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# Transformative Learning and Study Abroad

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## Abstract

This paper presents a mapping literature review of 27 studies published between 2012 and 2017 dealing with the process and the outcomes of study-abroad programmes in higher education.

The studies were selected after two rounds of review. The first round included 1,371 studies' abstracts, retrieved from 10 databases and the second round review included 148 studies closely investigated based on selection criteria that targeted empirical studies investigating international students and scholars in post-graduate programmes and staff and scholar exchange programmes in higher education contexts that used transformative learning as a theoretical framework alone or in combination with other theories. The review aims to clarify key concepts in the theory of transformative learning, research methods conducted in study abroad context and main factors contributing to learner potential transformative experiences. Its findings may be useful for study abroad students and higher education institutions.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural learning; study abroad; transformative learning

## 1. Introduction

Study abroad outcomes have been widely investigated through cultural, intercultural, and developmental theoretical frameworks. However, recent research has shown interest in its transformative dimension (Savicki, 2008), as there is scholarly consensus that study abroad experience has a profound impact on the lives of students, and is often labelled 'life changing' or 'transformative' (Hunter, 2008, p. 93; Selby, 2008, p. 1). In their review of transformative learning research, Taylor and Snyder (2011) note that while the term 'transformative' is commonly used in this context, it often lacks a solid theoretical basis. They critique the lack of original literature reviews in the field and challenge the notion that transformative learning is uniformly positive. They also identify a gap in the literature regarding the nature of disorientation, its influence on critical reflection and perspective transformation analysis in context.

Jack Mezirow, the originator of the transformative learning theory, defined it as the 'learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them

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more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open and emotionally able to change' (Mezirow, 2009, p. 22). His model of personal transformation involves changing 'frames of reference' through 'critical reflection' in the following ten identified phases (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 168–169):

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt and shame
3. A critical assessment of epistemic, socio-cultural, or psychic assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared, and that others have negotiated a similar change
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning of a course of action
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. Reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

The initial phases address crisis response, while phases three to five emphasize critical reflection for change. Mezirow posits that disorientation is a negative experience, leading to self-examination and identity threat. Learners either engage in denial or critically assess their assumptions. On finding distortions, they move through planning, skill acquisition, and trying and reinforcing new perspectives and roles (phases four to nine), culminating in a transformed reintegration (phase ten).

Transformative learning theory has been a subject of significant scholarly focus (Kitchenham, 2008), with two predominant traditions identified in North America and Europe (Kokkos, 2014; Kokkos & Koulaouzides, 2011) and two main theoretical perspectives: individual and social (Taylor & Snyder, 2011). Both perspectives aim to dismantle long-standing beliefs and roles, culminating in a transformed self. However, while the individual perspective emphasizes personal change through discourse or authentic expression, the social perspective aims to change one's relationship with broader social structures.

Early critiques of transformative learning theory targeted its neglect of context, power, and relationships (Cervero & Wilson, 2001; Clark & Wilson, 1991; Collard & Law, 1989; Inglis, 1998; Wilson, 1999) and its undue focus on rational aspects of critical reflection (Dirkx, 1998). Subsequent criticisms argued that the term 'transformative learning' was becoming a catch-all label, lacking scientific rigor in explaining its mechanisms and outcomes (Brookfield, 2000; Kegan, 2000; Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2013; Newman, 2012; Taylor & Cranton, 2013; Taylor & Laros, 2014). The theory's evolving nature led to fragmentation, especially

between rational and extra-rational approaches within the individual perspective, and between the individual and social perspectives (Taylor & Cranton, 2013; Taylor & Snyder, 2011). This led to greater awareness of unresolved issues and spurred efforts towards integrative research methodologies.

Integrative approaches to transformative learning account for the interplay between the individual and the social context, emphasizing how this shapes learner identity (Illeris, 2013; Jarvis, 2011). These scholars argue that Mezirow's definition, while foundational, overlooks factors like the intuitive, emotional, and regressive elements that contribute to transformation (Illeris, 2013; Jarvis, 2011). According to Illeris (2007), learning is the identity's core dimension that enables the 'coherent development of meaning, functionality, sensitivity and sociality' involving interaction between an individual and the social environment (Illeris, 2007, p. 139).

Illeris and Jarvis expand upon Mezirow's definition by describing transformative learning as a change that impacts the learner's identity, underscoring the multidimensional nature of the learning process. For Jarvis, learning is an ongoing, transformative process that spans the rational to the irrational (Jarvis, 2011, p. 26). Illeris similarly asserts that transformative learning encompasses all forms of learning that effect identity change (Illeris, 2013, p. loc 1074). This broader view accommodates the 'coherent development of meaning, functionality, sensitivity, and sociality' as mediated through the interaction between an individual and their social milieu (Illeris, 2007, p. 139).

Regarding the study abroad experience, it is suggested that cultural differences between the home and host countries trigger a crisis that innately provokes adjustment, self-exploration, and crossing of various existing personal, cultural, and professional boundaries. Conceptualising the term boundary as a 'socio-cultural difference leading to discontinuity in action or interaction' (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 133), a study abroad experience involves crossing geographical boundaries as well as overcoming disparities and establishing continuity across the two cultures. Oberg (1960) and Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) claim that back and forth adjustments between entry and re-entry in the host and home countries cause the supposed 'culture shock' and a 'reverse culture shock', respectively (Gaw, 2000; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Oberg, 1960). Both terms refer to a crisis students undergo because of encountering differences and personal growth experiences. The resulting tension provides a space in which they may participate and compare various perspectives that may in turn lead to significant learning and boundary-crossing across their lives' diverse dimensions.

This review aims to explore the usefulness of the transformative learning theory as a framework to analyse cross cultural learning. The main review questions are as follows:

1. What is the focus of inquiry, and which are the predominant research strategies?
2. What is the triggering events' role in cross-cultural learning?
3. What is critical reflection's role in cross-cultural learning?
4. What are the transformative learning outcomes in cross-cultural learning?

## 2. Method

The literature review focussed on studies that investigated transformative learning experiences in post-graduate programmes in the higher education contexts. It was based on a scoping review which according to Pham et al. (2014), maps the literature on a certain topic to identify and clarify key concepts and gaps in literature. The search covered studies from 2012 to 2017 in the Australian Education Index, British Education Index, Education Resources Information Center, Proquest, Index to Thesis, Sage, Scopus, Science Direct, Project Muse, and Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations. In addition to these, proceedings of the Transformative Learning Conferences and other studies that were identified during the literature reviewing were purposefully included in the review. This topic's importance is justified by the abundant research retrieved using the descriptor 'transformative', an inaccurate description of the study level or the study abroad experience type in their descriptors, thus resulting in the retrieval of all kinds of papers with different sorts of cross-cultural experiences. Thus, after the first and second scans of the abstracts, 148 results were further investigated for selection based on the following criteria:

- ▶ International students enrolled in full- or part-time study abroad post-graduate programmes (Master's or PhD) for at least one year
- ▶ Students registered for graduate programmes with or without a transformative learning intention.
- ▶ Sojourners and returnees from staff and scholar exchange programmes
- ▶ Higher education settings
- ▶ Transformative learning as a theoretical framework alone or in combination with other theories
- ▶ The grounded theory or concepts regarding identity, adjustment, entry, and re-entry
- ▶ Methodology chapter (empirical)

Appendix 1 shows the retrieved results and selections from each round. From the 27 studies reviewed, 10 employed only transformative learning as a theoretical framework (Boyer et al., 2006; Brock, 2010; Faulk et al., 2010; Glisczinski, 2007;

Hamza, 2010; Lennox, 2005; Morrice, 2013; Ritz, 2006; Stevens-Long et al., 2012; Taylor, 2003). However, nine studies used the transformative learning theory in combination with other theories: the environment–person interaction schema theory and the Johari Window (Chang et al., 2012), symbolic interactionism and intercultural competency (Erichsen, 2009), ‘reverse culture shock’ and intercultural personhood (Gill, 2010), other adult learning and development theories, the chaos and complexity theory (Kung, 2007), culture shock, self-efficacy, and communication (Milstein, 2005), intercultural adjustment (Park, 2002), social change (Pasquariello, 2009), international experiential education (Tacey, 2012), and intercultural competency (Taylor, 1994). Eight other studies did not use the transformative learning theory; however, they found transformative learning to be an outcome of a cross-cultural experience. They employed the network theory and learning’s socio-cultural perspectives (Baker & Pifer, 2011), re-entry (Chang, 2009), social practice theory (Chapman & Pyvis, 2006), identity (Gu, 2009), cultural identity and repatriation (Sussman, 2002), and grounded theory (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Pasquariello, 2009; Wong, 2008). Therefore, the transformative learning theory was used in 17 studies as a theoretical framework.

### **3. Key Findings**

#### **3.1. Focus of the inquiry and employed research strategies**

The inquiry in the reviewed studies predominantly focussed on the individual and could be grouped into three main categories: 1) the transformative learning process during student involvement in the study abroad and graduate programmes; 2) the study abroad and graduate programmes’ outcomes; and 3) the role of context and relationships in facilitating and integrating transformation. Besides identifying the transformative learning’s existence and its precursor steps (Boyer et al., 2006; Brock, 2010; Glisczinski, 2007), research also explored the triggers or disorienting dilemmas that students experienced, the coping strategies used, and the cognitive and affective processes of development and changes pupils encountered while attempting to adapt and adjust (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Boyer et al., 2006; Chang et al., 2012; Gu, 2009; Kung, 2007; Pasquariello, 2009; Ritz, 2006).

The studies that focussed on the transformative learning experience outcomes examined the modifications in knowledge and attitudes (Faulk et al., 2010), the nature of change in the meaning structures (Park, 2002), variations in understanding and consciousness (Sariyant, 2002), modifications in personal growth and development (Gu, 2009; Milstein, 2005; Stevens-Long et al., 2012; Taylor, 1994; Taylor, 2003), impact on life choices (Tacey, 2012), and changes

in identity (Erichsen, 2009; Wong, 2008). The role of transformative learning's context and integration was explored in four studies (Chapman & Pyvis, 2006; Gill, 2010; Hamza, 2010; Sussman, 2002; Taylor, 2003). Two studies assessed relationships in the transformative learning experience (Baker & Pifer, 2011; Chang, 2009) and three investigated the returnees' integration of cross-cultural experience in their home country (Chang, 2009; Gill, 2010; Sussman, 2002).

The research strategies predominantly followed the interpretative paradigm using mainly qualitative methods. Out of 27 studies, 17, 5, and 5 employed qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research strategies, respectively. The studies primarily included 1 to 59 participants, with an average of 21 for qualitative research. When quantitative or mixed methods were utilised, they included a larger number of participants. Appendix 2 shows the destination, types of programmes, samples, methods, and instruments of the studies selected for review.

Qualitative design strategies comprised case study, phenomenology, and narratives; moreover, they chiefly used purposeful, snowball, and criteria-based samplings. The majority of the research employed in-depth interviews, whereas some also used reflective journals, drawing, and reflective rituals. In general, the studies were based on retrospective accounts.

The quantitative investigations in the research used various instruments to gauge distinct facets of learning. King's (2009) Learning Activity Survey was employed in three studies to assess whether participants had undergone transformative learning, the stages they associated with, and the educational activities that facilitated this transformation. However, alternate studies used tailored instruments to measure self-efficacy and intercultural competence. These investigations faced challenges related to student response timing and instrument sensitivity. For instance, Brock (2010) identified inconsistencies between preliminary responses and subsequent reports of transformative learning experiences. Specifically, Brock failed to clarify why 42% of respondents who initially reported no change in their beliefs or role expectations later claimed to have experienced transformative learning (Brock, 2010, p. 137). She claimed that it was unfeasible through this study to judge if there was 'shifting going on at an unconscious level or the wording of [particular step] did not elicit recognition of perceptual shifts' (Brock, 2010, p. 137). In contrast, Gliszinski (2007) posited that students might only be partially aware of the transformative outcomes during their college years, advocating for a longitudinal methodology to capture these nuances. While the merit of a longitudinal approach is acknowledged, Pelletier (2001) argued that its absence in research could be justified due to the logistical and financial challenges of long-term commitment and tracking participants over extended periods.

Most studies were conducted in higher education settings in programmes with no specific intention to foster transformative learning. Of the six papers (Boyer et al., 2006; Brock, 2010; Glisczinski, 2007; Lennox, 2005; Stevens-Long et al., 2012; Taylor, 2003) covering transformative learning experiences in postgraduate programmes without international students, only two (Lennox, 2005; Stevens-Long et al., 2012) explored courses with specific intentions and methodologies to promote transformative learning. Further, only two studies included staff professional development and scholar exchange programmes.

This review's main findings were organised into three themes: triggering events in cross-cultural learning, critical reflection, and transformative learning outcomes in cross-cultural and graduate learning experiences.

### **3.2. Triggering events in cross-cultural learning**

The timing and character of disorienting dilemmas in cross-cultural learning are contingent on student preparedness and the specific features of the study abroad program. Such triggers may be abrupt or gradual and can occur pre-, mid-, or post-experience (Tacey, 2012). Common instigators of personal crises in this learning context include academic hurdles, language barriers, and socialization challenges (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Chang et al., 2012; Gu, 2009; Ritz, 2010; Wong, 2008). At the graduate level, higher-order critical and reflective thinking are often stimulated through activities like discourse participation, research, and writing (Chapman & Pyvis, 2006; Faulk et al., 2010; Gu, 2009; Kung, 2007; Ritz, 2006). Post-experience disorientation frequently pertains to issues of reintegration (Chang, 2009; Gill, 2010; Hamza, 2010; Sussman, 2002). The literature reveals that disorienting dilemmas can be either negative or positive, influenced by the nature of the experience and the student's readiness to navigate the emotional complexities involved.

The cultural disparities between the home and host countries trigger disorientation. Several studies found that the disorienting dilemmas related to language difficulties or cultural and academic differences among international students were accompanied with negative feelings and responses (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Erichsen, 2009; Gu, 2009; Ritz, 2010; Wong, 2008). For example, Alazzi and Chiodo (2006), who examined problems and coping strategies of male doctoral students from the Middle East studying at an Australian University, found that limited language proficiency while writing essays and participating in class discussions produced a significant personal crisis. They further argued that discrepancies in the curriculum structure and academic expectations prevented participants from engaging in independent decision-making, such as choosing electives, questioning teachers, and communicating effectively.

Similarly, Wong (2008) highlighted that international students deal with perception errors and stereotypes owing to their difficulties in expressing opinions and emotions through language. Therefore, in addition to language proficiency, the contexts in which language is used and learning occurs can instigate a series of unpleasant feelings and challenging experiences.

Disorientation in cross-cultural learning is referred to as ‘learning shock’ (Gu, 2009), ‘crisis’ (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Ritz, 2010), and ‘disequilibrium’ (Kung, 2007). These phenomena are often accompanied by an array of emotional responses, including but not limited to loneliness, alienation, rejection, fear, and anger. Ritz’s (2010) study elucidated that international graduate students encounter disorienting dilemmas emanating from cultural, academic, and social incongruities, which often precipitate emotional upheavals such as fear and anger. Gu (2009) extended this by showing that deviations in teaching and learning paradigms, as well as variances in social norms and values, can induce ‘learning shock’.

Concurrently, Kung (2007) detailed how linguistic and academic barriers contribute to a state of disequilibrium among international students. Obstacles in effective communication stemming from an amalgam of cultural, educational, and professional discrepancies exacerbate feelings of dislocation, insecurity, and the fear of failure.

The literature highlights the dual nature of disorienting experiences in study abroad contexts—they can be both empowering and debilitating (Kung, 2007; Chang et al., 2012). These experiences are influenced by various factors like linguistic skills, academic preparedness, and cultural gaps between home and host countries. While study abroad has the potential for transformative learning, such an explicit aim is often absent from program curricula. Only two studies focused on programs designed with transformative learning intentions (Pasquariello, 2009; Stevens-Long et al., 2012). These studies show that a mix of well-designed coursework, interaction, and safe spaces contribute to altering awareness and perspectives. Thus, there’s an unexplored avenue in terms of embedding transformative learning intentions in international study programs.

### **3.3. Role of critical reflection in cross-cultural learning**

According to Mezirow (1991), critical reflection is crucial for any significant learning to happen. Brock (2010) and Glisczinski (2007) found it to be a main precursor step in the transformative learning process. However, not all their research participants engaged in critical reflection. The nature of reflection, according to Glisczinski (2007), involves reevaluation of values, attitudes, feelings, concepts, and actions. Furthermore, Tacey (2012) and Erichsen (2009)

demonstrated that critical reflection in transformative learning experiences encompasses questioning self-identity. Tacey (2012, p. 84) highlighted that critical reflection is a way of ‘re-contextualization’ involving assessment of assumptions and beliefs, identity, and life purposes. Thus, it can be concluded that critical reflection involves the questioning of cognitive, personal, and social dimensions across time and space.

Mezirow (1991) posits that critical reflection is essential for transformative learning. Supporting this, Brock (2010) and Glisczinski (2007) identified it as a key initial step but noting that in their research not all participants engaged in critical reflection. Glisczinski (2007) elaborated that reflection involves re-evaluating various personal and cognitive aspects. Tacey (2012) and Erichsen (2009) further asserted that it includes questioning one’s self-identity and assumptions. Thus, it can be concluded that critical reflection involves the questioning of cognitive, personal, and social dimensions across time and space.

The study abroad literature highlights the educational potential of cross-cultural experiences but faces challenges in documenting transformative outcomes consistently (Montuori & Fahim, 2004; Savicki, 2008). Therefore, asserting that all such experiences are transformative is unviable.

Studies, such as Chang et al. (2012), indicate that individual reactions to cross-cultural encounters vary. In this research, participants were prompted to exceed their pre-existing frameworks, leading to self-reliance and internal dialogue (Chang et al., 2012, p. 245). They engaged in diverse activities, including learning the language and forming new connections. Critical reflection acted as a mediator between contrasting experiences, fostering cognitive expansion (Chang et al., 2012, p. 244).

Culture significantly impacts learners’ epistemic perspectives, as evidenced by Gu (2009). In her study, students adapted their learning approaches due to cultural differences, eventually becoming more independent and conforming to host academic norms. When learners were immersed in the host academic culture, they experienced a ‘reflexive change’ and ‘cultural appropriation’ towards becoming more independent learners and adapting to host academic conventions (Gu, 2009, pp. 44–45). Specifically, they assimilated the host’s cultural values, and changed their academic roles and practices. Gu argued for a holistic approach to understanding these complex experiences, suggesting that changes in self could trigger shifts in worldviews (Gu, 2009, pp. 44–47).

The literature generally lacks a focus on the intentional engagement in critical reflection. While critical reflection often stems from disorienting dilemmas, its activation occurs as students work to comprehend and adapt to their experiences. Erichsen (2009) emphasized that her participants did not consciously seek to change their worldviews. Instead, their learning involved both reflective and non-reflective elements, culminating in a ‘re-storying of their lives’

(Erichsen, 2009, p. 172). The constant comparison of cultures resulted in a sense of cultural liminality and ongoing efforts to redefine and integrate new learning (Erichsen, 2009, p. 118).

Not all research confirms that study abroad experiences induce critical reflection or transformative learning. Specifically, Alazzi & Chiodo (2006) and Ritz (2010) found that participants disengaged from critical reflection due to academic pressures and other factors such as language barriers and teacher-student dynamics. According to Ritz, some participants even withdrew from dialogue due to perceptions of their teachers' power, and the academic setting did not facilitate transformative dialogues (Ritz, 2010).

Participants often coped with stress and isolation by staying occupied or seeking guidance from fellow citizens rather than utilizing available academic counselling services. Importantly, the host culture's acceptance influenced students' level of engagement in critical reflection. Despite questioning certain aspects, students did not feel they belonged to the host culture, thus limiting their transformative experiences (Ritz, 2006).

Studying abroad does not guarantee transformative learning, as emphasized by Taylor (2003), Gu (2009), and Gill (2007). Taylor argued that the lack of transformative experiences could be attributed to entrenched teaching beliefs intertwined with identity and epistemological principles (Taylor, 2003, p. 364). Gu pointed out that deficits in critical thinking and problem-solving skills often originated from educational systems that promoted conformist learning, rather than from students' incapacity for critical engagement (Gu, 2009, p. 172).

These studies underscore the complex interplay between context, educational systems, and individual capacities in facilitating or inhibiting transformative learning experiences.

Gill (2007) emphasized the role of readiness in adaptation, suggesting that a positive attitude and willingness to engage in diverse academic and cultural practices can foster transformative learning. According to Gill, factors such as student identity and past academic practices should also be taken into account when assessing the transformative potential of study abroad experiences (Gill, 2007, p. 173).

The literature also highlighted the significance of discourse in critical reflection. Sariyant (2002) and Wong (2008) noted that the ability of international students to effectively participate in local or academic discourse should not be assumed. Cultural and linguistic differences, as well as individualism and collectivism, impact the discourse and may lead to misunderstandings or stereotypes. Wong found that supportive student-teacher relationships and extended time abroad could help mitigate these challenges and facilitate more effective participation in host and academic discourse (Wong, 2008).

These findings indicate that transformative learning is influenced by a range of factors including readiness for adaptation, discourse competence, and the educational and socio-cultural context.

The studies reviewed suggest a nuanced interplay between rational and extra-rational processes in reflection, but they reported limited intentional efforts to engage with spirituality or self-reflection. For example, Stevens-Long et al. (2012) noted that while dialogue is facilitated through self-reflective activities and mentor support, it rarely extended to the subconscious level (Stevens-Long et al., 2012, p. 192).

Pasquariello (2009) found that critical reflection predominantly involved cognitive processes triggered by disorientation and reorientation events, which he termed as 'meaning schemes' deconstruction and reformulation' (Pasquariello, 2009, pp. 77, 85). This highlights the role of emotional engagement in stimulating critical reflection.

Furthermore, while self-reflective activities are acknowledged as valuable in transformative learning, Selby (2008) pointed out their scarcity in standard higher education curricula. He proposed that international students need closure activities to facilitate their reintegration, marking this as an underexplored area in transformative learning research (Selby, 2008).

This summary underlines that the existing literature recognizes the importance of both rational and extra-rational elements in transformative learning but also calls for more intentional incorporation of these elements in educational settings.

### **3.3. Transformative learning outcomes in cross-cultural experiences**

The outcomes reported could be grouped into two categories: personal growth and development (Baker & Pifer, 2011; Chapman & Pyvis, 2006; Erichsen, 2009; Faulk et al., 2010; Gu, 2009; Milstein, 2005; Park, 2002; Ritz, 2010; Taylor, 1994) and identity exploration, negotiation, and shift (Chang, 2009; Erichsen, 2009; Gill, 2010; Hamza, 2010; Sussman, 2002; Tacey, 2012; Wong, 2008).

#### ***3.3.1. Personal growth and development.***

The Oxford Dictionary (2016, no page) defines growth as 'the process of developing physically, mentally, or spiritually'. This implies adding personal qualities. Gould (1978) refers to personal growth as the ability to supersede personal restrictions and expand options for future development; this suggests working on restraints that may also include changing the existing qualities. In general, personal growth can include adding and changing personal qualities in all

aspects of a person for enhancing one's self-concept, professional competence, and relationships.

The research on cross-cultural learning identified several positive outcomes, such as professional growth (Faulk et al., 2010); increased communication and self-efficacy skills (Milstein, 2005); affective, cognitive, and behavioural maturity (Chang, 2009); improved tolerance and confidence (Milstein, 2005); increased individualism and self-sufficiency (Wong, 2008); enhanced cultural awareness (Faulk et al., 2010; Gill, 2010); greater self-esteem and self-image (Park, 2002); and intercultural competency (Gill, 2007; Taylor, 1994). Moreover, the literature identified cognitive outcomes such as higher order cognitive skills (Stevens-Long et al., 2012), additional complex ways of thinking, and an authorial self (Faulk et al., 2010). Some studies also identified negative outcomes such as alienation and marginalisation. In general, the cross-cultural experience provides fertile ground for self-knowledge regarding the host culture's context and through others' lenses.

### ***3.3.2. Identity negotiation, shift, and integration.***

The extensive review of literature provided above elucidates the multifaceted nature of identity negotiation in cross-cultural experiences. The oscillation between confronting and embracing new cultural realities compels learners to undergo a complex process of self-exploration, reevaluation, and, ultimately, transformation (Chang et al., 2012; Gu, 2009).

Noteworthy is the duality and complexity in the construction of self-identity. As Gill (2007) outlines, the individual's intercultural identity incorporates both an understanding of self and an awareness of cultural roots. This suggests that the transformation isn't unilateral but involves a bilateral flow of influences from both the host and home cultures, leading to the creation of a 'hybrid identity' (Gill, 2007; Wong, 2008). Bhabha's concept of the 'third space' and Akkerman & Bakker's 'at the boundaries' shed light on this transitional sphere where individuals are neither entirely assimilated nor entirely separate, yet somehow exist in both spaces (Bhabha, 1990; Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).

The transformative learning theory provides a robust framework for understanding how this 'third space' functions as a locus of self-discovery and change (Mezirow, 1991). However, the review also reveals that transformative learning may not be a complete or irreversible process. Both external influences, such as the expectations and perceptions of friends and family upon return, and internal processes like self-perception and awareness, can retroactively affect the transformative journey (Sussman, 2002; Chang, 2009).

The 'dilemmas in the formation of student identity' identified by Chapman and Pyvis (2006) further magnify the complexity of this transformative process.

Being part of an educational community abroad may bring about either feelings of belonging or the contrary, thereby influencing one's sense of identity. Consequently, the transformative process seems to be interwoven with both the individual's internal states and external conditions, thus requiring a nuanced understanding of both.

Finally, the argument presented by Kegan (2000) that transformative learning is not merely an accrual of new knowledge but a shift in 'the way of knowing' suggests that the end goal of cross-cultural experiences may not be a fixed, definitive identity, but a dynamic, ongoing process of identity negotiation and transformation. The individual's 'personal epistemology,' therefore, emerges as a pivotal element that both influences and is influenced by the transformative learning process.

In summary, the complexities of identity transformation in a cross-cultural context demand a multifactorial analysis that extends beyond simple binaries like 'positive' or 'negative' experiences. It calls for an appreciation of the nuanced interplay between personal epistemology, external contexts, and the reciprocal influences of host and home cultures.

### **3. Conclusions**

The literature makes a strong connection between the disorienting dilemmas and the consequent reactions and actions they trigger. Thus, it is important to analyse the nature of disorientation and its emotional charges, which can be both encouraging and restrictive. In cross-cultural learning, the contradictions and differences between the home and host countries are of an epistemic nature, that is, how learners recognise and use knowledge; however, they are also related to how they perceive themselves as members of the educational community and of the host culture.

Although critical reflection seems to result from a disorienting dilemma, critical reflection is portrayed differently in the literature. Critical reflection happens during and after a study abroad experience and is dependent on context, personal characteristics and readiness and the difference in the role of students and academic practices in an institution. While not all research participants engaged in critical reflection, studies do not evidence an intention for students to engage in a critical reflection of assumptions and actions. Studies reveal the blending nature of the rational and extra-rational processes during reflection, whereas immersion in the host academic culture (longer time) leads to 'reflexive change' and 'cultural appropriation' or even assimilation of the host's cultural values. Approaches that deconstruct the dimensions of disorientation and critical reflection could be useful to explain their influence on the nature of changes

associated with the transformative learning outcomes. This method would facilitate a clear distinction of transformative learning from other types of learning.

Regarding context, while the literature on transformative learning generalises the importance of safe and conducive environments, the studies covering cross-cultural learning experiences reveal challenging and unfamiliar environments, thus questioning the level of control one has when experiencing transformative learning. This poses a significant question about how the individual and social aspects interact in the identity change process. First, international students experience academic practices that are deeply embedded in the institution's culture, to which they are obliged to adhere to succeed. Second, as they are partially situated in the host country, they coexist within the home and host contexts. While they are pressed to overcome the differences in order to prosper, the changes they undergo and the practices dissimilar to those of their home country may need to be negotiated after they return. This provides an important research avenue for analysis: the reintegration phase of transformative learning.

Regarding methodologies, many literature reviews suggested that transformative learning should be examined using a bigger sample, mixed method designs, and in more than one group in a single situation (Taylor & Laros, 2014). However, simultaneously, it has been proposed that the key constructs should be routed in the data and evidenced. While larger samples would provide a useful comparison, I argue that a rigorous analysis of a prior learning experience, disorientation dilemmas, critical reflection, and changes learners experience can be investigated more efficiently by assessing learner experiences across time and contexts. This approach, however, would require longitudinal methods that are very often difficult to pursue and exorbitant for individual researchers. Therefore, research designs that encapsulate the time and space dimensions may be beneficial to explain transformative learning as a process and an outcome.

Institutions hosting international students and organising student exchange acknowledge that changing learning contexts creates possibilities for engaging with similarities and differences between contexts and identity transformations. However, for learning to be transformative, it needs to engage all three dimensions: ways of knowing, being and interacting. Study abroad experiences have the capacity to yield both positive and negative outcomes, leading to moments of personal growth and self-discovery, but also instances of temporary regression and feelings of alienation. It is essential to acknowledge that students may encounter significant challenges during their reintegration into their home country following such experiences. These complexities underscore the need for institutions to provide adequate support and resources to facilitate a well-rounded, transformative educational journey for international students.

Finally, changing frames of reference implies changing or reorganising one or more dimensions of identity. The process takes place over time and not necessarily in sequential phases. Therefore, transformative learning is a process that challenges and changes our frame of reference through a redefinition and reorganisation of our ways of knowing, doing, being and interacting in the world. The outcome of transformative learning is the re-framing of identity that involves agency and negotiation.

In the context of student exchange programs, changing frames of reference implies changing or reorganising one or more dimensions of student identity. Importantly, this transformation is not a linear process with clearly defined stages but unfolds gradually over time. In essence, student exchange becomes a vehicle for transformative learning, challenging and reshaping students' existing frames of reference. Through these immersive experiences, students undergo a redefinition and reorganization of their ways of knowing, doing, being and interacting across contexts. Transformative learning outcome from study abroad experience signifies a reframing of identity involving active agency and negotiation as students navigate their evolving sense of self across contexts.

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**Appendix 1: Search syntax and results**

Databases	Search syntax	Number of results	Scan selection for further review	Selected from criteria based review	Selected for close review
Sage	“transform* learning” or student identity in all fields and graduate or international in all fields and return or reintegration in all fields and effect or impact in all fields, from Jan 2000 through Oct 2011 in SAGE journals available to me	206	33	33	9
Scopus	“transform* learning”	242	30	7	5
Science Direct	(“transform* learning”) and study abroad and (return or reintegration or shock or post or outcome or impact or effect)	220	35	8	5
AU Australian Education Index—1979 to date British Education Index—1975 to date ERIC—1966 to date	(TRANSFORM ADJ LEARNING OR STUDENT ADJ EXPERIENCE OR STUDENT ADJ IDENTITY OR STUDENT ADJ JOURNEY).TI, AB. AND (GRADUATE OR PHD OR DOCTORAL OR MASTER OR STUDY ABROAD OR INTERNATIONAL OR OVERSEAS OR FOREIGN OR UK OR SOJOURNER*).TI, AB. AND (RETURN OR REINTEGRATION OR SHOCK OR POST OR OUTCOME OR IMPACT OR EFFECT). TI, AB. combined sets 1, 2, 3 (LIM from 2000) and removed duplicates	267	87	29	
Proquest	((transform* learning or student experience or student journey or student identity) and (graduate or PhD or doctoral or master or study abroad or international or overseas or foreign or UK or sojourner*) and (return or reintegration or shock or post or outcome or impact or effect)) AND PDN (>1/1/2000) ANDLN(EN)	279	65	39	8
Index to Thesis	(“transform*learning” or “student experience” or “student journey” or “student identity”) and (graduate or PhD or doctoral or master or “study abroad” or international or overseas or foreign or UK or sojourner*) and (return or reintegration or shock or post or outcome or impact or effect)	44	10	10	
Project MUSE	“Transform*learning”	57	18	15	
NDLTD	“transform*” “learning” “and” “study” “abroad”	56	7	7	
ALL	Combined	1371			
ALL	Duplicates removed	338			
ALL	Total	1033	285	148	27

**Appendix 2:** Selected studies for the review

N	Reference	Theoretical framework	Setting	Participants	Gender	Age	Home	Host	Qualitative	Quantitative
1	Alazzi, K., & Chiodo, J. J. (2006). Uncovering problems and identifying coping strategies of Middle Eastern university students. <i>International Education</i> , 35(2),65–81. Available at: Proquest Database	Grounded theory	Doctoral / University	8	M	26–39	JO	AU	II	
2	Baker, V. L., & Pifer, M. J. (2011). The role of relationships in the transition from doctoral student to independent scholar. <i>Studies in Continuing Education</i> , 33(1),5–17. doi:10.10 80/0158037X.2010. 515569	Network theory and sociocultural perspectives of learning	Doctoral/ University	31	14 F	N/S	US	US	SSI	
3	Boyer, N. R., Maher, P. A., & Kirkman, S. (2006). Transformative learning in online settings. <i>Journal of Transformative Education</i> , 4(4),335–361. <a href="http://jtd.sagepub.com/content/4/4/335">http://jtd.sagepub.com/content/4/4/335</a> . doi:10.1177/1541344606295318	Transformative learning	Graduate/Web-based course	59	165 F	N/S	US	US	4 sets RW	
4	Brock, S. E. (2010). Measuring the importance of precursor steps to transformative learning. <i>Adult Education Quarterly</i> , 60(2),122–142. <a href="http://aeq.sagepub.com/content/60/2/122">http://aeq.sagepub.com/content/60/2/122</a> . doi:10.1177/0741713609333084	Transformative learning	Under-graduate/ University	256	N/S	17–22	ASIA, O	US		(LAS)
5	Chang, W.-W., Chen, C.-H. L., Huang, Y.-F., & Yuan, Y.-H. (2012). Exploring the unknown: International service and individual transformation. <i>Adult Education Quarterly</i> , 62(3),230–251. <a href="http://aeq.sagepub.com/content/early/2011/03/12/0741713611402049">http://aeq.sagepub.com/content/early/2011/03/12/0741713611402049</a> . doi:10.1177/0741713611402049	Transformative learning environment–person interaction schema theory Johari Window	International service	10	5F	24–35	TAI	PN, BE, UK, IC, TH, DE, BR	SER, SSI, PO, DR,	
6	Chang, Y. (2009). A qualitative study of temporary reentry from significant others' perspective. <i>International Journal of Intercultural Relations</i> , 33(3),259–263. doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2009.02.002	re-Entry	Mothers of international students	18	F	S20-29 M40-50	CHN	D	II	

7	Chapman, A., & Pyvis, D. (2006). Dilemmas in the formation of student identity in offshore higher education: A case study in Hong Kong. <i>Educational Review</i> , 58(3),291–302. doi:10.1080/00131910600748190	Social practice theory	Doctoral	21	N/S	N/S	AU in HK	HK	I, DR	S
8	Erichsen, E. (2009), <i>Reinventing selves: International students' conceptions of self and learning for transformation</i> (Thesis). University of Wyoming. 3387257	Transformative learning theory (TLT), symbolic interactionism (SI), and the concept of intercultural competency (IC)	Graduate/ University	7	F	31–45	DE, KR, KE, LA, TM	US	SSI letter back home FI	
9	Faulk, D. R., Parker, F. M., & Morris, A. H. (2010). Reforming perspectives: MSN graduates' knowledge, attitudes and awareness of self-transformation. <i>International Journal of Nursing Education Scholarship</i> , 7(1). doi:10.2202/1548-923X.2052	Transformative learning	Graduate/ Nursing	24	22F	33–59		US	SSI, DT, WIKICA	
10	Gill, S. (2010). 'The Homecoming: An investigation into the effect that studying overseas had on Chinese postgraduates' life and work on their return to China. <i>Compare a Journal of Comparative and International Education</i> , 40(3),359–376. doi:10.1080/03057920903464555.	'Reverse culture shock' Transformative dimension of intercultural experience Intercultural personhood	Doctoral	10		27–38	CHN	N/S	II	
11	Glisczinski, D. J. (2007). Transformative higher education. <i>Journal of Transformative Education</i> , 5(4),317–328. <a href="http://jtd.sagepub.com/content/5/4/317">http://jtd.sagepub.com/content/5/4/317</a> doi:10.1177/1541344607312838	Transformative Learning	Large grant university and private college	153	N/S	18		UK		LAS
12	Gu, Q. (2009). 'Maturity and interculturality: Chinese students' experiences in UK higher education. <i>European Journal of Education</i> , 44(1),37–52. doi:10.1111/j.1465-3435.2008.01369.x	Identity formation	Under-graduate and graduate	163	D	D	CHN	UK	Three studies Mixed Methods Study 1: (QUAN> QUAL>QUAL) Study 2: (QUAL) Study 3: (QUAN>QUAL> QUAL>QUAN)	

13	Hamza, A. (2010). International experience. <i>Journal of Studies in International Education</i> , 14(1),50–69. <a href="http://jsi.sagepub.com/content/14/1/50">http://jsi.sagepub.com/content/14/1/50</a> doi:10.1177/1028315308329793	Transformative learning	Staff exchange	9	F	38–62	US	Gulf	PHI, DR, FI,	S
14	Kung, H. (2007), <i>Dancing on the edge: International students' transformative journeys in the United States of America</i> (Thesis) p. 3271223, The University of Oklahoma.	Adult learning and development theories, chaos and complexity, transformational learning	University students and recent graduates working in the United States under practical training (including H1 visa)	18	N/S	21–64	N/S	US	2 series of II, IE	
15	Lennox, S. L. (2005), <i>Contemplating the self: Integrative approaches to transformative learning in higher education</i> (Thesis) p. 3184473, Fielding Graduate University.	Transformative learning	Graduate level course: Spirituality	16	14 F	20–59	N/S	US	SIP, DT, DR, PO, CSDE	
16	Milstein, T. (2005). Transformation abroad: Sojourning and the perceived enhancement of self-efficacy. <i>International Journal of Intercultural Relations</i> , 29(2),217–238. <a href="http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel">http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel</a> . doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.05.005	Culture shock, intercultural sensitivity, transformation theory, self-efficacy, and communication	Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET)/ Language Education	212	N/S	21–62	US	JP		Pre & post S, DT
17	Morrice, L. (2013). Learning and refugees: Recognizing the darker side of transformative learning. <i>Adult Education Quarterly</i> , 63(3),251–271. doi:10.1177/0741713612465467	Transformative learning	Refugees in the University of Sussex programme	10	4F	24–48	IQ, ET, ZW	UK	I	
18	Park, K. (2002), <i>Transformative learning: Sojourners' experiences in intercultural adjustment</i> (Thesis) p. 3068021, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.	Transformative learning (Mezirow) intercultural adjustment	University	25	N/S	N/S	EA	US	SSI	

19	Pasquariello, G. (2009), <i>The way in and the way on: A qualitative study of the catalysts and outcomes of transformative learning</i> (Thesis) p. 3376158, Azusa Pacific University.	Grounded theory	Graduate university Arts degree programme in transformational leadership (MATL)	28	N/S	25-57 avg 33	US	US	I	S
20	Ritz, A. A. (2006), <i>Transformative learning and international students in an American University</i> (Thesis) p. 3225190, Teachers College, Columbia University.	Transformative learning	Graduate/ HE	12	6 F	21-35	EC, KR, TW, AZ, IN, CHN, JP, CA, TH,	US	JO, SSI	
21	Sariyant, T. P. (2002), <i>Knowing and understanding through auto/ethnography: Narrative on transformative learning experience of an international graduate student</i> (Thesis) p. 3039391, University of Massachusetts Amherst.	Social change transformation through education	University	1	f		TH	US	PJ, ID, I,	
22	Stevens-Long, J., Schapiro, S. A., & McClintock, C. (2012). Passionate scholars: Transformative learning in doctoral education. <i>Adult Education Quarterly</i> , 62(2),180-198. doi:10.1177/0741713611402046	Transformative learning	PHD programme designed around the principles of collaborative adult learning	59	D	22	US	US	SSI	SAQ
23	Sussman, N. M. (2002). Testing the cultural identity model of the cultural transition cycle: Sojourners return home. <i>International Journal of Intercultural Relations</i> , 26(4),391-408. <a href="http://www.elsevier.com">http://www.elsevier.com</a> . doi:10.1016/S0147-1767(02)00013-5	Cultural identity and repatriation	JET	113	62F	23-43	US	JP		SRS
24	Tacey, K. D. (2012), <i>'Perspective transformation analyzing the outcomes of international education'</i> (PhD Thesis). Texas A&M University.	Transformative learning and international experiential education	ETA Fulbright	124	D	22-29	AD, AR, BE, CL, DE, HU, IN, KR, RO, ES, TW, TR,	US		S

25	Taylor, E. W. (1994). Intercultural competency: A transformative learning process. <i>Adult Education Quarterly</i> , 44(3), 154–174. <a href="http://aeq.sagepub.com/content/44/3/154">http://aeq.sagepub.com/content/44/3/154</a> . doi:10.1177/074171369404400303	Transformative learning theory intercultural competency	Intercultural competent individuals	12	4 F		US	BR, BF, EC, GA, DE, HN, JP, IND, MX, NI, ES, CHN	I, FI
26	Taylor, E. W. (2003). Attending Graduate School in adult education and the impact on teaching beliefs. <i>Journal of Transformative Education</i> , 1(4), 349–367. <a href="http://jtd.sagepub.com/content/1/4/349">http://jtd.sagepub.com/content/1/4/349</a> . doi:10.1177/1541344603257239	Transformative Learning	MA Adult Education	16	11F	mid-20s to late 50s	US	BR, BF, EC, GB, GR, HN, JP, IN, MXNI, ES, CHN	I
27	Wong, Y. (2008), <i>(Re)forming incipient hybrid identities: The voices of female international graduate students</i> (PhD Thesis). Santa Barbara: University of California.	Grounded theory, identity negotiation, and cultural hybridity	Graduate university	12	F	24–29	CA, BG, TW, TR, GT, EG, PT, CHN, KR, DE	US	I

<b>Research Instruments</b>	<b>Countries</b>					
Case study database exercise (CSDE)	Andorra (AD)	Canada (CA)	Gabon (GA)	India (IN)	Mexico (MX)	Taiwan (TW)
Demographic tool (DT)	Argentina (AR)	Chile (CL)	Germany (DE)	India (IN)	Nicaragua (NI)	Thailand (TH)
Document review (DR)	Australia (AU)	China (CHN)	Guatemala (GT)	Indonesia (ID)	Nigeria (NI)	Turkey (TR)
Follow-up interviews (FI)	Azerbaijan (AZ)	Costa Rica (CR)	Honduras (HN)	Iraq (IQ)	Panama (PA)	United Kingdom (UK)
'I' image exercise (IE)	Belgium (BE)	Ecuador (EC)	Hong Kong (HK)	Japan (JP)	Romania (RO)	United States of America (USA)
In-depth interviews (II)	Belgium (BE)	Egypt (EG)	Hungary (HU)	KOREA – SOUTH (KR)	Spain (ES)	Zimbabwe (ZW)
Informal dialogue (ID)	Brazil (BR)	Ethiopia (ET)	Iceland (IC)	Lao (LA)		
Interviews (I)	Burkina Faso (BF)		Iceland (IC)			
Journal observation (JO)						
Learning Activity Survey (LAS)						
Participatory observation (PO)						
Personal journal (PJ)						
Phone interviews (PHI)						
Reflective writings (RW)						
Self-administered questionnaire (SAQ)						
Self-inquiry papers (SIP)						
Self-reporting survey (SRS)						
Semi-structured interview (SSI)						
Significant event review (SER)						
WIKI face-to-face telephone content analysis (WIKICA)						