more studied by one scholar than by the other (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006). Together, these scholars as well as the data from the current study suggest that a more unified theory of transformation is required.

Some of the true strengths of Mezirow's theory relate to its flexibility in capturing human transformation. Specifically, Mezirow allowed that the stages are not necessarily sequential and that it is not uncommon for people to stall during their transformative processing (1978). The flexibility of this theory was therefore able to capture the diversity within the TEBLO students experiencing of transformation. It captured the experiences along all the continua: cognitive *and* emotional; solitary *and* relational; and individual *and* societal. Findings from the TEBLO group suggest that polarized debates will therefore not add to transformative theorizing in meaningful ways. Rather, future research should focus on when, how, and under which circumstances transformative learning is supported.

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