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Travel as Transformation

Phyllis C. Brown and Cheryl A. Smith

Introduction: A Cuban Experience in Education

Travel is broadening. It can also be transformative. To that end, Lesley University has developed a series of study/travel trips, one of which is to Cuba. The purpose of this presentation is to explore the power of place as text for the participants in the January 2002 trip to Cuba, addressing the issue of transformative learning in a specific context. Representative group members are highlighted as they discuss the nature of their learning from their own perspectives. Video clips from post-trip reflection interviews conducted 11 months after travel are used in a PowerPoint presentation to illustrate their experiences with their learning. The data collected through the interviews as well as reflection papers from the students was examined to see whether and to what extent transformative learning occurred as a result of this travel trip and if so what kinds of transformations were evident.

Themes did emerge that provide evidence for change as a result of the trip. The implications for practice regarding the value of non-classroom based teaching through travel, highlighting the power of place as an instructional technique for advancing the understanding of political, social and cultural contexts are examined. In addition, the benefits for professional development of adult educators, the use of multi-media for data collection, analysis and presentation are discussed. Finally, questions raised as a result of the research that are intended to advance understanding of transformative learning theory on individual, group and societal levels are presented.

Setting the Context

Lesley University has developed a series of study/travel trips for students, faculty, staff, alumni and community partners. One of the recent and most powerful is "The Cuban Experience in Education and the Arts." In 2000, the president of Lesley University Margaret McKenna traveled to Cuba with a delegation of college presidents led by Congressman James McGovern of Boston for the purpose of exploring the possibility of engaging North Americans and Cubans in a mutually beneficial educational relationship. A university license that enabled Lesley to travel to Cuba with members of the Lesley community as well as participants from the wider community was obtained in 2000 and the first trip took place in January 2001. Since the 2001 inaugural trip, approximately 150 students, faculty members, administrators and community partners have traveled to Cuba with the university.

According to President McKenna, the value of the trip for Lesley students is to enable them to become more aware of culture and its impact, to become critical thinkers and to value diversity as they move forward as educated, informed citizens of the world. The trips also provided a means of enhancing a sense of community in a more global sense, providing a cultural mirror through which the US worldview was reflected.

The purpose of this presentation is to explore the power of place as text for the participants in the January 2002 trip, addressing the issue of transformative learning in a specific context. The experience of traveling to a controversial country for the express purpose of learning was captured in the participants' own voices.

Theoretical Frame

The overarching theoretical frame of analysis used is Mezirow's transformative theory of adult learning, which has as its core perspective transformation (1991). The theory "makes sense of how adults learn to change their frames of reference (Mezirow, 2000, p. xiv) and its focus is on how adults learn to negotiate and act on their own. Since the generally accepted definition of learning in adulthood is that adults make meaning of their experiences, then the theory holds that they do this by becoming critically aware of their own tacit beliefs and assumptions and those of others who help them assess the validity of those assumptions. Mezirow defines learning as the "process of using prior interpretation to construe new or revised interpretations of one's experience as a guide for future action (2000, p. 5).

If learning is making meaning of experience and the desired outcomes of transformative learning is "...to make them (learners and teachers) more inclusive, discriminating open, emotionally capable of change and reflective so they may generate beliefs and opinions...that will guide action (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8) then travel is an immediately felt experience that enhances learning on many levels.

That learning can be intentional, incidental or mindlessly assimilative. The role of experiential learning or the express purpose of learning by doing or by being there in the case of travel can enhance and accelerate the transformative process.

Transformational learning in adulthood has traditionally been focused on the individual and has been criticized as such for failing to acknowledge the role of context, political, social and cultural on individual change and vice versa. Recent iterations of the theory, based in part on the outcomes of previous transformative learning conferences, have prompted Mezirow to address the importance of new understandings promoted by critical reflection on context based-assumptions. For the purposes of this presentation, the core elements of the theory used to identify elements of transformative learning and its context-driven process are place as the

"trigger" event, disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, change in perspectives and action that followed that change (Mezirow, 2000).

Given the political and economic issues attendant in the US/Cuban relationship, it is not surprising that all of the participants, while having the common purpose of learning also came on the trip with their own particular expectations and with their own unique biases that would come to be challenged on the trip. It is also true that each viewed their experiences through different lenses, had different responses to, events and places and had their own stories to tell within the larger story of the Cuban experience.

The Trip

The trip to Cuba took place from January 4 to January 14, 2002. Thirty participants went, including the two faculty leaders. The group was comprised of students, both graduate and undergraduate, alumni, administrators and community partners. Interestingly, five adult children of faculty, including the President's son, went on the trip. The composition of the group was impressive in terms of its diversity along many dimensions, including age, race, ethnicity, gender and profession. The differences among the travelers enhanced the vibrancy and discourse in this very purposeful learning community and as will be seen later, enhanced the richness of the learning experiences of each individual.

The Study/Travel trip enabled the Lesley students to take the trip for credit; those who did so had to follow the curriculum that included pre-trip reading, a journal that was kept throughout the trip, post-trip reflection papers and a research project of their choice. Of the 6 students who attended, 5 took the trip for credit. The one student who did not take the trip for credit did keep a journal for her own purposes. Students came from several schools within the university including the Adult Baccalaureate College, the School of Education and the School for Interdisciplinary Inquiry. PPD or CEU credits were offered for teachers and two Boston public school employees took advantage of that opportunity. All group members were given background reading material and resources, including websites, prior to the trip. Two Orientation sessions were also held before travel, giving the participants the opportunity to meet each other as well as ask questions.

The Video

Five participants were used in the PowerPoint presentation that included video clips of post-trip reflection interviews. They were chosen because they represented diversity in terms of age, race, ethnicity and perspectives. Three students were presented as their main purpose for going was to enhance their learning while

obtaining credit for the experience. A faculty member on her third trip and a community partner of Cuban descent were also presented because their perspectives added value to our understanding of travel as transformation.

A semi-structured interview guide based on Brookfield 's critical classroom incident was used to direct the post-trip reflection interviews. The answers given were evidence of disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, changed perspectives and action taken, the core elements of the theory used as a conceptual frame of analysis. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. A description of the participants presented in the video follow and includes a statement felt to epitomize their most significant learning.

The People Who Traveled to Cuba Speak about their Experiences

Kris is an Adult Baccalaureate College (ABC) student majoring in American studies and minoring in elementary education. Her educational goal is to become a middle school social studies teacher. She will graduate from Lesley in 2004. In her self-evaluation/reflection journal Kris wrote: " Some of my most powerful learning came from listening and observing Cuban people... I can only speak for myself, but I never realized that I have such an imperialistic attitude towards life...What did I learn in Cuba? I guess one way to answer this question is that I have a lot to learn about the world and why different societies feel the way they do about us."

Carol is also an ABC student and Ted is her partner. He is a software engineer and a part-time blues musician. Carol graduated in May 2003 and will begin teaching in an elementary school in September. They were interviewed together however most of the focus is on Carol and her student experience. "Prior to our trip, I thought Cuba was a dangerous place. Why? Because people I cared about and trusted told me it was...This trip was one of the most powerful and emotional journeys that I have ever been on... I am truly grateful to have been able to expand my knowledge and understanding of such an 'unknown' country and look forward to learning more now that I have a foundation to build on." Ted spoke directly to the political situation that colored his underlying assumptions and expectations about Cubans' reactions to Americans.

Susanna is a Latina woman of Chilean descent. She graduated in May 2003 with a Master's Degree in Intercultural Relations. Her reasons for going to Cuba were two-fold: to increase her knowledge of her own Latin roots and to combine this personal quest with her academic pursuits. Since returning from the trip, she realized she hears and sees things pertaining to Cuba differently. She pays attention now to news clippings, TV reports and books with a different view since she has been there and states: "I am now connected to Cuba."

Dolores is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Lesley College , the traditional college of the university. Matthew is a speech pathologist in the Boston Public schools. This trip was Dolores' third and Matthew's second. Dolores' research area is Afro-Cuban life, especially the Santeria religious practices. Matthew's research is focused on how children with special needs, especially those with speech and hearing problems, educated in Cuba.

Matthew's interest in going to Cuba was purely political as he doubted that the information he was getting from the media about Cuba was accurate. He felt there were stories there to be told about how people were living and surviving in a way that needed to be brought to light. Dolores talked about how she has brought her learning and new perspectives back to her classroom: " I teach cross-cultural psychology and... assign the chapter on Cuba to her students" using her firsthand experiences to guide and inform the discussions.

Marita is a Boston resident of Cuban descent and a community partner on this trip. She is the Vice President for public radio and the Chair of the Board of the Afro-American Museum in Boston . Marita came to Cuba because of the influence of her father who was born there and her paternal grandmother who visited from Cuba . She was interested in going to see Cuba for herself. She came away with a more textured understanding of Cuba , for example understanding the educational system with more depth as it plays out in day-to-day life. She has gained a "flesh and blood" perspective on life and people in Cuba that is different from the "cardboard picture" obtained from the news and films. She understands now that culture is always with you and that although she had never been there before Cuban culture is a part of her.

Analysis of the Data

Travel to Cuba in the post- September 11th era made for many disorienting dilemmas, thus the trip itself was the trigger event in the transformative learning process. Habits of mind and points of view changed. Assumptions were examined as critical reflection took place both in and on action. The data collected was examined to see whether and to what extent transformative learning occurred as a result of this travel trip and if so what kinds of transformations were evident.

Several themes became immediately apparent in all of the 11 interviews conducted. Even though, as previously stated, everyone came with their own agendas, expectations and goals, commonalities far outweighed the individual differences. One consistent theme was surprise at the openness and warmth of the Cubans towards Americans, indicating a change in perspective from their unexamined assumptions about how the Cuban people would perceive and react to them. Another common

realization was the importance of the Literacy Campaign as a national achievement, changing their perspectives about how governments can impact empowerment and social reform if there is a collective will to do so. Finally, meeting and talking with Cubans, discourse, was reported by almost everyone as being the best part of their learning. All stated they would take action based on their learning. Types of actions either taken or planned include listening more critically to news reports and other people's opinions about Cuba, sharing information about their trip, learning Spanish, continuing research, using material in their classrooms and going back to Cuba.

Implications for Practice

The value of travel as transformation has implications for the practice of teaching and learning in adult education. For example, the one of the "hooks" or enhancements for the Lesley students was the ability to use the trip as the basis for earning credits while providing them with an opportunity to experience learning in a unique setting. The university's granting of credit validated this type of non-classroom learning. Other pertinent aspects of teaching and learning in higher education in this model of adult education is to use it to build connections and community in its broadest sense and to emphasize the criticality of context and multiple perspectives in this increasingly volatile global village.

An additional aspect of travel as transformation is related to professional development of adult educators, including our own transformation as travelers, the use of multi-media in teaching and the impact of that learning on educators. The process of videotaping the journey and the post-journey interviews raised questions for us as we examined them through the lens of transformation theory. Coming to the theory from different perspectives, we discussed questions that we now raise together to challenge and expand the theory: If action is not taken or demonstrated immediately but is only planned, can we say that transformative learning took place as a result of the journey? What exactly is meant by action and how is that action assessed as an indication of transformative learning? Was the trip transformative only individually? Did the group evidence collective transformation impacted by relationship of the members with each other in this setting? Does the members' new views and perspectives about Cuba have an impact on their families, workplaces and communities such that they trigger transformative learning on a much wider collective and community level?

Given that this group of people who chose to go to Cuba were at least curious and at best already questioning the information received about it, the overarching question is raised: Did travel to Cuba truly result in transformative learning for the participants?

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