RETURNING HOME: MAKING MEANING OF STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE TO FACILITATE TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

A doctoral thesis presented by

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to the Graduate School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

in the field of

Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
October 2019
Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand how American students returning from a study abroad program make meaning of their experiences to facilitate transformative learning. Using the theoretical framework of transformative learning, research participants engaged in semi-structured interviews discussing their experiences abroad and upon their return home to further understand how they utilized critical reflection and rational discourse to make meaning and facilitate development. Analysis using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) led to the emergence of three superordinate themes and nine sub-themes. These themes outlined student personal development, interpersonal development, and increased cultural awareness. The results of this study show the importance of creating structures to provide students with effective support prior to their departure abroad, while abroad, and especially upon their return in order to foster their learning and development.

*Key words: study abroad, transformative learning, re-entry*
Acknowledgements

“The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page” – St. Augustine

In September of 2006, when I got off the plane in Germany to embark upon a year abroad at the University of Heidelberg, I knew it would be the opportunity of a lifetime, but I don’t think I truly understood how much that year would make a difference in my future path. My passion for international education and understanding the experiences of students returning from study abroad stems from my own experiences during this year, 13 years ago. There are so many people I would like to thank and acknowledge that have been a part of this journey and have supported me through it all:

To my Heidelberg crew, I’m so grateful for the experiences we shared that year in Germany and in the years since. Across the miles and time zones, we’ve continued to come together to explore new places and experience life’s milestones with one another. I can’t wait to see what the next milestones bring.

Christine Goulding, my German professor in college who urged me to apply for a year-long study abroad program. I didn’t think it was possible, and your encouragement made me see that it was. This encouragement changed my career path and I’m forever thankful.

Tasha Dev, “read this entire email, don’t skim”, and Mike Nieto …thank you for your dedication to providing support to students studying abroad at Chico State, including me. It takes people like you to ensure students have opportunities to make meaning of their experiences when they return from study abroad.

To my fellow classmates in the 2016 CPS Seattle Cohort, I’m so thankful for our comradery and mutual support we have given each over the past 3 years. Whenever I felt self-doubt or needed a sounding board, I knew I could rely on our group to give advice, find inspiration, or help me to snap out of it!
To my academic mentors I’ve had throughout my journey, Donna, Kara, Paula, Karen, and Holly. Thank you for showing me how women can be leaders in the academic sphere, making a difference in the lives of the students you serve. Thank you for being a shining example of what I strive to be as I engage in this research and in research in the future.

The Education Abroad Office staff at my research institution: thank you for sending out my recruitment email and being patient with me during this process. I, literally, could not have done this without you and I’m, truly, so grateful for your support.

Joan and William, thank you for your dedication and support as my Chair and second reader. I’m so appreciative of your thorough and continuous feedback throughout this entire process. Your curiosity and genuine interest in my research topic have been reassuring and affirming.

Joanne, thank you for being my third reader. When I thought of who might be able to provide me with valuable insight regarding my research, I knew you would provide both support and critical feedback in a way that helped me to grow. Thank you for taking the time to provide that!

To my friends and family, far and wide, who motivated me to write when I was struggling, reminded me that what I’m doing is important and unique, joined me for study dates, took things off my plate when they knew I should be writing, and genuinely cared and asked how my research was going, thank you!

Anna, I don’t think I can say enough how thankful I am for everything you’ve helped me with during this dissertation process. Thank you for putting up with my constant visits to your office just to get a “quick minute of feedback” or sitting with me to help me externally process
my emergent themes when I was convinced I wasn’t on the right track. Thank you for validating me as a researcher and reassuring me I knew what I was doing.

Joel, I can’t even begin to find the words to thank you for always being there over the past year and a half during this process. Your continuous encouragement and positive attitude, even when I was struggling, has been invaluable and I’m so appreciative for your support and always believing in me.

Thank you, Dad, for instilling in me your sense of adventure, the curiosity for learning and the need to understand “why” from a young age. This research is founded in all of these values and I’m so thankful that we share these traits.

Thank you, Mom, for listening. Always listening. When I needed to vent about the research process, needed to talk out what I was thinking so I could better understand it for myself, or I just needed to tell you the 10 million things on my ‘to do’ list that week, you were and are always there to listen.

And finally, thank you to the student participants who came along on this journey with me. Thank you for sharing your experiences with me and for engaging fully in this process. Hearing your experiences abroad and upon your return home continues to affirm the importance of this research and providing opportunities for students to engage in international education.
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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how undergraduate students returning from an academic year study abroad program make meaning of their re-entry experiences throughout the re-entry process. The knowledge generated will inform the field of international education, as it will provide insight into the experiences of students returning from study abroad in order to support their future learning and development.

This chapter provides a statement of the problem supported by evidence from the literature addressing prior studies on the experiences of students returning from study abroad, followed by a discussion of the study’s significance in providing support to students upon their return home. This research focused on the experiences of American undergraduate students returning from an international study abroad program and address how they made meaning of their experiences abroad during re-entry to facilitate transformative learning. Finally, the theoretical framework of transformational learning will be introduced, explaining its alignment with the study’s research question.

**Statement of the Problem**

The number of American students participating in study abroad continues to grow each year, with increased commitment and effort from institutions to provide international experiences for their students (Petersdotter, Niehoff & Freund, 2017). Each year the Institute for International Education provides data on American students participating in study abroad through the creation of the Open Doors Report (2017). This report has shown an increase in the overall number of students, from 205,000 students in 2004/2005 to approximately 325,338 in 2015/16. Approximately 15.5% of U.S. undergraduate students pursuing a bachelor’s degree participate in a study abroad program before graduation. Ogden and Streitwieser (2016) addressed the impact
of this increase by voicing the need for international educators to understand the experiences of students to provide better support during their re-entry, so that students can benefit fully from their experience. As the number of students participating in study abroad programs continue to increase each year, this will be become increasingly important (Szkudlarek, 2010).

While students at many institutions consistently receive pre-departure preparation before participating in a study abroad program, the depth of opportunities for reflection upon a student’s return varies from institution to institution. As discussed by Brubaker (2017), re-entry programming typically receives less emphasis from international educators, leaving students to process their time abroad alone. This is due to many reasons. Anecdotally, Brubaker cites low attendance in re-entry activities, a lack of available staff time to provide opportunities, and limited professional development training to provide adequate programming, not to mention competing for administrative priorities within the institution. As students continue to make meaning of their experiences abroad when they return home, institutions must focus on creating and providing re-entry initiatives to provide support to students during a potentially difficult or stressful time. This provides students with the opportunity to learn from their experiences and reflect on their time abroad when they return home to assist in their development (Raschio, 1987).

There is an increasing amount of research in the area of international education focusing the experiences of American students’ when they return from study abroad (Hadis, 2010; Salisbury, An & Pascarella, 2013; Wielkiewicz, R.M. & Turkowski, L.W., 2010; Gaw, 2000). Among these experiences are reverse culture shock, understanding development of cultural sensitivity, and processing how one makes meaning of their experiences abroad (Szkudlarek, 2010; Salisbury & Pascarella, 2013; Pederson, 2010; Terrant, Rubin & Stoner, 2014). Mezirow
(1991) defines making meaning as the ability to interpret one’s experiences and learning and make sense of those experiences and new knowledge. While there have been many studies focusing on the experience of students when they return from study abroad, there is a lack of research on how students make meaning of that experience upon returning. Perry, Stoner and Terrant (2012) summarize the importance of students having opportunities to increase their awareness of, not only what they learned while they were abroad, but also how that knowledge affects their decision-making, perspectives and overall worldview.

This research will provide an opportunity to examine how transformational learning contributes to students’ ability to make meaning of their experiences abroad when they return home. Further, it will identify how the use of reflection and discourse specifically facilitate opportunities for students to process and understand what they learned. Perry et al. (2012) discuss the use of intentional pedagogy and reflective exercises in effectively promoting transformative learning opportunities to ensure optimal development. Herbers and Mullins Nelson (2009) found that study abroad alone does not facilitate transformation, recommending that international educators plan for discussion and reflective experiences to provide students with transformative experiences.

Finally, Wielkiewicz and Turkowski (2010) address the importance of international educators focusing on creating programming that will facilitate a positive re-entry experience that supports students working through adjustment to their home environment, who may experience challenges processing their time abroad. As stated above, programming opportunities are often scarce, leaving students to process on their own, calling for an increase in attention to creating space for reflection and transformation in order to ensure students get the most of their study abroad experience.
The audiences that will most benefit from this study are those working in international education, especially those directly working with and advising students. This study will provide international educators with additional context to develop re-entry programming opportunities and reflective exercises to ensure institutions have the opportunity to provide space for students to make meaning of their experience and transform their perspectives. This study will also provide international educators with further context to understand how students make meaning of their study abroad experience in order to support their future development. Students returning from study abroad may benefit from this research as well. It will provide guidance and context for them as they make meaning of their own experience. A student’s ability to make meaning of their experience provides the opportunity to transform their perspectives to learn as much as possible from their study abroad program. Additionally, it may assist students as they reflect on their time abroad, potentially navigating difficulty in returning home and acclimating to their home environment and developing skills to understand and integrate other cultural differences.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how American undergraduate students returning from academic year study abroad programs make meaning of their experiences abroad when they return home.

Significance of the Research Question

As stated above, the number of students participating in study abroad programs have steadily increased over the past ten years, with students pursuing a diversity of options in both duration and location (Open Doors, 2017). This increase in students studying abroad shows the need for increased attention and dedication to serving students when they return. As Young (2014) stated, it is widely accepted in the field of international education that students will experience difficulties in readjusting upon their return home. As such, it is important that
international educators provide support and opportunities to this increased number of students upon their return to ensure successful adjustment and space to reflect and learn from their time abroad.

According to the National Association of Foreign Student Advisor’s (NAFSA), an essential component of the study abroad experience is providing space for re-entry processing (Hoffa & Pearson, 1997). As such, previous research has shown that students are impacted academically, psychologically, socially and emotionally because of their study abroad experience (Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010; Szkudlarek, 2010; Ryan & Twibell, 2000; Hadis, 2005). Many have identified how students experience re-entry issues such as reverse culture shock and difficulty applying their learning abroad to their life at home, establishing that there is a want for effective programming available for students to reflect on their experiences, learn from their time abroad and adjust accordingly (Sussman, 1986; Raschio, 1987; Uehara, 1986; Young, 2014; Presbitero, 2016). Providing a model for how to facilitate reflection and transformation among college students returning from study abroad, this research has the opportunity to empower students to get the most out of their learning and experiences abroad.

Finally, as evidenced in the Lincoln Commission Report (2005), the United States has placed emphasis on international education and study abroad. The Commission stated three main goals:

- To send at least one million U.S. undergraduate students abroad each year.
- The demographics of students studying abroad should be similar to the general population of U.S. undergraduate students.
- Students participating in the Lincoln Fellows program (a fellowship program established by the Commission) should study abroad in non-traditional countries. (Durbin, 2006).
The Lincoln Commission addresses the importance of study abroad participation to increase opportunities for student interaction with diverse populations, thereby increasing their ability to function in a globalized society. Engberg (2013) researched the benefit of study abroad programs in fostering a global perspective. He found that through the use of intentional service-learning and study abroad experiences, students have the potential to “optimize their preparation as global citizens” (Engberg, 2013, p. 478). Nguyen (2012) further studied the impact of study abroad on student intellectual and professional development in the areas of critical thinking, global engagement and ability to adapt to other cultures, stating the need for institutional implementation of study abroad in order to encourage this experience for all. As such, it benefits international educators and researchers to understand how students make meaning of their experience abroad and their development of cultural sensitivity to increase students’ abilities to interact with other cultures. In providing opportunities for students to make meaning and learn from their experiences, this facilitates student development and learning to learn more about the world around them, achieving the goals of the Lincoln Commission. This research provides an example of the experiences students have, not only when they are abroad, but more importantly, upon their return home in order to further inform international educators so they can support students.

**Research Problem and Research Question**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study of undergraduate students returning from study abroad program was to understand how they transform their perspectives, make meaning of their experiences abroad, and develop cultural sensitivity through the re-entry process by exploring the following overarching research questions:

- How do American college students returning from study abroad make meaning of their study abroad experience as a part of their re-entry process?
How do students experience transformation upon their return from study abroad?

How does critical reflection and discourse facilitate transformation upon their return from study abroad?

How do their experiences contribute to their development of cultural sensitivity?

Definitions of Key Terminology

International Educator: student services professionals, faculty, deans, and other higher education administrators who provide support services to students pursuing study abroad or international experience opportunities (NAFSA, 2018).

Re-entry: the process students engage in when returning home after participating in an international experience or study abroad experience.

Re-entry student – an undergraduate student returning to the United States to their original university campus after participating in an international experience or study abroad program.

Cultural sensitivity: one’s attitude towards understanding cultural difference (Bennett, 2009).

Reverse Culture Shock: difficulty readjusting due to emotional and psychological distress experienced by a student returning home to their original university campus after participating in an international experience or study abroad program (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963).

International Experience – an educational opportunity a student participates in outside of the United States that is related to their academic goals.

Study Abroad – an academic program in which American students pursue education outside of the United States at a university or in an academic setting.
Theoretical Framework: Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning theory, developed by Jack Mezirow (1978), guided the development of this study. This theory of adult learning is used to explain how one makes sense or meaning of their experiences through critical reflection and rational discourse to transform their perspectives or frame of reference (Mezirow, 1978). A person’s perspective is formed by their beliefs, values, and assumptions that develop over time due to education, socialization, upbringing, culture and personal life experience (Dirkx, 1998; Christie, Carey, Robertson & Grainger, 2015). Through critical reflection, challenging one’s assumptions, and rational discourse of active dialogue to understand their experiences, one has the potential to transform their perspectives and frame of reference to further understand themselves and the world around them (Christie et al., 2015). The foundation of Mezirow’s (2003) theory is that education provides adult learners with the opportunity to move towards greater autonomy in developing necessary skills to critically reflect in order to effectively and regularly transform (Jones, 2015). By increasing their abilities in these areas, adult learners can navigate their experiences, make meaning of those experiences, and transform their perspectives.

Transformative learning theory is based on constructivist assumptions with roots in humanism and critical social theory (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). The constructivist lens assumes that “meaning exists within ourselves rather than in external forms…that personal meanings that we attribute to our experience are acquired and validated through human interaction” (Mezirow, 1991, p.xiv). We gain meaning through our experiences, and it is then validated by interaction and communication with others (Mezirow, 1991). Humanism relies on the principle that individuals are free to make their own choices, have the ability to grow and develop, and create their own reality, which is arguably “inherent in transformative learning” (Cranton & Taylor,
Transformative learning theory also addresses the need to change society, looking at society from a critical lens, rather than describe its condition (Cranton & Taylor, 2012).

Mezirow (1991) used Habermas’ (1971) overview of the three domains of learning to situate transformative learning theory. The three domains were technical, practical and emancipatory. As adult learning theory has been described as self-directed or voluntary, there is a need to understand how one gains knowledge and uses it effectively (Cranton, 1994).

Technical, or instrumental, learning is more subject-oriented (Cranton, 1994). It involves learning facts, concepts, and strategies for problem-solving and is more about skill-building. Communicative learning is meant to develop the ability to “understand what others mean and to make ourselves understood as we attempt to share ideas” (Mezirow, 1991). This includes understanding values, social norms, political concepts, and communicating one’s perspectives in those areas (Cranton, 1994). This domain of learning is most significant in adult learning as it develops the ability to understand how to engage effectively in rational discourse, one of the two essential components of transformative learning theory. (Taylor, 1998). Habermas’ (1971) third domain of learning is emancipatory, achieved through critical self-reflection. This domain provides one the opportunity to create their own meaning or perspectives instead of relying on meaning established by others. Cranton (1994) notes that transformative learning theory is focused primarily on the use of emancipatory knowledge, while Mezirow (2009) notes the importance of communicative learning in transformative learning theory as well.

Mezirow’s theory has developed over the past thirty years, taking shape with each critique. It originated in Mezirow’s 1978 study of 83 women returning to college after time away. His initial purpose was to use transformative learning theory to describe one’s personal
transformation through ten phases (Mezirow, 1978). He primarily focused on how a person’s view of themselves changed because of a new experience (Cranton, 2004).

Taylor (1998) outlined transformative learning as both a process one goes through, as well as an outcome of adult development. It is not so much about what happens to people when they make meaning, but how they make meaning, interpreting and explaining what happens to them as they change or transform their frame of reference (Mezirow, 1991). Through transformative learning, reflection and discourse, one has the opportunity to make meaning of the world around them, effectively navigate new perspectives and ultimately create individual and social change (Cranton & Taylor, 2012).

Mezirow (1991) defines learning as using meaning to direct the way we think, act, and feel. To make meaning is to interpret an experience or make sense of it, “give it coherence” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 10). Typically, one learns something new or makes meaning by assigning old meaning to a new experience. Mezirow (1991) describes transformative learning as the ability to reinterpret experiences from a new set of assumptions or perspectives, defined as a new frame of reference. Mezirow (2009) defines a frame of reference as a structure “of assumptions and expectations on which our thoughts, feelings and habits are based” which “may be rules, criteria, codes, language, schemata, cultural canon, ideology, standards or paradigms” (p. 22). Further, he describes frames of reference to include “personality traits...power allocation, worldviews, religious doctrine...social movements...learning styles, and preference” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 22). These components of one’s frame of reference guide the ability to make meaning and interpret experience.

While Cranton (1994) cautions against the use of generic stages or phases in a learning process, transformative learning theory provides a framework for how a learner progresses. In
Mezirow’s original 1975 study, he outlined ten phases a learner progresses through towards transformative learning:

1. Disorienting dilemma
2. Self-Examination
3. Critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition of discontent and relating to others
5. Exploring options of new behavior
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge to implement plans
8. Experimenting with new roles
9. Building confidence in new ways
10. Reintegration into life with new perspectives

The disorienting dilemma, or triggering event, confronts one with new facts or rules that contradict previously accepted knowledge (Cranton, 1994). Brookfield (1987) describes this further as something unexpected that occurs that leads to confusion or discomfort and requires a response. It is important to note that this event is not always a negative event and can have a positive impact. Mezirow (1997) describes the disorienting dilemma as different for everyone, examples such as death of a family member, a natural disaster, an accident, losing a job, or making a transition to retirement. This dilemma results in a person taking a closer look at their predetermined assumptions, their beliefs, and worldviews to assess their position (Mezirow, 1997). As one explores new directions and increases their ability to take on new roles, they eventually take on a new perspective or set of beliefs (Mezirow, 1997). Herbers and Mullins Nelson (2009) used transformative learning theory to study groups participating in study abroad
programs as these programs provide an optimal environment for students to challenge their assumptions, explore new directions and potentially examine new perspectives, facilitating transformation.

Cranton (2004) outlined the phases following the disorienting dilemma, where one begins to question their assumptions or worldviews and increases their self-awareness, as the core of transformative learning. Mezirow (1991) described that assumptions are ways of believing, social norms, social ideologies, and ways of feeling. In experiencing a disorienting dilemma or triggering event, one begins to question how they established their assumptions or worldview and where they received this information and the validity of its content. Cranton (2004) addresses the importance of support during this time to encourage reflection and discourse to provide space for the learner to question their assumptions and develop a new perspective effectively. While Mezirow originally outlined 10 phases, he eventually concluded that not all steps are required to experience transformation. Further, he summarized his initial ten steps into four levels which provide a more general description of the transformative learning experience: elaboration of existing frames of reference, learning a new frame of reference, transforming one’s point of view, and transforming one’s “habits of mind” (Brock, 2010). These four levels provide a general progression of a person in assessing their current perspectives, beliefs, and values while considering the perspectives, beliefs, and values of others, eventually transforming their perspectives to include new beliefs and values.

Throughout the phases, Mezirow (1991) outlined, transformative learning theory focuses on two important components essential for successful transformation: critical reflection and rational discourse (Christie et al. 2015). Locke described reflection as “an awareness of [one’s] own process of thinking” (Mezirow, 1991, pg. 100). Dewey presented a definition of reflection
that is prominently used in conversations about learning and education. He defined it as “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends” (Dewey, 1933, p. 9). Dewey (1933) further discussed the role of reflection in problem-solving and critical inquiry, facilitating evaluation of what we already know and how to reform our perspectives.

Mezirow (1991) further described the role of reflection in evaluating and interpreting experiences to assess their validity based on previous knowledge in order to create opportunities for transformation in perspectives. Mezirow (1991) defines reflection as the “process of critically assessing the content, process or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience” (p. 104). Jones (2015) highlights the importance of critical reflection in facilitating increased awareness of one’s assumptions or worldview and how there may be alternative ways of learning or additional knowledge to be obtained. Through reflection, one can question the soundness of their assumptions in order to transform their perspective (Taylor, 1998). If a learner does not effectively engage in reflection, the opportunity to evaluate their perspectives does not occur and, therefore, the opportunity for transformation does not exist. Strange and Gibson (2017) used transformative learning theory to examine the potential for student transformation as a result of participation in study abroad and experiential learning programs. They surveyed approximately 200 students through fixed choice and open-ended questionnaires. Their research found that students highlighted the importance of reflective elements in study abroad programming in contributing to their ability to learn and transform. Webster and Arends (2012) provided a case study of Stephanie, a study abroad service-learning participant, who voiced the importance of reflection throughout her immersion experience which provided the opportunity to reevaluate her values, ideologies, and stereotypes. It was stated that “global learning at its best
allows students to interrogate the process of learning and questioning common philosophies and rhetoric” (Webster & Arends, 2012, pg. 2), further addressing the value of reflection in facilitating transformation.

In conjunction with reflection, one must engage in rational discourse to further understand new perspectives and transform their frame of reference (Mezirow, 2000). Discourse is defined by Mezirow (2000) as “the process in which we have active dialogue with others to better understand the meaning of an experience” (p. 14). Cranton (1994) outlined discourse as the ability of a person to interpret a new experience’s meaning and challenge the validity of prior knowledge through discussion with others. Mezirow (1991) outlines the conditions needed to engage in rational discourse (p. 77):

- Access to accurate and complete information
- Be free from coercion
- Ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively
- Open to other perspectives
- Ability to reflect critically on presuppositions and their consequences
- Have equal opportunity to participate
- Ability to accept informed, objective and rational consensus as legitimate

These conditions allow a learner to reflect effectively, through dialogue and discussion, on their perspectives to develop new or more advanced perspectives. Development occurs through engagement in these practices, supporting the ability to make meaning autonomously of one’s experiences, which is essential to adult education, according to Mezirow (1991, 1997). Discourse further facilitates reflection by providing a learner with an opportunity to examine and challenging their beliefs while exploring new ways of learning (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow
(2003) addressed the importance of dialogue, or discourse, in facilitating an intrapersonal process. By engaging in discourse, it allows a person to try on someone else’s perspective, hear feedback from others, and consider how their perspective may be impacted by such dialogue. This facilitates the assessment of one’s own beliefs and can result in transformation. Discourse encourages skill development in the areas of empathy, listening, and deciphering feelings of judgment (Mezirow, 2003). Reichenbach, Muth & Smith (2013) outlined the importance of dialogue in facilitating transformative learning in extension education. By using various exercises and tools to ensure students learned from one another’s perspectives, they addressed the importance of dialogue to provide opportunities for transformation. Green and Malkki (2016) address the need for creating an accepting and open learning environment in order to encourage effective dialogue and ultimately, transformation. The use of both reflection and discourse, or dialogue, is essential in order to facilitate a transformative learning experience.

**Critics of Transformative Learning**

While the philosophical underpinnings of Transformative Learning Theory have remained the same since Mezirow first addressed it in his 1978 study, the theory continues to evolve as a result of critique by many researchers (Baumgartner, 2012). The theory has “evolved from a rational process grounded in a particular context… to an increasingly holistic theory …open to the importance of emotion, context, intuition and relationships” (Baumgartner, 2012, p. 110). Many researchers and practitioners have furthered the conversation about transformative learning using the framework to ground their research and providing their critique (Christie et al., 2015).

Collard and Law (1989) criticized the theory’s lack of recognition of social inequalities. They stated that Mezirow focused primarily on the ability for the individual to transform their
perspective, as opposed to addressing the importance of engaging in social action as a change agent through the transformative learning process. Mezirow (1989) responded to their critique, noting that transformation of perspective is an individual, group, or collective action. Further, he addressed the goal of social action in adult education as a component, but the real focus is on the individual’s ability to transform, ultimately making his or her own decision to engage in social action (Cranton, 1994).

In 1991, Clark and Wilson commented on Mezirow’s theory saying it reflected a white, Western view of values or definition of the individual. They noted that the theory ignored social identities of race, class, and gender and disregarded the context that can provide. Additionally, they addressed the theory’s grounding in the “hegemonic American values of individualism, rationality and autonomy” (Clark & Wilson, 1991, p. 80). Taylor (1997) also reviewed Mezirow’s theory bringing attention to the importance of addressing one’s diverse backgrounds (class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation) and its impact on their ability to build knowledge or make meaning. Mezirow countered these arguments by stating that his theory was based on the identities and the cultural context one holds in those identities (Baumgartner, 2012).

Transformative learning theory focuses on how a learner’s cultural frame of reference changes resulting in transformation. As students participating in international study abroad are exposed to new cultural contexts, they have the opportunity to examine their identity and engage in transformation effectively.

John Dirkx (1997) built upon Mezirow’s theory of transformation by drawing attention to the “inner world” of the learner and the individual, personal nature of a transformative learning experience. He drew attention to the emotional experiences associated with transformation. In 2000, Mezirow made modifications to his previous work by acknowledging the role of one’s
emotions in changing their perspective due to critiques that his theory disregards a person’s feelings (Baumgartner, 2012).

Research has shown that the opportunity for transformative learning is not provided to every student returning from an international study abroad program. Pederson (2010) studied the experiences of students participating in a one-year study abroad program and found that participation in the study abroad program alone was not enough for students to develop. Bennett (2009) addressed the fact that study abroad programs and re-entry programming opportunities should require guided reflection in assisting with the development of intercultural learning, beyond what students might learn about themselves on a personal level. Jackson (2015) connected both a transitional course upon students’ return from abroad with cultural mentoring while they were abroad to provide further facilitated support for their reflection and learning. These opportunities facilitated reflection, a key component of Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory, in order to ensure students had opportunities to make meaning of their experience.

**Rationale**

This theory focuses on the transformation one experiences because of a disorienting dilemma or triggering event. Through the use of critical reflection and rational discourse, the opportunity for transformation occurs, allowing one to make meaning of specific experiences. My research focused on the experiences of students while abroad and upon return home from study abroad and how they make meaning of these experiences. Their ability to make meaning of their time abroad provides opportunities for their future development. Transformative learning theory shows that one has the potential to change their frame of reference or their perspective about how they see the world, as a result of a triggering event. Through participation in a study
abroad program, students are exposed to new ways of thinking, new cultures, and new experiences. These experiences, coupled with intentional reflection and dialogue, have the potential to transform their perspectives, impacting their future. As stated above, transformative learning is a constructivist theory, rooted in humanistic assumptions with a focus on critical social theory (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). This places emphasis on the learner creating knowledge based on their experiences and less on external forces. Additionally, it focuses on the importance of the individual to make their own choices and define their worldview. Finally, transformative learning theory encourages development and change in one’s perspectives through critique of dominant worldviews.

This framework provides the space for students returning from a study abroad program, a potentially disorienting situation where they are approached with new perspectives, to challenge and redefine their perspectives. Mezirow’s (1978) theory provides a framework to understand how making meaning can transform their perspectives, their views and assumptions of the world around them in order to better understand their development. Students have an opportunity, upon their return home, to learn how to utilize the skills they have developed while abroad and evaluate their learning abroad to consider how their perspectives may have changed.

Wilson (1988) describes the study abroad re-entry process as a continuous cycle of personal development and growth, the first of many opportunities to internalize and understand the experiences students have gained while abroad and integrate into their experiences at home. For many students returning from an international study abroad experience, they report challenges in conveying their experiences and feelings to others. They struggle to communicate their difficulty readjusting or integrating their experiences into life at home, resulting in a feeling
of alienation and isolation or inability to relate to their friends and family as they once had (Gaw, 2000; Young, 2014; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Jones et al., 2012).

While every student can tell stories and make connections between other cultures and those at home, they must develop the skills to take their learning from those stories and experiences and apply it to develop new perspectives. Through transformative learning practices of reflection and discourse, students have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, assumptions, and perspectives, and transform their frame of reference to get the most out of their international experience (Perry, Stoner & Terrant, 2012). Perry et al. (2012) note that transformative learning theory is not solely focused on the student’s experience but on how they internalize it, process and communicate what happened. As a result, the process of transformative learning has the potential to facilitate growth and development for students returning from study abroad. As Wilson (1986) outlined, the progression of re-entry for many students in taking what they have learned at home and how they share and integrate that information can be difficult. This research will provide an example of how one can facilitate opportunities for student reflection and transformative learning when they return from study abroad in order to ensure they get the most out of their experience. Using this theoretical framework, my study will address how students make meaning of their time abroad to show the value of transformative learning, critical reflection and discourse, to facilitate a change in their frame of reference and create opportunities for individual change and social action.

Application of Transformative Learning

Transformative learning theory was applied to my research in understanding how students make meaning of their experiences when they return home from an international study abroad program as it provides a framework for understanding the transformation in their
perspectives or frame of reference. Taylor and Synder (2012) address the need for flexibility in fostering transformative learning, as it is not a “one size fits all” approach and requires attention to the individual in their specific context (p. 45). Mezirow (2003) highlights the importance of creating an environment to facilitate transformational learning that is learning-centered, provides opportunities for interaction and participation, and is group-oriented. It is important that a safe, inclusive, and trusting relationship with the learner, which facilitates the development of their whole person throughout the process (Taylor & Synder, 2012). In addition to the emphasis on critical reflection and active dialogue, some research has shown a focus on written reflection to facilitate transformation through both creative writing and autobiographical work (Burke, 2006; Karpiak, 2003).

Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus (2011) addressed Mezirow’s transformative learning theory in detailing the need for reflection and dialogue in the wake of a difficult, disorienting, or potentially traumatizing experience to foster this transformation. Disorienting or traumatizing is not always an adverse event but an event that puts the student outside of their comfort zone to consider an alternative reality, as in the case of a study abroad program. Perry et al. (2012) address the importance of providing adequate opportunity for students to progress through this transformation. This is especially true if they are engaging in a shorter international experience because there is less opportunity to be exposed to cultural difference.

Jones, Rowan-Kenyon, Ireland, Niehaus and Skendall (2012) researched the significance of specific program elements in short-term programs that facilitate transformation and meaning-making for students, including getting students outside of their comfort zone in a new environment, personalizing programming to their own educational needs by meeting them where they are at, and actively crossing borders that create new experiences.
Dolby (2007) further utilized Mezirow’s theory to address how students navigate development of national identity or recognition of their own culture in the context of others. Similar to the discussion above regarding the importance of facilitated and intentional reflective and learning opportunities, Strange & Gibson (2017) and Perry et al. (2012) outlined a need to provide intentional learning outcomes for students to gain additional perspective and integration of this new way of thinking. Strange and Gibson (2017) coupled Mezirow’s transformation learning theory with Kolb’s experiential learning theory to further contextualize the importance of hands-on, facilitated experiences so students can internalize their learning in a transformational, intentional manner, which they argue is essential for actual transformation.

Taylor (2008) additionally discussed barriers to transformation, which could be seen as barriers for many study abroad students as well. A lack of discussion, dialogue, or opportunity for reflection is seen as a barrier, possibly stunting a student’s development towards transformation. Vande Berg (2007) addressed the importance of balancing challenge and support in order to facilitate active development. Providing opportunities for reflection or dialogue provides the opportunity for students to make meaning of their experiences and therefore adjust to stressful events. Park (2010) argues that this process is essential for cross-cultural adjustment.

Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus (2011) studied the impact of study abroad on students immediately upon their return and one year after their experience to see how they made meaning of their time abroad. Many students described the positive outcomes that resulted immediately upon their return, including a newfound appreciation for other cultures, a revelation that made them change their course of study or connection to a new community. There were varying levels of impact for students after one year, some reporting that they do not think about their experience very often, and it does not play a significant role in their life day to day. This points to the
importance of providing adequate opportunities for reflection and follow-up to students immediately upon their return for optimal consideration of learning. If they lack the opportunity to consider what they have learned while their experiences are still fresh, they may lose that opportunity to process and grow.

My research explored how students make meaning of their experiences and transform through facilitating critical reflection of their assumptions, beliefs, values, and experiences, and rational discourse to provide an opportunity for them to understand and make meaning of those experiences in hopes of changing their frame of reference for increased learning. Study abroad provides students space to learn about the world around them as well as who they are, what they believe and value. By examining the experiences of students returning from a study abroad program, this research shows the possibility of international study providing a transformative experience for students. The use of Mezirow’s (1978) transformative learning theory provides a framework to shape interview questions, reflective exercises, and opportunities for dialogue to understand these processes.

**Conclusion**

This study explored how students returning from an international study abroad program make meaning of their experiences. As international education increases in popularity, and students continue to pursue study abroad opportunities, it is essential that researchers and practitioners alike focus on how students make meaning and develop because of their time abroad. Through their experiences both abroad and when they return home, students can transform their perspectives, critically reflecting on their international experience through individual thought and active dialogue with others.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

International study abroad has been a consistent part of the higher education system in the United States. The number of students pursuing international study continues to grow each year, as documented by the Institute for International Education’s Open Doors Report (2017). In 2005, the United States Congress established the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program Commission to encourage more students to study abroad, a goal of 50% of all undergraduate students graduating by 2017. This focus on international education is an effort to engage students in an international experience to provide college students with opportunities for transformative learning and development.

Students encounter many experiences while participating in study abroad that have the potential to transform their assumptions and perspectives. These experiences include the development of cultural sensitivity, enhanced language acquisition, improvement in self-awareness, increased dedication to their academic studies, readjusting to American culture upon their return home and the ability to effectively reflect on their time abroad in order to get the most out of their learning. The purpose of this research study was to examine the experiences of students returning from an international study abroad program and how they make meaning of these experiences to facilitate transformational learning.

This literature review will provide an overview of the relevant research addressing the shared experiences of American students who have participated in study abroad programs, both while abroad and upon their return home, focusing specifically on the experiences that contribute to students’ transformational learning opportunities and their ability to make meaning of their experience.
Study Abroad in American Higher Education

American college students have participated in international education opportunities since the founding of the country (Hoffa, 2007). Program types have evolved since that time, ranging from short-term programs facilitated by American faculty members to long-term cultural immersion programs at a host university abroad in many countries around the world in which students engage in foreign language learning. The diversity of students pursuing these programs has also continued to evolve, as study abroad programs continue to provide access to students from underrepresented minority groups to ensure students have the opportunity to engage in international study (Open Doors, 2017). It is essential to focus on adequate pre-departure preparation and re-entry support for these students to ensure students have positive study abroad experiences and can learn about themselves, others, and the world around them. These initiatives will provide opportunities for student reflection and discourse, facilitating transformation, and supporting students in making meaning of their experiences abroad.

History of Study Abroad

American college students have pursued various types of study abroad and international education opportunities over the last 250 years, ranging from cultural immersion programs to short travel tours abroad (Hoffa, 2007). Study abroad in the United States originated with the very first scholars studying in New England in the late 1700s (Hoffa, 2007). As students wanted to pursue specialized careers in medicine and the law, the young country did not have universities with established programs to provide a thorough education. As a result, students traveled to Europe in order to gain the necessary knowledge for their chosen career (Hoffa, 2007). However, as the country developed, the perception of study abroad began to change.
During the 19th century, country leaders saw study abroad as a potential draw away from the newly formed country, encouraging students to stay at home to pursue their education.

The Institute for International Education (IIE) was created in 1919, furthering the development of study abroad programs at United States colleges and universities (Hoffa, 2007). Their mission sought to create opportunities for international education by collaborating with the government and universities to ensure students had opportunities to study abroad that provided the ability to receive academic credit for their studies. In the 1920s the program June Year Abroad (JYA) was created, providing students, primarily studying humanities and the arts, the chance to spend their entire junior year abroad to focus on language learning and cultural exposure (Heisel & Stableski, 2009). At this same time, the concept of faculty-led programming was also developed, providing students the opportunity to travel abroad with a faculty member from their institution to receive instruction in a specific discipline. These programs provided students access to study abroad who may not otherwise pursue international education due to academic restrictions, family obligations or financial barriers, making them more and more popular in recent years (Mills, Deviney, & Ball, 2010).

Study abroad programs began to change in the second half of the twentieth century, as geopolitical factors began to impact both location choice and program type for students interested in study abroad (Keller & Frain, 2010). With the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, the federal government began to focus more on the importance of study abroad in providing opportunities for learning, diplomacy and international exchange (Bu, 1999). As study abroad in the United States had initially focused on students pursuing their education in Europe, mostly with attention to language learning and cultural immersion, students began to think more broadly about their international opportunities (Keller & Frain, 2010). This
brought increased focus on programs in Central Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa, in a world where students began to show an interest in becoming ambassadors “to represent their country globally” while abroad (Keller & Frain, 2010, p. 19). It was also during this time that the curriculum of study abroad began to diversify to meet the changing needs and interests of students wanting to pursue study abroad (Twombly, Salisbury, Tumanut, & Klute, 2012). As study abroad had focused primarily on cultural education and foreign language during the 1800s and beginning of the 1900s, programs began to offer coursework in business, science, health, and education (DeWinter & Rumbley, 2010). This increase in course diversification resulted in a growth in the number of students pursuing study abroad as it allowed more students the opportunity to complete academic coursework in their areas of interest while abroad (DeWinter & Rumbley, 2010).

In 1978-79, the Institute for International Education began to keep statistical data on the state of study abroad in the United States in the form of the Open Doors Report (Ogden, Soneson & Weting, 2010). Ogden et al. report that while the initial data only included information about year-long programs and consistency from year to year was lacking, the report provided educators with picture of who was participating in study abroad, where they were going and in what quantity, eventually creating a consistent annual report of study abroad amongst American college students.

Following 9/11 colleges and universities throughout the country made conscious efforts to advocate for study abroad and the need to internationalize campus communities (Twombly et al., 2012). In 2005, the Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program was created by the Congress to encourage students to participate in study abroad, naming the importance of cultural competence, language fluency and the ability to adapt to new
environments as essential experiences for students in higher education (Durbin, 2006). While universities are encouraging students to study abroad for these reasons today, there is also an increased push for students to participate in study abroad to enhance their potential earnings in an increasingly global market through development of skills that facilitate cultural understanding (Twombly et al., 2012). Study abroad is seen by institutions and students alike as a beneficial experience that provides essential skills for success (Zemach-Bersin, 2009). It is important to provide students opportunities following their time abroad that facilitate reflection, learning, and development, so they can achieve optimal results in these areas.

**Demographics of Study Abroad Students**

As stated above, the Institute for International Education annually assesses the state of study abroad through their Open Doors Report, providing a clear picture of student demographic information (race, ethnicity, age, gender, etc.), as well as information about the length of time abroad, study destination, nature of the academic work done abroad, and fields of study from various institutions around the country (Open Doors, 2017). While it is not a comprehensive picture from every institution, it does provide the most reliable data available in the field of international education on who is studying abroad each year (Twombly et al., 2012). Understanding the current status of student study abroad participants can help to contextualize students experiences abroad further, their intentions in participating in specific programs, or what they hope to gain from their participation. Over 66 percent of students participating in study abroad identify as female, while only 33.4% identify as male. The number of students of color continues to grow each year, with approximately 27% non-white students participating in study abroad in 2015/2016. This number has steadily increased, as the number of students of color was only 17% in 2004/2005 (Open Doors, 2017).
The top three destinations of students were the United Kingdom, Italy, and Spain, while the top major field of study was science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, with over 22% of students. Approximately 25% of these students identified as students of color, an increase of 5% from the year previous. Only 3% of these students participated in a full-year study abroad program, while 62% participated in short-term programs lasting eight weeks or less (Open Doors, 2017). Study abroad can take on many forms for a diverse population of students, requiring varied strategic and planned initiatives to effectively serve and support these students in order to ensure a transformative experience.

**Study Abroad Program Elements**

Study abroad programs can vary in duration, program of study, language of delivery, and level of interaction with local citizens and curricular purpose, creating a unique experience for students depending on the program they choose. Program type has the potential to impact the student’s ability to learn about themselves and their host country, providing unique experiences depending on the type of program students choose, resulting varying degrees of transformation and development. Understanding the varying types of study abroad programs, and the important elements involved with preparing students before their departure and upon their return provides context to understand how students individually make meaning of their experiences.

Engle and Engle (2003) classified programs into five levels: study tours, short-term study, cross-cultural contact program, cross-cultural encounter program, and cross-cultural immersion program. The first level, study tours, is classified as shorter field trips or site visits abroad in which students travel together as a group. The fifth level, cross-cultural immersion programs, is classified as longer-term programs in which participants learn in the host language usually directly enrolled in university courses at a host institution integrated fully into their host
country. Each level in-between increases in duration, level of cultural interaction and language ability, and integration into the host country (Engle & Engle, 2003).

For example, direct enrollment programs are very different from island programs (Vande Berg, 2007). Island programs, most closely related to Engle and Engle’s study tours or short-term study programs, provide academic opportunities for students in English in courses that directly relate to U.S. style course delivery but may not allow for the same level of cultural immersion as a direct enrollment program (Vande Berg, 2007). Conversely, direct enrollment programs provide opportunities for students to immerse themselves in a new academic, social, and cultural environment but could be more academically restrictive, not allowing students to pursue particular disciplines while abroad. These programs are most closely related to Engle and Engle’s description of cross-cultural immersion programs and are typically longer. As the Open Doors report notes, a large number of students are participating in short-term programs, 62% in the 2013-2014 academic year (Open Doors, 2015). This is up 8% from the report in 2010 (Open Doors, 2010), showing that short-term programs are becoming more popular among study abroad students.

Long-term programs have typically been seen as more prestigious and beneficial (Strange & Gibson, 2017). These programs typically require a higher level of preparation on the part of the student, as some many require language preparation over many years and extensive preparation learning about the culture or way of life in their intended location. As the Open Doors Report (2017) shows, only 2% of students participate in long-term or yearlong programs, as their length may deter students due to academic restrictions, financial difficulties, or other obligations (Twombly et al. 2012).
Terrant et al. (2013) recognized the criticism that many short-term programs face as many might think that shorter programs lack the depth to provide students with a quality cultural experience. As a result, many are skeptical about whether or not they provide enough opportunities for students to learn and progress. While these programs may be short, they provide access to students who may not have the opportunity to experience another culture due to family constraints, financial restrictions, or academic barriers.

Medina-Lopez-Portillo (2004) researched the difference in students participating in a short-term 7-week program and those in a semester-long language program to determine if there was a significant difference in their development. He found little significance showing that the more extended program made a difference in helping student development. Medina-Lopez-Portillo (2004) also investigated the difference between programs facilitated in English versus foreign language similar to Douglas and Jones-Rikkers (2001) who researched the difference in world mindedness development between students engaged in a program in England versus students in Costa Rica. Their study resulted in students studying in Costa Rica experiencing more of a cross-cultural opportunity than those in England, possibly pointing to placing importance on where students study in facilitating increased development.

**Pre-Departure support.** While there is a diversity in study abroad type, ranging from duration to language requirements and curriculum, there are standard initiatives that many study abroad professionals put in place in order to facilitate transformational experiences and provide students with skills to be successful. This can most often be seen in the form of pre-departure orientations and peer advisors (Hoffa & Pearson, 1997). Pre-departure orientations, ranging from a few hours to an entire weekend of educational sessions, are geared to provide students
with an introduction to their location of study, the important considerations for packing and living in a foreign country, and tools for study success.

Many pre-departure programs highlight the concept of culture shock in order to prepare students upon their arrival in the event they experience it. Culture shock, as a concept, has been widely researched throughout the 20th century. Researchers have addressed the concept as it applies to soldiers, missionaries, Peace Corps volunteers, students, and travelers alike (Szkudlarek, 2010). Defined by Oberg (1954), culture shock was signified by a loss of familiarity in their social environment, specifically for travelers when they are exposed to a new culture. Oberg (1954) discussed the concept by describing a five-stage series of transitions: the honeymoon phase, feelings of aggression, finding humor, moving towards adjustment, and acceptance. Furthering this research, Lysgaard (1955), developed the U-Curve of cultural adaptation. According to his model, students experience an initial adjustment, sparked primarily by excitement, followed by a feeling of depression or loneliness, in which students are at the bottom of the curve. As students work through their depression and become more comfortable with their surroundings, they begin to climb the latter part of the U-shape, adjusting to their host culture (Lysgaard, 1955). This feeling of shock can have an impact on how students adapt to their host culture abroad (Presbitero, 2016).

**Re-entry support.** When a student returns from study abroad, there is an opportunity to provide support through programming and advising that facilitates development, reflection, and learning that hopefully results in transformation. The need for providing specific types of debriefing opportunities depends on the student, with some needing space only for a few weeks upon return and others requiring attention and support months after their return (Raschio, 1987). The *NAFSA Guide to Education Abroad for Advisers and Administrators* states that “pre-
departure orientation, participation in a program abroad, and reentry should be seen as parts of a continuous and unified process” (Hoffa & Pearson, 1997, p. 233).

While everyone has their own method of managing their re-entry process and reverse culture shock, there are documented examples of re-entry programming facilitated across the country. Re-entry programming provides students with an opportunity to share their experiences, what they have taken from studying abroad, and how they have developed (Hoffa & Pearson, 1997). In a study done by Gaw (2000), the two services primarily utilized by returning students were health services and career counseling. Other services might include support or discussion groups, opportunities for involvement, possibly in a peer mentor capacity, or other psychological outreach services (Gaw, 2000). A variety of resources addressed the necessity for re-entry programming in an attempt to provide students with the support to start the reacculturation process (Gaw, 2000; Thompson & Christofi, 2006; Butcher, 2002; Raschio 1987).

These re-entry programs enable students to process their experiences, determine how it has changed them, and what support they need to succeed upon their return (Butcher, 2002). Some researchers argue that if study abroad and international programs are promoted, the organization should provide a re-entry program in order to facilitate the returnee’s development and provide them a positive experience (Raschio, 1987). Through effective re-entry programming, students will have the space to explore their experiences, creating meaning of their time abroad, and evaluating their perspectives to facilitate transformation.

**Transformative Student Experiences Abroad**

International study provides students with a variety of opportunities to learn about themselves and the world around them while they are abroad, especially if opportunities for
reflection and discourse are provided to facilitate meaning-making. For many these have manifested as increased language learning, enhanced academic performance, personal growth, interpersonal relationship development, intercultural awareness, interest in global affairs and professional development upon their return home (Cisneros-Donahue, Krentler, Reignig & Sabol, 2012; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004; Haines, 2013; Raschio, 1987; Engberg, 2013). Additionally, there is a large amount of research that speaks to the importance and value of students graduating with an enhanced cultural competence, world mindedness or global mindset so they can effectively collaborate and communicate across cultural differences (Jones et al., 2012; Douglas & Jones-Rikkers, 2001). According to Tarrant, Rubin, and Stoner (2013), the increased attention placed on international education and increasing the number of sending students abroad calls for researchers to continue their observations and inquiry into these areas to encourage study abroad and international education opportunities to facilitate student professional and personal development.

**Academic Development**

Students participating in study abroad programs often show an increased interest in their academics, are more committed to graduating, and show overall gain in their academic success, transforming a students’ perspective on their direction of learning, their chosen course of study and their commitment to future directions (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015; Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012; Ryan & Twibell, 2000). Luo and Jamieson-Drake examined data from an annual survey of incoming first-year students and again upon their graduation at medium-sized, private university which consistently offered study abroad programs. Their examination showed that students who participated in study abroad saw a positive impact on their academic performance, their ability to understand moral and ethical issues, and overall satisfaction with their
undergraduate experience. Cisneros-Donahue et al. (2012), investigated students’ perceptions of their learning as a result of participating in study abroad, hypothesizing that students would report gaining knowledge about world geography, cultural sensitivity, and functional knowledge during their study abroad program more so than those students who did not. Data from the students supported this hypothesis, stating that students perceived an increased knowledge in these areas showing an increased level of engagement in academic and cognitive development. Further, in a study comparing student adjustment upon return and their academic motivations, it was determined that those students who studied abroad had a higher GPA compared to students who did not (Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010).

Hadis (2005) investigated the experiences of students upon their return to determine how their priorities may have changed over time. As a result of the study, he reported there was a noticeable change in students’ interest and dedication to learning and academic success. In addition to looking at students’ GPAs, he also looked at their motivation for learning, noting that while GPA may not increase as a result of study abroad, students’ experience an increase in the intrinsic value of education upon their return home. Ryan and Twibell (2000) primarily examined the experience of students during their study abroad program. They reported that students show increased interest in pursuing graduate school upon their return, showing continued academic engagement and interest to continue education. Ingraham and Peterson (2004) conducted research looking at the experiences of study abroad participants both before their departure and upon their return home. Looking at the areas of personal growth, academic performance, and intercultural awareness, they found that students reported an increase in their development in all areas as a result of their time abroad.
Language Learning

Study abroad has consistently provided students the opportunity to develop their foreign language abilities, facilitating transformative experiences resulting in the development of new perspectives and the ability to communicate more broadly. Many researchers have pointed to study abroad as the ideal setting to provide exposure to foreign language and one’s ability to acquire increased skills in these areas (Isabelli, 2004; Coleman, 1997; Freed, So & Lazar, 2003; Magnan & Black, 2007; Davidson, 2010; Engle & Engle, 2004). Davidson (2010) examined the impact of second language learning of American students participating in study abroad programs in Russia. Looking at the experience of students participating in 2-month, 4-month, and 9-month programs over 15 years, Davidson found that many students developed in the areas of reading, listening, and speaking. Further, he noted that the primary motivator for many students participating in these programs was to increase their ability for speaking proficiency.

Engle and Engle (2004) examined the experiences of students studying at the American University Center of Provence in France. They looked specifically at the intentional program design that facilitated their ability to learn French. All courses were delivered in French, students were paired with a language partner, and participated in facilitated community service opportunities that required their use of French. Improvements were seen, especially in the areas of oral and written composition, showing the value of student engagement in these programs. Magnan and Back (2007) similarly looked at the impact of social interactions on students’ abilities to acquire enhanced language abilities. This included the need for students to engage consistently with native speakers, read local newspapers, and living with host families. Their article summarized much of the current literature on the topics of language learning in study abroad, drawing attention to the type of programs that are most beneficial for students to ensure
optimal results. Knight, Schmidt and Rinehart (2002) stated that the longer the program duration, the more beneficial it would be for language learning. At the same time, Regan (2003) stated that students just beginning to learn a language can also benefit from short-term programs with intentional programming.

**Development of Self-Awareness & Self-Efficacy**

As a result of study abroad, students have the opportunity to not only improve their academic performance and ability to learn a new language but also learn about who they are as a person and build their self-confidence. These study abroad experiences contribute to a student’s ability to make meaning of their experiences, facilitating reflection and development, transforming their perspectives both while abroad and when they return home.

Students participating in study abroad programs have seen developments in the areas of self-awareness and self-efficacy (Petersdotter, Niehoff & Freund, 2016; Milstein, 2005; Bennett, 2009; Harrison, Chadwick & Scales, 1996; Barbuto, Jr., Beenan & Tran, 2015). Harrison et al. (1996) define self-efficacy as “the level of confidence that individuals have in their ability to accomplish tasks” (p. 170). They further discuss the impact of past successes and failures on a student’s development of self-efficacy, showing that these experiences can affect whether or not a student believes in their ability to succeed in particular situations. They found that students with a higher level of self-efficacy found it easier to adjust to different cultures and succeed in international travel.

Petersdotter et al. (2016) examined whether or not an international experience would increase a student’s perception of his or her self-efficacy. Findings showed that international study helped students to overcome challenges, gain resilience, and be more flexible in believing in their abilities. Focusing on students’ perceptions of their development is especially important
when discussing self-efficacy as it is based on the student’s belief in their abilities, which is also based solely on their own perceptions of ability. This parallels Medina-Lopez-Portillo’s (2004) study regarding students’ perceptions of their development of intercultural sensitivity showing the value of exploring both areas for students upon their return from study abroad.

While transformative experiences during study abroad are frequent, students must be well prepared to ensure optimal results in developing self-awareness and resilience to facilitate transformation effectively. For example, Aberbanel (2009) focuses on the language used to help students develop self-awareness and resilience through study abroad. Specifically, he addresses the need for intentional word choice in describing culture shock and any opportunities for development and cross-cultural adjustment. For example, culture shock is often described as a negative process that students must endure and therefore carries a negative connotation. If students are provided with empowering language to navigate stressful situations, those situations will be seen as learning experiences and facilitate movement towards increased development of self-efficacy or intercultural sensitivity. Aberbanel (2009) further notes that if students gain the skills to cope effectively with stressful conditions, there is potential for them to achieve more and benefit from the experience.

**Intercultural Awareness**

In addition to learning about themselves, students have the opportunity to gain increased awareness about both their own culture and the culture of their host environment as a result of their time abroad. Exposure to international cultures provides students with an environment to explore new ways of doing things, including how to effectively interact with those who are different from them and to navigate their development. Studies report that students studying abroad gain a heightened sense of purpose, motivating them to learn more about other cultures to
make a difference when they return (Jones et al., 2012). Carsello and Creaser (1976) noted in their research that students reported a positive change in their interest in travel, politics, the arts, and foreign language. Study abroad experiences provide an opportunity for students to reflect on their view of the world, break down stereotypes, and increase their understanding of their privileges (Jones et al., 2012). Research has also been done to show that students gain an increased knowledge in the areas of world geography, cultural sensitivity, and global interdependence (Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012). Additionally, study abroad can contribute to a change in students’ perceptions of global issues, while learning more the social issues in both their home and host culture (Uehara, 1986).

The concept of cultural comparison has been central to many studies focusing on international education and study abroad, specifically addressing the impact of student awareness of other cultures and the difference between those and their home culture. (Saviki & Price, 2015; Engberg, 2013; Raschio, 1987; Kartoshkina, 2014; Costello, 2015). This awareness of cultural difference also manifests in a heightened critical lens of American culture, values, pace of life, and politics (Kartoshkina, 2014; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). Some authors described this awareness of cultural difference as an increase in global mindedness or global perspective-taking, implying that students saw the view from a larger scope (Engberg, 2013; Hadis, 2005).

**Facilitating Transformation Upon Return**

Returning from study abroad provides students an opportunity to share their experiences, learn how to utilize the skills they have developed while abroad, and to navigate acclimating effectively to an environment that was once familiar. This requires that increased attention to student support in order to facilitate an impactful return home, fostering student reflection so that they can learn from their time abroad. Wilson (1988) describes the re-entry process as a
continuous cycle of personal development and growth, the first of many opportunities to internalize and understand the experiences students have gained while abroad and integrate into their experiences at home. Learning does not stop once a student has left their study abroad program. It is an opportunity to create connections and utilize the knowledge they have gained. This can be achieved through effective facilitation (Wilson, 1988). While students face challenges, they also have the potential to gain an increased sense of intercultural sensitivity, and the ability to make meaning of their time abroad through intentional reflection in order to become global citizens (Jones et al. 2012).

**Intercultural Sensitivity & Cultural Comparison**

When students are exposed to new cultures, they have the opportunity to learn about their host country and develop an increased awareness about cultural difference and their ability to adapt to other cultures. This increased awareness can be seen throughout their time abroad and is also evident in their reflections upon return home, facilitating development, transformation, and learning about themselves and others. Students reported feeling out of place with their home culture due to a new level of identification with their host culture (Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). Sussman (2001) hypothesized that students experience a change in their cultural identity because of immersion or exposure to a new country. As many students learn new things and are exposed to new ways of thinking, their core values also began to change (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). Because of this, many returnees become critical of many components of their home culture, including its political system, education, and social systems, style of life, transportation options, spending habits, and food (Tomlin et al., 2014; Kartoshkina, 2014). A culture and environment that had once seemed normal and comfortable are now unfamiliar and strange (Haines, 2013). This feeling of unfamiliarity and confusion is
compounded with a feeling that nothing at home changed while the sojourner or student experienced so many new things (Dettweiler, Unlu, Lauterbach, Legl, Simon & Kugelmann, 2014).

Bennett’s (1986) Model of Intercultural Sensitivity illustrates how one develops intercultural sensitivity, progressing from an ethnocentric point of view to ethnorelativism. This development illustrates a transformation in one’s perspective to consider other cultures and facilitate adaptation as a result. This model is frequently used by researchers to provide insight into the learning students engage in while abroad, upon their return home and in general everyday life (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen & Hubbard, 2006; Pederson, 2009; Berg, 2009; Milstein, 2005; Czerwionka, Artmonova, & Barbosa, 2015; Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004; Deardorff, 2004; Jackson, 2015; Pederson, 2010). The primary assumption of Bennett’s original model was that as “one’s experience of cultural difference becomes more complex and sophisticated, one’s potential competence in intercultural relations increases” (Hammer et al. 2003, p. 423). Further Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) add that one must be interested in other cultures and aware enough to notice the difference among cultures in order to move forward in Bennett’s model. Intercultural sensitivity is not only a cognitive process of understanding and adapting to other cultures, but also an emotional one of navigating how one’s culture impacts their ability to adapt which requires that one be intrinsically motivated to transform their perspective in learning about other cultures and accept difference as a reality (Wang and Zhou, 2016).

Model of intercultural sensitivity. Bennett’s Model of Intercultural Sensitivity outlines six stages along a continuum from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration (Hammer et al., 2003). The three stages
with an ethnocentric view see their own culture primarily and if they recognize other cultures see it from the lens of their own. When a person is in denial of cultural difference, they view their own culture as the only culture that matters, in other words, no recognition that other cultures exist. A person in this stage may negatively dismiss other cultures, especially if there is an opportunity for it to affect them negatively. Some people in this stage have never been exposed to another culture, therefore only have context for one way of doing things. Moving into defense, people now recognize that cultures exist, other than their own; however, they see their cultures as the only legitimate culture. People in this stage typically see culture as ‘us vs. them.’ seeing their culture as the right way of doing things and operating from a stereotypical view of other cultures primarily seeing other cultures from a negative lens. The last phase within the ethnocentric viewpoint is minimization. In this phase, a person recognizes other cultures exist and tolerates their existence; however, they are quick to try and assimilate that culture to theirs or find a way of correcting the culture’s norms to their own. There is a desire to standardize or see their culture as universal for all (Bennett, 1986).

From this stage, Bennett’s (1986) model moves towards a more ethnorelative view of looking at cultural difference, seeing their culture in the context of others. A person in the stage of acceptance understands that their culture or worldview is one of the many acceptable worldviews and while they do not always accept every aspect of other cultures to be positive there is an acceptance of these differences. While they may not always see things positively, there is still a newfound appreciation for different cultures as “equally human” (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 425). In adaptation, a person has a further ability to empathize and identify other cultural norms moving further in the direction of ethnorelativism, as they can see their culture in the context of others. In this stage, a person has increased their capacity to understand other
cultural realities and worldviews as legitimate and real. The final stage of Bennett’s model is integration, where a person can move throughout cultural difference both within his or her own and others. In this stage, people can see themselves “at the margins of two or more cultures and central to none” (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 425). Hammer et al. (2003) note that this stage may not be better than Adaptation in effectively exhibiting intercultural sensitivity in working with others but is increasing as more people move from one culture to another. Through study abroad, students have the opportunity to develop their ability to understand cultural difference, ideally adapting and integrating into another culture through the development of an ethnorelative point of view. This development facilitates transformative learning as it provides students with an environment to learn about themselves and others to further understand other cultures and make meaning of their experiences.

**Intercultural sensitivity & study abroad.** Study abroad programs provide the model environment for students to learn about cultural difference and develop intercultural sensitivity through transformative learning experiences. Many researchers have focused on how students develop intercultural sensitivity as a result of their time abroad (Vande berg, 2007; Anderson et al., 2006; Paris, Nyaupane & Taye, 2014; Jackson, 2015; Czerwionka et al., 2015). Douglas and Jones-Rikkers (2001) summarize that students who are actively seeking study abroad or cultural experiences are those that benefit most from participating in the development of cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural interaction. Based on Bennett’s model, Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003) developed the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) to measure a person’s progression or positioning in understanding cultural difference. Researchers have commonly used this 50-question quantitative inventory with students who have studied abroad to determine how study abroad has affected their development of intercultural sensitivity and overall learning.
Jackson (2015) paired the IDI with the delivery of an intentional transitional program upon students’ return from study abroad. The inventory was given to students upon their return and before participating in the course, and once again after their completion of the course. Results of this study showed that the students’ intercultural development increased after participation in the course, especially those that received cultural mentoring while abroad in conjunction with the course.

**Mitigating Reverse Culture Shock**

Reverse culture shock is considered a psychosocial challenge for sojourners or students, upon their return home from study abroad as they begin to readjust to their home culture (Presbitero, 2016; Uehara, 1986; Young, 2014). While students may be prepared for their experience abroad, expecting to deal with change and culture shock, that is not always the case with the re-entry process. As a result, there can be an increased difficulty due to inaccurate expectations (Rogers & Ward, 1993). While some studies suggest that reverse culture shock can be seen as a positive learning process to increase intercultural understanding and opportunities for personal growth, various studies indicate adverse outcomes as a result (Goldstein & Keller, 2015; Young, 2014). It is important to develop mechanisms to mitigate reverse culture shock for students when they return home to ensure students are well supported to benefit from their time abroad as much as possible. Through the use of transformative learning practices, students can engage in reflection and discourse about their experiences to learn from the challenges reverse culture shock present.

Students may experience the greatest difficulty with readapting to the pace of American life, accepting that they were home and their time abroad is over, and leaving their life abroad behind (Gray & Saviki, 2015). This may manifest in the same way that those experiencing grief
have difficulty acclimating to change after a significant life change or death (Chamove & Soeterik, 2006) Oberg outlined the symptoms and stages of culture shock in his 1960 study, describing it as a feeling of anxiety “that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (p. 177). This process occurs when someone enters a new environment or interacts with a culture that is unlike their own, including social norms around language, customs, food, and behavior. Oberg described the cycle of culture shock as a U-Curve: initially, the person exposed to the new culture, or visitor, may be in awe of the differences, fascinated by how things are done and how exciting it is to learn new things. As they begin to settle into the new environment, though, a sense of frustration may eventually arise. As a result, people often “reject the environment which causes…discomfort,” wanting their new culture to be more like the one they came from or are used to (Oberg, 1960, p. 177). Eventually, as the visitor continues to learn more about their new environment and become more comfortable, they begin to acclimate and accept the new social norms. In summary, he outlined five stages of transitions: the honeymoon phase, feelings of aggression, finding humor, moving towards adjustment, and acceptance.

Reverse culture shock is described as an extension of the aforementioned U-Curve of culture shock to include the re-acclimation process (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). As students return home, they feel an initial excitement to be back in a familiar environment and happy to be with their friends and family again. However, an eventual depression may set in as they realize the environment that once felt familiar and normal now seems different. During this time, returnees or students report feeling lonely or out of place, not feeling comfortable in a place that once felt like home. Some may even realize that their host culture abroad seems more familiar and home-
like than their original home. This is followed ideally, by a readjustment to their home culture where they become more comfortable with their new normal (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963).

Many returnees report difficulty in conveying their experiences and feelings to others regarding why they struggle to readjust or integrating their experiences into life at home. This results in a feeling of alienation and isolation or inability to relate to their friends and family as they once had (Gaw, 2000; Chamove & Soeterik, 2006; Kartoshkina, 2014; Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Young, 2014; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Jones et al., 2012). Due to this difficulty in communication, interpersonal relationships can be impacted as sojourners look for to talk with someone to talk with who will understand their experience (Dettweiler et al., 2014; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010; Raschio, 1987; Gray & Saviki, 2015). Having formed a bond with those they lived with abroad, some students actively create a new social circle or family dynamic with those that truly understand them (Haines, 2013). Through communication with fellow study abroad participants and reflecting on experiences with family and friends upon return home, students have the opportunity to mitigate the effects of reverse culture shock and benefit from potentially transformative experiences to further develop.

**Re-Entry Programming**

The preceding sections of this literature review have outlined the Model of Intercultural Sensitivity and the ability for students to transform their frame of reference through difficult experiences and the act of making meaning of their experiences. Research consistently addresses the importance of providing intentional and effective programming for students in order to facilitate this development. While international educators, including NAFSA: The National Association of Foreign Student Administrators, use the term *programming* to address facilitated experiences for students abroad, some researchers call for a *curriculum, pedagogy, and learning*
outcomes (Bennett, 2009; Pederson, 2009; Jones et al.; 2012; Jackson, 2015; Terrant, et al., 2012). This request for more guided programming or education aligns with Mezirow’s (1996) transformative learning theory that iterates the importance of reflection upon experience to internalize events and transform frame of reference. Wilson (1986) outlined the progression of re-entry for many students in taking what they have learned at home and how they share and integrate that information. While all students may not experience study abroad in the same way, there is a need for intentional space to learn from those experiences upon their return. Vande Berg (2007) examined whether or not the use of intentional learning outcomes increased a student’s development, finding that guided or structured experiential activities abroad and opportunities to debrief upon returning home may influence development, especially in the areas of intercultural sensitivity. Vande Berg (2007) summarized that while students participating in longer programs showed gains in intercultural sensitivity, those students left to fend for themselves in developing intercultural skills did not see as much of an increase, showing the value of facilitation.

While it is helpful for students to share their experiences with others upon their return home, they need to engage students in more in-depth dialogue where they have the opportunity to integrate their learning from abroad to facilitate development still exists (Wilson, 1986). This can be done through re-entry programming that extends beyond time to share with an intentionally developed pedagogy that involves intercultural learning outcomes and opportunities for reflection (Pederson, 2010). Jackson (2015) summarized a common theme among programs and research that have shown international educators are working to provide more comprehensive support to students at all stages of their education abroad, including pre-departure courses, online outreach while abroad and facilitated re-entry workshops. In researching the
relationship between a student’s learning and their level of intervention by international education professionals before and after studying abroad, Vande Berg (2007) found that students do not merely learn by participating in the program but instead benefit from a designed program with professional intervention and guidance in learning activities.

Reflection plays a large part in facilitating transformation upon a student’s return from study abroad. Bennett (2009) addressed the fact that study abroad programs and re-entry programming opportunities should require guided reflection in assisting with the development of intercultural learning, beyond what students learn about themselves on a personal level. Jackson (2015) connected both a transitional course upon students’ return from abroad with cultural mentoring while they were abroad to provide further facilitated support for their reflection and learning. Those who had access to cultural mentoring were more successful in furthering their development as they were provided with an additional touchpoint to reflect. These initiatives speak to the importance of providing students with facilitated space to reflect on their time abroad, so they can internalize their learning and apply it to their life at home and their ability to understand and communicate with other cultures.

**Conclusion**

As the number of students pursuing study abroad continues to grow and study abroad is seen as a valuable opportunity by university administrators and employers alike, it is essential to examine the impact of their experiences abroad and the development of these students upon their return home. Study abroad programs are diverse in the curriculum offered, the locations of study, and program duration, and they all provide an opportunity for a student to learn about both their host culture and themselves. Facilitating intentional opportunities for students to reflect on their development intercultural sensitivity, their level of self-efficacy, and their ability to make
meaning of their experiences in transforming to find a new frame of reference is important. As Jackson (2015) highlighted in the conclusion of her study, it is crucial to encourage students to engage in international study opportunities and essential to ensure they have adequate opportunities to process and reflect on their experience to understand the transformations they have gone through and the developments they have made in the areas of cultural sensitivity and self-efficacy.

The literature addressed in this chapter shows the unique experiences of students during their time abroad and upon their return, and the initiatives facilitated by international educators to provide students with the opportunity to reflect on their experiences to enable development. This research further examined the experiences of American undergraduate students returning from international study abroad programs and how they make meaning of these experiences to understand practices that may be implemented to facilitate success and transformation. Through the use of intentional support before departure, while abroad, and upon their return home, students participating in study abroad have the potential to reflect, develop essential skills and transform their perspectives resulting in learning.
Chapter Three: Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the re-entry experiences of undergraduate students returning from a study abroad program and how they make meaning of these experiences as a part of their re-entry process. Further, it examined how students experience transformation upon their return from study abroad, specifically looking at the roles of critical reflection and discourse. Finally, this study examined how students’ transformational experiences contributed to their development of cultural sensitivity upon their return home.

This section will outline the chosen qualitative research method selected for this study, providing an overview of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), its philosophical underpinnings, and main tenets. It will further describe the setting for this research study, as well as the participants selected, including a rationale for their selection. This section will fully outline the use of one-to-one semi-structured open-ended interviews to learn more about students’ experiences while abroad, exploring their ability to reflect on these experiences to make meaning, learn, and develop. Following an overview of the chosen procedure, this section will detail the use of coding to examine common patterns and themes to understand these experiences better. Finishing with a discussion about the study’s attention to credibility, this section will discuss the researcher’s unique positionality as a study abroad alum and international educator while paying attention to unique biases to ensure the trustworthiness of the research.

Qualitative Research Approach

Creswell (2013) defines qualitative research as a type of inquiry that uses theoretical frameworks and assumptions to further inform the study of a research problem by establishing themes and patterns from collected data that includes participant voices, interpretation, and description. Qualitative research is mainly focused on meaning, examining the descriptive
quality of a particular experience or phenomenon, and not concerned with establishing a causal relationship (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Further, qualitative research hopes to provide insight into the thoughts and feelings of research participants to understand their experiences, both how and why they have occurred. The goal of qualitative research isn’t to generalize findings but to further understand individual stories. Qualitative research focuses on an inductive approach which allows for meaning to be established by the participant and not predetermined by the researcher (Tuffour, 2017). The study will focus on how students make meaning of their individual experiences upon returning from a study abroad program to facilitate a transformative learning experience, aligning itself with the goals of qualitative research.

This research is further grounded in the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, which looks to create a narrative of the participants and is not searching for one correct answer (Butin, 2010). This approach acknowledges that nothing is finite, but instead a continuing story of the participant’s reality. This research focuses on how students make meaning of their experience. A primary goal of this paradigm is learning about the participant’s life experiences or “erlebnis” (Ponterotto, 2005). The constructivist paradigm will utilize dialogue with participants to create meaning, as a characteristic of this paradigm requires interaction between the researcher and the participant to engage in reflection and meaning-making (Ponterotto, 2005). Further, this shows a hermeneutical approach as a participant must engage in reflection to uncover meaning.

**Methodology**

Basing this research in the constructivist paradigm, this study utilized the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology. IPA is a qualitative research method which examines “how people make sense of their major life experiences” and is frequently utilized in research in the social sciences as it provides detailed, descriptive data (Smith, Flowers & Larkin,
This methodology focuses on the individual lived experiences of a small sample size, with an emphasis on interpreting these experiences to understand their meaning further (Tuffour, 2017). IPA includes concepts from three main areas of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. This methodology aligns with the research question as it hopes to examine the individual, detailed, lived experiences of students participating in study abroad programs, and how they make sense or meaning of these experiences to facilitate transformational learning. As Mezirow (2000) stated, through rational discourse and critical reflection of their experiences, adult learners can change their frame of reference to transform their perspectives and learn from their experiences. Through examining the individual experiences of students when they return home, this research further examined how each student utilized both reflection and discourse to facilitate this transformation.

**Phenomenology.** Phenomenology is defined as the philosophical approach to the study of one’s experiences and is informed by the work of four major philosophers: Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl focused on the theoretical concepts of phenomenology, outlining the examination of one’s experience as a level of consciousness that involves perception, judgment, remembrance, reflection, and thought (Smith et al., 2009). As phenomenology works to look at individual experiences, it is focused on how participants description their perceptions and experiences of events, objects, and locations as opposed to determining how particular events or phenomena fit into predetermined categories or concepts. Phenomenology can be categorized in two ways: descriptive and hermeneutic or interpretative. While the focus of descriptive phenomenology is to describe an experience purely and how we understand it, interpretative or hermeneutic phenomenology focuses more on how specific experiences are interpreted by those who experience them and those that study them.
(Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). As one of the primary philosophers to work with phenomenological principles, Heidegger focused on the ontological concepts of existence, the relationships between experience and our existence, and how we make meaning of those experiences. Heidegger’s influence in phenomenology was less theoretical, beginning the with the concept and discussion of hermeneutics in research, the second major underpinning of IPA.

**Hermeneutics.** Hermeneutics is defined as the “art and science of interpretation or meaning” (Tuffour, 2017, p. 3). IPA is based on the work of Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer (Smith et al., 2009) who examined the concept of hermeneutics in interpreting experiences. Schleiermacher addressed the importance of interpretation, combining both skills of making meaning but also the need to integrate intuition to make sense of lived experiences. Heidegger focused on the importance of interpretation due to the basic need to understand the world around us. Further, he addressed the involvement of the researcher in making meaning of individual experiences, discussing the double hermeneutic, the essence of IPA methodology. This involves the researcher making sense of how their study participant makes meaning of a particular experience (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

**Idiography.** IPA is further informed by idiography, the in-depth focus on an individual case or experience. This perspective examines each participant as a unique case before moving on to make generalizations or examine patterns (Tuffour, 2017). While qualitative research is typically more idiographic than quantitative, IPA more specifically focuses on the individual experience than many other methods. It is important to a researcher engaging in IPA to fully examine a participant’s experience individually before establishing themes and patterns of similar experience (Pietkeiwicz & Smith, 2017).
Qualitative research does not require a large sample size. While there is no correct number of participants that must be used in IPA research, this method is particularly concerned with detailing individual’s experiences, putting more of an emphasis on quality over quantity (Smith et al., 2009). Typically, however, many IPA studies focus on the experiences of four to ten participants to provide a collection of significant experiences around a similar phenomenon. As a result, this research study focused on the experiences of 8 students returning from an international study experience to provide detail about their experiences and ability to make meaning to foster development and learning upon their return home.

Research questions utilizing the IPA method focus on the how and what, as this provides an opportunity to understand a central phenomenon or experience further. As IPA looks to examine the lived experiences of research participants in order to understand how they make meaning of these experiences further, it is important that research questions are open-ended and prompt reflective answers that uncover the details of one’s experience through the use of one larger central question and several sub-questions (Creswell, 2018). This requires that questions be “exploratory not explanatory,” focusing on “process rather than outcome” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 47). As such, to examine the experiences of students returning from study abroad and how they make meaning of these experiences, this study asked:

- How do American college students returning from study abroad make meaning of their study abroad experience as a part of their re-entry process?
  - How do students experience transformation upon their return from study abroad?
  - How do students engage in critical reflection and discourse to facilitate transformation upon their return from study abroad?
How do students’ experiences abroad contribute to their development of cultural sensitivity?

“Open-ended, evolving, and non-directional” research questions were most appropriately utilized in semi-structured one-to-one interviews that allowed participants the opportunity to share their experiences in their own words (Creswell, 2018, p. 137). Following thorough interviews with participants, qualitative data collected were transcribed and coded to detail the individual experiences of students upon their return further home from study abroad, how they made meaning of their experiences. Through further understanding of how students utilized reflection and discourse to process their time abroad, both while abroad and upon their return, this data provided context to inform how these experiences contributed to their transformational learning and future development. As Smith et al. (2009) indicated, “IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experiences [which] enables that experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems” (p. 32). This shows the need for analysis to provide an in-depth description of individual stories to show research results of how participants experienced their time abroad.

The use of IPA aligns with the questions asked in this research as I was most interested in the individual experiences of students returning from an international study abroad program. I was interested in learning more about their stories, what they thought they learned from these stories and experiences, how they thought this learning transpired, and what this learning resulted in upon their return. As such IPA directly applies to this research as it seeks to “give in-depth descriptions and interpretations of the research participants’ lived experiences” (Alase, 2017, p.12). Through examining these experiences of study abroad students, my research uncovered individual experiences as well as themes and connections to understand further how
study abroad impacts a students’ experience, how they develop as a result of their time abroad, and how it contributes to their learning. Through the use of IPA methods that seek to understand how participants make sense of individual, in-depth experiences, this approach provided insight to learn more about the participants’ time abroad. This was beneficial in informing both students and those that work with students the impact of study abroad and how they can make the most of their own experiences to develop.

Participants

The institution selected for this study was a mid-sized, regional, public university in the northwest United States. Approximately 15,000 undergraduate students study at this institution, making up 95% of the total student population. This institution focuses on undergraduate education, placing importance on student-faculty collaboration in teaching, learning, and research. Students can pursue degrees in the areas of humanities and social sciences, engineering and sciences, business, and education. The university focuses on community collaboration, experiential learning, social justice education, and global engagement. Approximately 86% of students identify as in-state students, while the population of international students is 1% of the total student body. The university population is 55% female, and approximately 26% of the total students identify as students of color. During the 2017/2018, 687 undergraduate students at this institution participated in study abroad programs, with 46 students (less than 1%) participating in a year-long (10-12 month) program. This institution was chosen as it is dedicated to providing opportunities for international education with a pledge to create global citizens. This can be seen in this institution’s mission statement, which outlines a commitment to having a positive impact on both the state and in the world.
**Participant Selection.** The participants for this study were undergraduate students from a mid-sized regional university in the Pacific Northwest, who have returned home within the past eleven months from study abroad program of three months or longer. It was important to speak with students who had recently returned as it provides an opportunity to talk with them about their experiences abroad when it was still fresh in their minds. As outlined above, the process of reverse culture shock begins as soon as students return home, showing the importance of paying attention to students’ experiences directly upon their return to facilitate maximum transformation and learning from their experience (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1968). The information collected from students’ experiences immediately upon their return contributed to findings that could inform future programming for international educators. Participants mirrored the university population, having diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and various ages.

This study utilized purposive sampling reaching out to this specific group of students as a nonrandom sample of a population (Lavrakas, 2008). This sampling technique is used often in qualitative research as it identifies participants with specific knowledge about experiences directly related to the research topic and provides rich data to inform the researcher (Patton, 2002; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). As IPA research looks to find a homogenous sample pool for researchers to more easily uncover similarities or differences in participant experiences, purposive sample allows the researcher to identify a specifically defined group “for whom the research question will be significant” (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In the case of this study, the research question asked about the experiences of students returning from study abroad, requiring that the sample be specific to students who have participated in study abroad programs to understand their experiences abroad further.
Consistent with the IPA research method, the participant group was a small size of eight students. As Reid, Flowers, and Larkin (2005) noted, IPA is most effective for participant groups ten or smaller.

In using purposive sampling to find a specific, well-defined participant pool, IPA calls for a relatively homogenous sample pool in attempts to find a group of participants with similar experiences to inform the research question around a specific phenomenon (Smith & Osborn, 2008). While each of the participants in this sample pool engaged in unique international learning opportunities, they were all pursuing studies at the same home institution and were within a similar age range as traditional-age university students between the ages of 18 and 23. Students who are U.S. citizens and grew up in the United States were eligible for this study. Students pursuing any academic major were also eligible for this study.

**Procedures**

This study began by obtaining approval of both Northeastern University Internal Review Board (IRB). Upon approval, all students from the chosen research site returning within the past 11 months from study abroad programs of three months or longer were contacted to inquire about their interest in participating. Student participants were contacted initially via email (see Appendix A) as invitation to participate in the study. This invitation included an overview of the proposed study and my contact information for them to call or email me if they were interested in participating. This email was sent by the Education Abroad Office, on my behalf, to eligible students to maintain student confidentiality. As the email template outlines, any interested student was required to contact me directly to move forward in the study.

**Data Collection.** Upon participant response to me via phone or email confirming their interest in participating in the study, each participant was contacted via phone for a short phone
call outlining the purpose of the study and the data collection process through reflective journaling and interviewing as well as answering any participant questions. At this time, two individual interviews were set up to meet with each student participant following their completion and submission of their reflective journals. Students were then sent an email with a link to a Qualtrics survey that included two reflective journaling prompts (see Appendix B). At the beginning of the Qualtrics survey, students were provided with the informed consent document, which they had to read and agree to continue to the reflective journaling prompts (see Appendix C). In addition to completing these prompts, students chose their pseudonym to input in the Qualtrics survey, to ensure anonymity throughout the data collection process.

Consistent with IPA and the need to uncover descriptive lived experiences of individuals, this study utilized semi-structured, one-to-one interviews (Smith et al., 2009), as well as reflective journaling. Reflective journaling was used before students engaged in semi-structured interviews to facilitate reflection. Consistent with Mezirow’s (1978) transformational learning theory, to facilitate meaning-making, one must engage in critical reflection and rational discourse. By providing students the opportunity to reflect through written prompts about their experiences abroad individually, they had an initial space to process their experiences and reflect on what they learned during this time. This initial reflective period then transitioned to the semi-structured interviews where they engaged in rational discourse to further process their experience.

This provided the opportunity to collect rich content through a first-person account of a student’s experience upon their return from study abroad to better understand their learning. Semi-structured interviews are important to this approach, as they allowed participants the opportunity to speak freely about their experiences, reflect on their learning and describe these
experiences in their own words, rather than choosing from a prescribed list of experiences or 
descriptions. Similarly, it allowed the researcher to delve deeper into areas where a participant 
has shown reflection that may be of further interest. Interview dialogues are meant to be a back 
and forth exchange between the participant and researcher, requiring the researcher to decipher 
the phenomenon in the context of their understanding (Merriam, 1991).

Interviews were held in a quiet, private location to minimize distractions. Participants had 
the option of choosing the location to ensure they felt comfortable and able to engage in 
discussion. As my position does not directly interface with the education abroad office, I have 
minimal interaction with possible participants in this study on a day to day business, if at all. In 
my current position at the university, I may have interaction with participants at some point 
during their studies if they were to apply for admission to the specific college in which I work. If 
this were to be the case, students would be ensured that their participation in this research would 
not impact consideration of their admission.

All interviews were voice recorded. At the beginning of each interview, students were 
asked to share their chosen pseudonym from their reflective journals, which was then indicated 
on any further documents to ensure anonymity throughout data collection. Detailed written field 
notes were taken throughout including comments on a participant’s nonverbal behaviors, 
observations on environmental context, and my impressions or reflections (Sutton & Austin, 
2015). The total time for each initial interview was approximately 30-45 minutes. At the 
beginning of each interview, participants were asked basic introductory information to both build 
rapport between the participant and me. This included demographic information, where they 
studied during their time abroad, a basic overview of what they studied while abroad, and their
favorite memories from their time abroad. This was essential for creating a comfortable environment for research (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

As research interviews utilizing the IPA method are meant to be “conversation(s) with a purpose”, the interview schedule (see Appendix D) used for these interviews was semi-structured and facilitated conversation around relevant experiences with still maintaining flexibility to follow the participant’s train of thought (Smith et al., 2009, p. 57). A second interview was scheduled with each participant to occur within 48-72 hours of the initial interview. This was often scheduled at the same time as the first interview to ensure participants were well aware of the time commitment required for participation. Following the inductive approach to allow themes to emerge, any questions asked in a second interview were informed by emerging themes and concepts addressed in their first interview to gain further input and explanation upon. It expanded upon similar topics as covered in the first interview, including discussion of their experiences while abroad, with a large focus on their experiences specifically when they returned home to understand their experiences and the potential for transformation further. This process facilitated the transformative learning process of engaging students in both reflection and rational discourse by providing opportunities for both written reflection and spoken dialogue, as well as time for them to reflect over a period of a couple of days in between interviews in order to understand how they make meaning of their study abroad experiences upon their return home.

Data Analysis

Following the interview process, I engaged in the transcription process to transcribe data from the in-person interviews. This was done using www.rev.com, an online transcription software, sending them the audio recordings electronically to be transcribed into individual documents to be printed for analysis.
Smith et al. (2009) point out that there is not one specific method for analyzing data collected utilizing IPA. This particular study utilized the inductive strategies, allowing for findings to emerge from common themes and concepts shared throughout the data, outlined by Smith et al. (2009) in chapter five as a guide for data analysis.

**Coding procedures.** Before reading each transcript, I listened to the recordings of each interview to immerse myself in the content of the data and to ensure the participant and their experiences are the center of attention (Smith et al., 2009). This includes noting non-verbal components such as pauses, sighs, laughing, hesitations in speech, or changes in pace or volume. Throughout this experience, I maintained a research journal and engaged in memo-ing, where I made a note of my reflections and thoughts in conjunction with the interview transcripts. Following an initial listening, I read through each interview to further process the descriptive content shared by participants. While reading and re-reading through the transcripts, I used the margins to document notes and observations. These included observations of common words and phrases repeated by individual participants and shared across interviews, taking into consideration descriptive content, specific linguistic choices, and conceptual comments that allow for researcher interpretation. Each re-reading of the transcript focused on a different content area, which was noted on the transcript.

Alase (2017) notes three cycles of coding that will be utilized throughout reading each transcript which aligns with the initial noting process described. The first system requires coding longer responses into more “meaningful chunky statements” to bring awareness to keywords or concepts that consistently repeated (Alase, 2017, p. 16). The second cycle continues to condense material by identifying the general principles discussed, making sure to maintain the lived
experiences and stories of each participant. The third cycle provides the opportunity to categorize the content shared, preparing the researcher to establish themes.

This process was duplicated with the written journal reflections, paying specific attention to linguistic choices and conceptual comments. All journal responses were printed with space left in the margins for notes. Using three cycles of coding for the written reflections, I looked first for repeated keywords and concepts, followed by condensing material and categorization to establish themes (Alase, 2017).

**Developing emergent themes and connections.** Using notes taken from each transcript and journal entry, specifically looking at common descriptors, words, and phrases, I looked for emerging themes to condense the content and develop topic areas. Smith et al. (2009) note the importance of reducing content volume while still “maintaining the complexity, in terms of mapping interrelationships, connections and patterns between exploratory notes” (p. 91). This process was done for each transcript and journal entry individually to examine each participant’s story to understand their experience further.

**Identifying themes.** Once each transcript and journal entry was coded, emergent themes established and connections identified within each specific case, I looked at the content from each interview and journal entry to look for patterns across all participants’ experiences. This process required asking questions about similarities between interviews, as Smith et al. (2009) ask: “how does a theme in one case help illuminate a different case? What themes are the most potent?” (p. 101). This process included creating a master table of themes for all participants, noting specific quotes from each transcript to further detail the patterns. This process was done until it is clear that no new information, unique themes or data are found to be added to the current codes upon reading and re-reading through the transcripts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).
Criteria for Quality Qualitative Research

Engaging in qualitative research requires attention to trustworthiness to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This can be achieved by enacting specific measures throughout the participant selection process, data collection, and analysis providing opportunities for both the researcher and study participants to create optimal environments for quality results. This section will discuss ethical considerations made throughout this research, credibility, and transferability of the research, as well as a discussion of my positionality as a researcher. This section will conclude with a discussion of the study’s limitations.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary for student participants, and they were not compensated for their participation. Before engaging in any interviews, participants were given an overview of the study, including details about how results will be shared. As part of this process, participants were asked to sign a consent waiver before their interview. Participants were told that they could refuse to answer any question and could withdraw from the study at any time.

Additionally, participants were assured that confidentiality would be maintained. Participants selected their pseudonym during data collection, which was then used throughout the rest of the study on any accompanying documentation or transcripts. No master file connects their pseudonym to their personal details. Any identifying details shared throughout the process by participants was not shared as part of the analysis process unless participants give written consent.
All interview audio recordings and electronic copies of transcripts and journal responses were kept in an electronic, secure, and password-protected area of my computer as well as on a secure, password-protected cloud account, to which I have sole access. Upon completion of this study, all audio recordings will be deleted from all locations. I am the only one with access to these locations. Any written documents collected, including consent waivers, field notes, and coding documents, have been kept in a secure, locked bookcase in my office to which I only have access.

**Credibility**

To ensure the credibility of this research, measures including member-checking, triangulation, and addressing positionality have been taken throughout. As qualitative research has received criticism over time due to the emphasis on the quality of experience versus causal relationships, the researchers need to address how they will consider reliability and validity throughout their study (Creswell, 2018). Triangulation, the use of a variety of data sources including reflective journals, my field notes and memos, interview transcription, and my research journals, provided this research the opportunity to validate consistent themes and patterns to understand the data fully. Through the material compiled in these various sources, I was able to collect sufficient insights to interpret and share.

Member-checking was done throughout the research, as it provided participants the opportunity to verify and clarify information; they have shared throughout the interview process. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that this is potentially “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314), this was a focus throughout data collection. This was done during each participant’s interview, as I summarized my understanding of the content, they
shared to ensure accuracy. This enabled participants to clarify content or further explain their meaning of specific components of each interview.

Finally, as the researcher, I continually assessed my positionality and potential bias throughout the study to ensure it did not negatively impact my interactions with my participants or sway my findings. As IPA requires that researchers create a rapport and engages closely with their participants throughout the study to gain in-depth descriptions about their lived experiences, it was important to consider the role positionality and bias played throughout the data collection process (Smith et al., 2009). This was especially important during the interview process, as it is important for researchers to practice bracketing, removing preconceived notions or views out of the process to ensure they fully understand the participant’s experience in their own words (Smith et al., 2009). Throughout interviews, transcription, and the coding process, I engaged in reflective memo writing to track my thought process. Following each interview, I memoed about my impressions of the interview, how I think it went, and any assumptions I had during the interview. Additionally, I memoed throughout the coding process to interrogate my assumptions about the data, how it applied to my previous knowledge, and how I made decisions in connecting topics and emerging themes.

**Transferability**

As the IPA method is idiographic, there is an emphasis on describing the individual in-depth experiences of each participant. Additionally, this study interviewed a smaller sample size of 8 participants. This required that thick description is used to ensure that findings are transferable and can be understood by other audiences (Creswell, 2018). As Ryle (1949) originally described, the importance of thick description in this research will provide additional context to understand the experiences of these research participants. This includes detailed
descriptions of students’ experiences abroad and how they made meaning of these experiences upon return to further process, develop and learn. Through the use of thick description, readers have the opportunity to transfer similar concepts to other contexts and future research.

**Internal Audit**

An internal audit was maintained to provide transparency throughout the research process. This included detailed documentation of research questions, field notes, interview transcriptions, annotated memos or journals, coding materials, and writing drafts. This was maintained to provide a thorough paper trail of all work done on this research project, so an external auditor could examine any necessary materials. Any materials compiled for this process were kept in a secure, locked location within the researcher’s office to ensure security.

**Self-reflexivity and Transparency**

Machi and McEvoy (2016) address the role of a researcher’s personal experience in impacting both positive and negative results due to the researcher’s passion for the topic. They further focus on the importance of a researcher reflecting on their views and experiences to move forward in a neutral position to see the problem of practice from many viewpoints. My research topic focused on the experience of students when they return from study abroad and how they make meaning of their experiences to provide transformational opportunities. My experiences as a study abroad participant and international educator contribute to my understanding of this topic and my position in researching students’ experiences similar to my own. As a student in college, I was fortunate to spend an entire year abroad, learning about myself, my host culture, and the world around me. My experiences abroad and in college led me to the field of Student Affairs and International Education where I started my career as a study abroad advisor supporting students pursuing international programs. These experiences have contributed to my view of the world,
education, and the importance of international study. In further exploring this research topic, I also recognize the position I come from in providing context and understanding. This recognition also provides perspective in further understanding the privileges and biases I hold in focusing on this topic to bring light an important topic in higher education today.

I participated in a year-long academic study abroad program in Heidelberg, Germany, where I studied German as a second language (Deutsch als Fremdsprache). Through study abroad, I learned the importance of being able to communicate through a language that is not your first but also body language and empathy. I learned the value of connecting with those that are different from you from places you’ve never been yourself. I learned how to navigate difficult bureaucratic systems and the importance of patience and compassion. And I learned the ability to cope when you return home, realizing the place and the people you left abroad now feel more like home than anywhere else. As a result of my experience studying abroad for an entire year, I also recognized that I held bias and preference for learning about the experiences of students who had studied abroad for an entire year as opposed to those who had participated in shorter programs. It was important to consider and continually audit my assumption that students would learn more about themselves and the world around them due to an extended period of time abroad throughout my research.

Following my year abroad, I returned home to a campus community where I was heavily involved both before I left, and when I came back. I had a positive and rewarding experience abroad and had a large network of friends, mentors, and supporters at home. Regardless, I experienced the negativity of reverse culture shock and found it difficult to acclimate to life at home in the United States. These experiences, both positive and negative, still stick with me today. These experiences are the reason I chose to pursue working in higher education. Every
student, regardless of what they study or where they study, at home or abroad, has a unique experience that provides them with new perspectives and increased learning. My experiences as a study abroad student, both while abroad and upon my return home, significantly impact my position as a researcher of this topic. I hold specific biases or preconceived notions of the experiences students have. It will be important to remind myself that every student’s experience is different, and therefore every student will respond differently to inquiry and support.

I pursued graduate student to support students in pursuing their dreams to study abroad. Moving forward, my first full-time position out of graduate school provided me the opportunity to work with hundreds of students in helping study abroad become a reality for them. This included choosing where they wanted to study, what preparations were needed before they left, and how to process their experience upon returning. As I have progressed in my career in student affairs, I continue to dedicate myself to helping students process their experience. This provides an opportunity to find a community that understands my experiences and struggles as well. As a result, in further understanding my position in researching this topic I recognize the importance of keeping my experiences advising students separate from any future students I may investigate, careful not to project my preconceived ideas about what students may or may not experience as a result of study abroad.

Overall, my experiences as a study abroad student and working with study abroad students, provide me with unique perspectives to engage in this research topic exploring how students make meaning of their study abroad experiences upon their return home. While these experiences can be beneficial in understanding these concepts, it’s also essential as a researcher to be aware of these perspectives in ensuring unbiased and grounded research to ensure well-founded results.
Limitations

The ideographic focus on IPA emphasizes the individual experiences of each participant in the study. In this case, it provides an in-depth description and interpretation of individual students returning home from participation in an international study abroad experience. IPA requires a certain level of interpretation to uncover participants’ experiences and make meaning of what is shared. Smith et al. (2009) note that novice researchers can sometimes struggle with producing analyses that are more descriptive than interpretative. As a result, a potential limitation of this study was the experience level of the researcher, requiring attention to interpretation throughout the research process to ensure results are adequately analyzed. Similarly, IPA requires the researcher and participant creating a significant level of rapport and trust to communicate effectively and share their experiences. This is a potential limitation of this study and required attention on the part of the researcher to ensure measures were taken to develop a productive working relationship, so participants felt supported to share. Finally, this research was conducted at one mid-sized regional university in the Pacific Northwest and describes the individual experiences of students at this university. This is a potential limitation as it provides a small description students’ experiences from a specific population.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how undergraduate students returning from a study abroad program make meaning of their experiences through the re-entry process. Each of the eight participants in this study were undergraduate students who participated in a study abroad program between 3 months and 19 months long. While these students studied a variety of academic disciplines in various countries around the world, as outlined in Table 1, they all returned home from their time abroad describing experiences that helped them to make meaning of their time there. Through semi-structured interviews and individual written journal responses, they shared their experiences both during their time abroad and upon their return home, providing insight into how they made meaning of their time abroad and their transition home upon the program’s completion.

Table 1.

Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Program Location</th>
<th>Academic Discipline While Abroad</th>
<th>Time Abroad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>Portuguese Language &amp; Culture</td>
<td>9 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alyssa</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Communication Studies</td>
<td>4 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>Spanish Language &amp; Latin American Culture</td>
<td>5 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>Senegal</td>
<td>Africana Studies &amp; Ethnomusicology</td>
<td>5 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>10 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>10 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ericka</td>
<td>Nicaragua/Honduras</td>
<td>Agroecology, Spanish &amp; Latin American Culture</td>
<td>19 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Supply Chain Management</td>
<td>4 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As addressed in Chapter 3, this research was grounded in the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, focusing on creating a narrative of each participant while not seeking a correct answer to address the research question (Butin, 2010). Further, through the utilization of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this research sought to examine “how people make sense of their major life experiences” through detailed and descriptive data collected from participants (Smith et al., 2009, p.1). The data collected from each of these eight participants provided a window into their reality, how they made meaning of their study abroad experience, and how they continued to make meaning upon their return home.

Upon analysis of the data provided by interview and journal transcripts, three superordinate themes and nine sub-themes emerged: 1. Personal Development (1.1 Self-Efficacy, 1.2 Coping Mechanisms, 1.3 Academic Identity); 2. Interpersonal Development (2.1 Cultivating Empathy, 2.2 Developing Community Abroad, 2.3 Connecting with Academic Mentors); and 3. Cultural Awareness (3.1 Increased Consciousness of Culture, 3.2 Here vs. There, 3.3 Global Citizenship). Table 2 provides a visual of each superordinate theme and sub-theme, including the reference of each theme by participant.

Table 2.

Superordinate and Sub-Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Making Meaning of Study Abroad</th>
<th>John</th>
<th>Alyssa</th>
<th>Sara</th>
<th>Claire</th>
<th>Kevin</th>
<th>Kayla</th>
<th>Ericka</th>
<th>Greg</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Development</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping Mechanisms</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Identity</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal Development</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivating Empathy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.
Participants in this study spent varied time abroad as a part of their study abroad program. While Ericka spent the most time abroad, totaling 19 months, over half of the student participants spent 4-5 months abroad. The data showed that participants were able to fully engage with their study abroad experience in order to make meaning of their experiences in the areas of personal and interpersonal development and cultural awareness, whether their program was only four months or over one year in length, as illustrated in the table above.

During the data collection process, participants were asked why they chose their particular program and program duration. For those students that chose to participate in an academic year program (10 months or longer), many said they wanted to engage in a longer program so they could spend time getting to know their host community, engaging with the culture and, in many cases, the language of their host country. On the other hand, students who participated in shorter programs of 4-5 months voiced a need for finding a program that allowed them to pursue their academic goals with little impact to their life at home, both personally and academically. This involved discussions around not being able to take that much time away from their jobs, academic restrictions that required they take coursework on their home campus, and plans for impending graduation.
Regardless of their program duration, it was clear throughout participant interviews and in their journal responses that participants utilized reflective practices and dialogue, to make meaning of their time abroad and in their transition home, contributing to the development of these superordinate themes. While the mediums of reflection varied from student to student, many of them voiced the importance of reflection in making space for them to think about and process their time abroad intentionally. At the same time, participants addressed the role that others played in helping them to make meaning of their experience abroad, connecting through shared experience, or facilitating a successful transition to life at home. As Mezirow’s (1978) theory outlined, transformative learning utilizes both critical reflection and rational discourse to facilitate how one makes meaning of their experiences to transform their perspectives. Through reflection and dialogue during their time abroad and upon their return home, these students voiced how they were able to process their experiences and make connections to their learning. As Claire summarized, “in short [I’ve learned so much] and I’ll be processing it for the rest of my life.”

**Personal Development**

The first superordinate theme that emerged from this study was how participants developed personally as a result of their time abroad. Personal development informs one’s awareness of their own identity, their values, and their ability to engage with the world around them. Further, it addresses how students grow and evolve as a result of increased awareness of their identity, their values, and how they approach situations given a new outlook on their identity, values, and beliefs (Gmelch, 1997). As Alyssa said in one of her interviews: “I would say that…ultimately what made my experience most meaningful was just learning about how I grew as a person when I was adapting in a new environment.” One of the subthemes outlined in
this section addresses how participants frequently described feelings of self-efficacy, recounting experiences where they feel they learned how to be more self-confident, adaptable, and flexible to be more successful. The second subtheme addressing personal development showed how students described the various coping mechanisms they developed to navigate difficult situations and challenges for themselves both throughout their time abroad and upon their return home. Further, the third subtheme addressing personal development outlines how students shared how their experiences abroad lead them to develop in their identity as a student. This was seen through an increase in their language skills, refining and focusing on their course of study, and making meaning of how their study abroad program impacted their academic journey to develop new beliefs, values, and attitudes towards their education.

**Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy can be described as an inner belief of one’s own ability, an increase in self-confidence (Strange & Gibson, 2017). Participants described this concept throughout their interviews, describing their increased confidence in themselves to travel independently, adapt to difficult situations, and the ability to say ‘yes’ to new experiences. As Claire said, “I’d never lived outside of the country for that long [a couple months], and it was just kind of that experience, almost like a test, ‘can I do that?’” Their experiences abroad, for many, confirmed that they can do hard things and can live abroad successfully.

When Sarah was asked what she learned about herself as a result of her time abroad, she said, “I think more…confidence in myself to be able to do more things and less insecurity about my abilities…adapting to really be confident in the way I ask for things.” Similarly, Kevin described how he developed more self-confidence while abroad:
It’s a different self-confidence…Being over there…it’s the confidence to speak Japanese, to travel. Here, what I do for fun, I just go to the mountains, I go snowboarding…If I were to do that in Japan, it would be totally different because I’d have to get on a train…take a bus…I’d have to rent gear in Japanese…that would be like a real adventure.

John described his development of self-efficacy through the ability to travel independently in a completely new environment:

I would say one [thing I learned about myself] is how independent I can be and want to be. I definitely learned how much I like traveling into places by myself… how capable I am in those kinds of situations. I’m pretty confident. Definitely increased my confidence…being myself and being in situations that are foreign to me.

In his journal responses, John further explained,

Primarily I have learned a lot about myself and how independent I can be. Being on a study abroad is not quite like traveling by yourself to a different country, but it is certainly close, and you have a large degree of freedom to do what you want.

These examples showed how students found more confidence in themselves as a result of navigating difficult situations. Traveling alone, navigating new adventures in a foreign language, and seeing their ability in trying new things showed them they had the capacity to be successful.

Kevin described how traveling abroad contributed to the development of self-efficacy:

“You learn how to be somewhere different…how to communicate in different ways. I feel more independent now and more comfortable traveling. I went to Mexico for Spring Break [upon returning home] …And I felt comfortable doing that.” This experience required taking public transportation in a foreign language, he didn’t know and navigating conversations with locals.

This was also shared by both Sarah and Ericka, as they described their increased confidence in
successfully traveling alone in an unknown environment. Sarah shared how her experiences traveling got easier as she developed her abilities and became more confident:

I got to travel a lot in Argentina…it was always a great learning process…to figure out the flight or the bus…navigating it all in Spanish at first was a little bit hard, but once you get the vocabulary down it was easier…it definitely got easier and easier over time and felt more confident with myself traveling around.

Ericka similarly discussed increased confidence in navigating travel as she described the visa renewal process she had to work through multiple times: “I feel very competent in just logistical things in traveling because while I was abroad, I would travel so much by myself…dealt with so many different visa renewals…I think that relates to just grounded-ness and self-confidence.”

These experiences provided students with concrete examples of how they succeeded in a new environment, giving them a foundation to believe in their abilities moving forward as they took on new responsibilities both abroad, and when they returned home.

Kayla described how her belief in her abilities grew as a result of dealing with a difficult living situation:

My room was infested by termites at one point, and that was a really big challenge…I woke up one morning and the bathroom was full of bugs and I went to the lobby of the dorm…and their response was ‘the termites are back already?'

In addition to realizing that she may have to learn how to live with conditions different than she was used to at home, Kayla also learned how to ask for what she needed. She was given a new room without termites upon asking, helping her to see that she could handle difficult times: “you throw anything at me, I’m ready…I learned I can handle a lot of things and almost anything, I can handle.” Ericka also remarked on how her ability to handle difficult situations and her self-
confidence was tested and proved through her living situation: “I learned that I’m really adaptable…being able to and willing to adapt to other people’s spaces and other ways of living.”

Both Claire and Alyssa communicated an increase in their belief about their abilities to be adaptable and to overcome difficult things, stating that they noticed an ability they didn’t think they had. Alyssa said, “I learned I can be adaptable…I possess a lot more confidence than I was giving myself credit…I learned that I was a lot more perceptive than I was giving myself credit for”. Claire noted a parallel concept,

I learned that I’m a lot stronger than I thought I was…with losing my bag for a month… I was really proud of myself…actually when I got there I also missed my flight was stranded in Casablanca by myself, not speaking the language. So, it was kind of like ‘I did it, I did that. I can do things…personal strength.

Through their experiences navigating challenging situations and learning a new environment, these students found a quality within themselves they did not think previously existed, developing increased self-confidence and the belief that they were capable, showing their development of self-efficacy.

As a result of their experiences abroad, students developed an increased sense of self-efficacy. Through the navigation of new environments, communicating in another language, overcoming obstacles and challenges, and adapting to change, students found that they began to believe in their personal abilities to navigate these situations and be successful. These experiences resulted in personal development to maximize their potential as individuals, students, and global citizens.
Coping Mechanisms

While students experienced an increased sense of self-efficacy as a result of their learning, they also shared how challenges both while abroad and upon their return home led them to develop individual coping mechanisms to overcome difficult and complicated situations.

Reflection Abroad. Many students discussed the role of reflection in helping them to cope with difficult situations and to foster their individual development to learn from these situations. As Ericka stated,

Reflection was really the only time and really the only way I could truly support myself…unfortunately I only have writings from when things were difficult because I used reflection as a way of supporting myself because I didn’t feel much support at different times.

She continued this discussion by noting that, “sometimes I didn’t want to sit with my feelings, sometimes I was like this seems so difficult that I didn’t want to write. So, I always was like ‘I need to write more’.” Similarly, for Sarah:

If I was feeling sad or missing certain people in my life from around here, it allowed me the kind of process that without kind of putting it on other things in my experience, so I could process things that I needed to on my own time.

Both of these students utilized reflection to process their feelings privately and support themselves individually, especially when dealing with more emotional issues. Greg shared that he journaled regularly throughout his time abroad in some way, documenting daily experiences or feelings about being in a new space as a way of trying to remember as much as he could.

For Sarah, reflection was mostly focused on writing:
It provided me with a way to get out words in whatever language…and have that be a resource for me and no one else I didn’t need to be shared, and what didn’t need to be a conversation with anyone else.

Claire also engaged in written reflection both through journaling and blogging to work through difficult times. She also used drawing as a reflective outlet to make meaning of her experiences and help her through stressful times: “definitely journaling [helped to process challenges] …allowing myself to have like a space that is mine and mine only to figure out how I process the world and be nonjudgmental about the way that I process the world.” She also engaged, though, in drawing as a way of processing challenges:

- I kind of let myself be more free …it would just be like, ‘I’m going to listen to music and I’m going to draw what that is, or I’m going to sit down on my host family’s roof, and I’m going to draw what it looks like and just ground myself in that way.’

Ericka similarly used drawing and painting to make meaning of her experiences to cope with challenges: “Sometimes it’s hard to name how you feel before you reflect…and then based off of what I was painting or what came to the surface I could [acknowledge] ‘oh, I’m feeling this way’.”

Kayla described how she struggled with isolation, especially at the beginning of her time abroad:

- Having no friends was really the biggest challenge in the beginning [of my time abroad] …I met a lot of Chinese people, but it was hard to actually become good friends with a lot of them. Harder than it is here.

As a result, Kayla utilized conversations with friends at home as a way of reflecting on her experiences and navigating challenges. Through external processing and reflection, she was able
to see how she could overcome her isolation and reach out to local citizens. She enrolled in music classes, building upon an interest to learn a new instrument, but also providing the opportunity to meet fellow students in her class.

Through both individual reflection and external processing, students were able to interpret their experiences abroad, developing a coping mechanism to understand what they learned from their time abroad further. While some students looked to active exercises to process challenges, others used individual reflection to process all of their experiences.

**Reestablishing Routine Upon Return Home.** While students voiced feelings of isolation during their time abroad due to various circumstances, it was also a common experience for students to feel isolation upon their return. These experiences centered around a feeling that they had this unique experience they people didn’t understand in a way that their friends who had been abroad with them did. Greg stated,

> I think coming back I felt isolated because I had this experience that not many people had shared around me, so it was just hard to relate and talk to other people about it…but then you would find other kids who had had similar things and that was cool.

Claire voiced this experience where it was difficult to connect with friends and family upon returning:

> Another thing [that was surprising] was how little people asked about my experience…I just did this huge thing for me, and it’s like all I can think about, and then I come back and you’re expected to have like a short sound bite of ‘how was your trip?’, ‘it was good’ and then you just go one with your life…their lives had also been doing things.

Friends and family weren’t able to connect with her experience and expected a short summary of her time abroad, as opposed to the longer processing Claire felt she needed. Greg shared similar
feelings, stating that it was weird when he returned because people only expected a couple of sentences to encapsulate his entire experience.

As a result of these experiences, participants discussed the importance of taking the initiative to reestablish their own routine upon coming home as a coping mechanism during this transition. Ericka stated,

I just threw myself into school, and then Spring Quarter it’s been so hard to be motivated because I think I am almost more culture shocked now… I’m somewhat feeling it more because I had something I could focus on. I think I’ve had more time to sit with being back [now after being home for 4 months] so I’m having to face reflections and when I first came back, I didn’t feel connected, but I could… just kind of jump right back in. John shared that he also found it important to reestablish his routine when he came home, but that he struggled with jumping directly into a job and looked to friends and family to balance him out. Kayla discussed the ease in transitioning home, resuming extracurricular activities, and school as soon as she returned home. “I just jumped right back into it.” Alyssa did the same thing of filling up her time and keeping busy, in hopes of helping with her transition: “I just filled up my, I didn’t let myself think about being sad and being lonely and being home. I just kept filling up my schedule.” Greg, Sarah, and Kayla all discussed the interesting dynamic of returning home to their parents’ home before returning to school and life. All three described this experience as being somewhat strange, a sense of familiarity with more structure than they were used to, but ultimately helped them to give them space to process their experience in an environment where they felt comfortable. All of these students found that by re-establishing a routine, they were able to feel comfortable in their home environment in a way that they could control.
Academic Identity

Each of the participants in this study engaged in learning while abroad, both in and out of the classroom, developing increased awareness about how they identify as a student. Through their interviews, participants shared how these experiences impacted their personal development, impacting their perspective about who they are as a student, reflecting on their personal beliefs and values and how they may contribute to their future education and academic journey. For some, this was in the form of language learning, while others engaged in dialogue with local citizens to learn more about the history, politics, and cultural norms of their environment. These experiences brought increased attention to their educational goals and priorities, contributing to their personal development.

Language Learning. Both Kevin and Kayla stated that what they learned most from their time abroad was the language they went to study, Japanese and Chinese respectively. Both spoke about increasing their ability to speak the language fluently, as well as how they saw themselves as someone who could interact with others in a new way. “I figured, I’m majoring in Japanese. You got to go all-in”, said Kevin, who said that he was dedicated to his language learning. “I was always reflecting…just always thinking about…what language strategies am I using to develop my Japanese?” This focus on learning was encouraged by his faculty at home and other students he knew, who told him, “you have to spend as much time speaking Japanese as possible.” Sarah also shared that language contributed significantly to experiences during her time abroad.

I’ve learned a ton of Spanish since then…that was a large part of my experience and trying to keep that up here has been a little difficult…Spanish was a big part that I couldn’t have learned in a classroom, experiential learning.
For these three students, they were able to focus on their language skills through courses they took during their study abroad program in a way that helped them to develop in their identity as a speaker of this new language.

Their experiences outside of the classroom, though, also proved to be essential for developing their confidence in learning a foreign language. As Sarah mentioned, there was an important element to learning a language in the community, outside of the classroom. Many students voiced the role of experiences out in the community in facilitating their language acquisition. Kevin wrote, “I cannot count the number of times where I learned something in class, or through self-study, and then used that specific grammar or vocabulary as soon as I left the classroom.” He further noted that, “school only gets you so far…It’s the real-world experience that gets you to that next…it gets you to the native fluency”. Kayla also addressed the importance of engaging in the community to learn a language, describing the experience of overhearing someone ask for directions in China and applying her learning from the classroom to understand real-world situations better. John had similar experiences in Portugal: “hanging out outside of the homestays…I would speak Portuguese when I was out and had to talk with just people on the street, or in stores, or things like that.” Through these experiences outside of the classroom, Sarah noted the importance of language acquisition, including many components:

I learned that there is so much that comes with a language – a new way of talking, different mannerisms, and a different history. Argentinian Spanish is very distinct from what I learned in the US, but I got to pick up their accent and vocabulary. This learning was most facilitated by speaking to Argentinians, but also watching movies and reading in Spanish.
Through studying a foreign language, both in the classroom and through their observations and connections outside of the classroom, students were able to hone their skills to foster development as students. They gained increased confidence and identity around their ability to speak a new language and interact with others in a way that they hadn’t experienced before.

**Defining Course of Study.** While all participants in this study had a declared major or intended course of study prior to leaving on their study abroad experience, three participants specifically noted that their time abroad helped to focus their personal academic goals. These experiences helped them to look more specifically at their chosen major or course of study as a result of their time abroad. While studying abroad did not drastically change the course of people’s direction, it provided space for them to think more critically about their chosen direction and add elements to their studies that would more specifically look at cultural influences.

As stated above, one of Sarah’s primary goals in studying abroad was to enhance her knowledge of Spanish; she was also interested in increasing her learning around Latin American studies. Her declared interdisciplinary major before leaving focused mostly on Food Security, and her time abroad helped her to realize that she wanted to include more of a focus on Latin American politics than she had considered initially:

I was hoping, my initial thoughts [about what I was hoping to learn from my time abroad] were Spanish and learning more about Latin American politics from a Latin American perspective, as I’ve taken many classes focused on that. I wanted to hear it from Latin America.

Following her formal study abroad, Sarah realized that she wasn’t done, and she wanted more opportunities for learning that might contribute towards her major. As a result, she found
opportunities to get involved with a farming community in Chile and a botanical garden in Peru. These experiences contributed towards her course of study, helping her refine her interests and personal passions even further upon return home.

Claire discussed the refinement of her course of study as a result of her study abroad program as well. Initially, she had hoped to focus on ethnomusicology for her interdisciplinary degree, but her time in Senegal helped her to realize that she wanted to focus more specifically on the intersection of ethnomusicology and Africana Studies. She said,

It didn’t like change any sort of thing drastically, but it put a lot of things in focus…trying to be a lot more conscious of what sort of role that the history of these fields plays in how I want to move forward and how I want to shape the fields I’m going into.

Exposure to a new culture and a fresh perspective helped her to see an element she hadn’t yet explored, fostering a sense of curiosity to seek out more information to contribute to her learning.

Alyssa specifically addressed the structure of her learning abroad in its contribution towards her learning at home. She highlighted the research-based nature of her courses in England and their independent nature for facilitating self-directed learning. This structure helped her to think more critically about her chosen major, resulting in a focus on coursework she was more specifically interested in upon her return home: “It [class structure abroad] gave me a little bit more know how about…researching and within the Communication Studies major it gave me more direction in the classes that I didn’t want to take afterwards. I think it was incredibly valuable.” This realization helped to inform her personal academic goals upon returning home in a way that contributed to her personal development and the direction of her career.
Developing as a Student. In addition to acquiring the ability to speak and understand a foreign language and think critically about their chosen course of study, students also expressed development in overall academic skills. This contributed to their personal development and their identity as a student and learner. Claire reflected on her academic program, as “it was probably the most rigorous academics I’ve ever done and those were really valuable because unlearn so much about what I thought Africa was and what the history was.” This experience moved her to continue her academic studies through independent study, making connections between concepts she had learned in the classroom and what she felt compelled to explore on her own in a way that she had not before learning for Senegal. This development on independent interests was also seen in Ericka’s return to campus, as a result of her time abroad. When asked how she defined learning in the context of her study abroad, she reflected on her experience of returning home:

Being back on campus…it truly hit me that you can learn other ways and that is something I had heard before, and I believe but, I had never lived because I had never lived that experience because I had gone straight from high school to college and never taken time off…I feel that I’ve learned so much in spending time outside of an institution …it became clear to me that so much learning can happen outside of being on campus. This experience shows her ability to see alternative ways of learning and exploring new information on a more personal level as a result of her study abroad experience.

Alyssa commented on how her experience at a university in England contributed to a newfound perspective to approach her education from a more personal lens. She said that,

[learning abroad] really made me think about how effective busy work actually is … they gave you the tools to understand what you wanted to figure out, but at the end of the day,
you would build your own, you’re building your own research or building your own final project…I definitely felt like I learned so much more through the research.

These experiences in and out of the classroom provided students with enhanced skills to think critically about their education and how they learn best to be successful in the future studies, developing new values which contributed to their identity as a student.

**Conclusions.** Through experiences like learning to travel alone, navigating environments in a foreign language, meeting new people and conquering challenging living environments, students communicated an increased sense of self-confidence and development of self-efficacy, believing in their abilities to be independent and adaptable. At the same time, students intentionally developed coping mechanisms to process the challenges they experienced while abroad effectively and upon their return home to be successful. Through various forms of self-reflection, communication and connection to others, and maintenance of routine, students found ways of coping. Finally, students engaged in learning both while abroad and upon their return home that helped them to develop their identity as a student, acquiring language skills, refining their course of study and connecting with their academics on a more personal level. These themes show how students made meaning of their experiences abroad to facilitate personal development, impacting their beliefs, values, and attitudes to develop an awareness of their own identities and contributed towards their ability to recognize the importance of cultivating empathy and connecting with others to promote interpersonal development.

**Interpersonal Development**

The second superordinate theme that emerged from this research was the role of interpersonal development in creating meaning for students during their time abroad and upon their return home. Throughout my interviews with each participant and in reading their journal
responses, all eight students discussed the value and experience of developing interpersonal relationships. This was described through cultivating empathetic relationships with students who had also participated in study abroad, and with friends, family, and academic mentors at home. Students described experiences of interacting with local citizens to learn more about their experiences and to develop meaningful relationships through curiosity and understanding. Finally, students also described challenges connecting with others, especially upon returning home. They did not know how to fit in with these new experiences and struggled to find a sense of belonging.

**Cultivating Empathy**

Empathy can be described as an ability to identify with another, understand the experience of another or share in their feeling (Ioannidou & Konstantikaki, 2008). In meeting and connecting with people during their time abroad, students communicated increased consciousness of how other people lived their lives, what they valued, and what they experienced every day. Greg explained this development:

I went to Europe and met all these people. I have so much more of an empathetic and robust understanding of how other world work past like being able to quote something I heard on a podcast or read in a book…as well as embracing other people’s or other cultures…value and outlook on life.

This experience led him to reconsider some of his values, showing him the importance of interaction with people and helping him to see that connecting with others can mean so much more than his personal and professional accomplishments.

**Developing Empathy Abroad.** Interacting with local citizens abroad allowed students to learn about their culture, understand their experiences and realities, and share in these
experiences. Through these opportunities, students described how they empathized with local citizens, increasing their understanding of another culture’s perspective and way of life. Ericka described experiences she had with her own family that lived in Honduras that she had never had the opportunity to truly learn from before, learning about their perspectives on safety, family structure, cultural norms, and obligations. She was able to connect with them in a new way as a result of her experiences abroad.

I think I just felt more connect with my family because when I was in Honduras, I spent a lot of time with them and I felt that I had finally, truly connected to my heritage…I connected more profoundly because I could speak Spanish by the time I was in Honduras.

Following her extended time in Nicaragua, due to political unrest in the country, Ericka moved on to live with her family who lives in Honduras while she studied at the local university. She described the experiences of navigating her family’s concern for her safety in traveling to campus. They were uncomfortable with her traveling alone at night, or traveling on the public bus alone, both activities that were completely normal to her. Through listening to their stories and learning from their experiences, she began to understand their reality of living in an area where it was unsafe to take the bus at night and where women had to take extra precautions when traveling alone. She shared that these conversations with her family about the reality of life in Honduras enabled her to develop increased empathy and understanding for their lived experiences and more appropriately navigate her environment in Honduras.

Claire talked about her experiences in Senegal, contributing to her ability to think more broadly and identify with others’ experiences.
I learned how to interact with people who are different than me, people who have very
different experiences. Being able to get out of my own head of being like ‘I’m the only
experience that matters’. I think that was a huge thing that I learned…how to interact
with the world.

Greg described a similar sentiment of developing empathy for others through listening to their
experiences. He described a challenging conversation he had with a classmate where his
classmate said he was lucky because he could speak English, a language that was so common
around the world. Before this interaction, Greg had not realized how privileged he was to be able
to communicate so broadly. As a result, he was able to understand and empathize with people
who may not experience this privilege. For both Claire and Greg, this awareness of others’
realities, and the ability to interact resulted in a realignment of their values, looking critically at
the values of others and listening to understand their situation and their viewpoint to consider
other ways of looking at things.

**Seeking Shared Experience Upon Return Home.** Many students voiced the importance
of creating space to connect with others who had participated in study abroad upon returning
home, especially due to the lack of understanding they often felt with others who had not studied
abroad. These opportunities provided an opportunity to relate with others who shared a similar
experience.

Greg and Claire both voiced difficulties relating to family and friends at home upon their
return due to their experience participating in study abroad. Their time away had given them
exposure to new knowledge and understanding that sometimes made it difficult to connect with
people in the same ways. Greg reflected that his friends identified ways that they thought he had
changed, including his outlook on life and the way he approached concepts he had developed a
more profound understanding of while abroad. And while he said, “I took it as a compliment for the most part”, he still voiced frustration that they didn’t take the time to understand from where he was coming. Greg stated, “I think coming back I felt isolated because I had this experience that not many people had shared around me, so it was just hard to relate and talk to other people about it.” He shared that he also struggled with communicating his experience to others upon his return “It was pretty awkward. I didn’t know really what to talk about quite a bit [upon coming home] …People were like ‘how was it abroad’ and I was like ‘it was crazy’.” He said that people didn’t care to hear about his experience, pushing that part of his life aside to resume life as it was before he left, leaving him to feel different because of this new learning he had experienced.

Kayla voiced this experience where it seemed like people didn’t genuinely care about her time abroad, feeling like she wasn’t able to fully engage in conversation about her year in China:

Another thing [that was surprising] was how little people asked about my experience…I just did this huge thing for me and it’s like all I can think about and then I come back, and you’re expected to have like a short sound bite of ‘how was your trip?’, ‘it was good’ and then you just go one with your life…their lives had also been doing things.

Friends and family weren’t able to identify with her experience and expected a short summary of her time abroad, as opposed to the longer processing Kayla felt she needed. Greg shared similar feelings, stating that it was weird when he returned because people only expected a couple of sentences to encapsulate his entire experience.

As a result of these experiences, John, Ericka, Sarah, and Claire talked about the importance of creating space to engage in conversation with other students who had studied abroad to intentionally bond over a shared experience. Sarah described the need to seek out others who studied abroad, naming the importance of allyship: “just a friend to kind of
understand if I was overwhelmed with being back or not used to being back in the same processes as before.” One of her closest friends at her home university was abroad at the same time she was but in a different country. Sarah reflected though, that while they had different experiences abroad, they could still relate about the “shock of coming back”:

So, I remember sitting on a bus going to school the first day of Spring Quarter and my friend, [who had been in Japan, where] all the public transportation was very clean, everyone was quiet, and everything was very efficient. While my experiences in Latin America, it was the complete opposite…My interpretation would be coming onto the bus here, I was like ‘wow, it’s so quiet and so clean. It’s comfortable’…and for her it was the complete opposite reaction…so being able to look at each other and [think] we had very different experiences…. it’s been a nice little comfort…to talk about that stuff.

This experience shows a level of shared understanding between Sarah and her friend about how their experiences abroad had an impact on their experiences at home. Even though their time abroad was very different, they had a common awareness and mutual understanding of how different their lives would be now that they are home.

John connected with another fellow student who was from the same hometown as him, saying that “we were able to reflect on things, and remember times that we were there…it was definitely nice to see somebody that I had shared that experience with.” He described the need for being in company with others who had studied abroad, even if they had gone to a different country.

It could’ve been cool to take a class or something and maybe talk with people that hadn’t necessarily been in the same country even as me, but just talk with people who had done study abroad…I guess it is kind of difficult to get back, and you had just been traveling
for nine months…and had all these experiences, and then you get home, and your friends
and family are still there, and they’d been there the whole time, and you know, it’s not
like I had been to war and they couldn’t understand anything that happened, but they
didn’t experience that with me, so I don’t know how to explain it.

This sentiment shared by John shows his desire to make connections with who students who
could empathize with him.

Before returning home, Ericka made a conscious effort to reach out to a friend who had
also been abroad in Peru: “I just spent some time reflecting with her, she had been studying
abroad for nine months, and so we could kind of connect over that.” Additionally, Ericka sought
out two other students who had spent time in Latin America on a similar program to hers, a self-
directed international grant, for support, reflection, processing, and an opportunity to connect
over their shared experiences in a space where they understood each other. She similarly
discussed the importance of doing the same with two American interns during her time abroad:
“I think conversation was a big part of reflecting…for me I think it helps…if one person shares
their experience, sometimes different things start to connect in my mind.”

Finally, Ericka addressed the importance of connecting with students who had also
studied abroad and share similar aspects of social identity: “I specifically reached out to [another
student who went abroad] because she is also Latina, and I felt like there were specific things
that I wanted to talk with her about.” This shared identity allowed them the opportunity to delve
deeper into their experiences and find meaning in how their identity as Latinas may have
impacted their time abroad in a way that talking with someone who didn’t share this identity
might not fully understand. Claire similarly described this need, as she discussed reaching out to
a fellow student who had participated in the same program as she did in Senegal to connect over the common experience of identity.

She was another queer person. So that was like in Senegal, being curious, super, super illegal. And I hadn’t really talked to anybody about that. So, it was really interesting, meeting up, talking with somebody who had done the program ten years ago, and then seeing how the program still affected her ten years later, so that was kind of nice seeing into my future… so that was probably the most impactful moment I had with somebody who had been abroad.

By connecting with someone who had a shared experience, she was able to learn from their experiences but also further develop in her own learning from her time abroad.

While students were able to cultivate empathy for the people they met abroad through their experiences and learning about their way of life, students also sought out opportunities to empathize with one another about their experiences abroad to create space for mutual understanding of what they learned while abroad, regardless of where they studied or what they learned specifically.

Even though many students described the importance and need to connect with others that studied abroad, both Kevin and John still explicitly named their friends at school and their family as some of the most important people who they connected with upon their return home to seek understanding and empathy. Kevin recalled that having close friends to connect with provided consistency and stability. John similarly said that it was a comfort to have his friends and family to support him. “Everybody was just so happy to see me…they acted as the friends that I knew and loved, and the family that I know and love, that just made it easy to transition and come back home.” Reflecting on the role his family played in his transition, John said they
John recalled a brief visit home he had just before he returned from his full year abroad in which he had gone to dinner with family and friends. While he was excited to see everyone, he described a significant panic attack that negatively impacted him as he became overwhelmed with the feelings of being back home. He described the support his family gave him during this time, which helped him to connect with being home and allowed space to process these difficult feelings.

**Developing Community Abroad**

Students shared their experiences developing relationships with those they met while abroad. This helped them to build a community in a variety of ways. For Alyssa, this provided an opportunity to create a supportive environment to be herself with her fellow students abroad. As a result, she felt like she was able to be a different person while she was abroad, really getting to know her peers and fostering a close bond, even more so than she was able to create meaningful relationships with her friends at home. “When you’re true to yourself and you are kind to yourself, and you are kind to other people, then you are going to attract the best people possible in your life.” She further reflected on the unique experience of building relationships while abroad because you are on your own in a new environment where no one knows you:

All you have is your ability to connect with other people; you don’t have any other ties. So, the people who connect with one another the strongest are the ones who allow themselves to empathize and be more understanding of the people that do. Claire discussed the value of creating new relationships in an environment where she knew no one:

I really enjoyed it…to be able to be in a new place and form connections with people when…I didn’t know a single person when I landed in this country [Senegal]…and then I
slowly, it was one of those things like ‘wow, the world is really small’…I went to this Thanksgiving at the U.S. Embassy, and I met somebody who was a pen pal with one of my friends from high school who was from Germany. All of these people have these connections that you never think you’d make, even as disconnected as I felt when I first got there.

Ericka spoke of the value of creating a positive rapport with local citizens in the various towns and cities she lived in throughout her time in Honduras and Nicaragua. This experience allowed her to observe their practices, listen to their stories, and talk with them about how their experiences impacted their way of life. Through these interactions, she was able to be a part of the community, which she felt allowed her to see elements of society that she may not have had she been more on the outside:

I was connected with many different farmers who were a part of the association [Rural Farm Workers Association] and at one point go to spend some time with a family that had their own plantain chip business…just being up that early and going with them to market…getting to spend time with them in their day to day life that was really impactful…I just felt instantly part of something and part of a community.

Sarah also voiced her experiences with local citizens that helped her to feel like she was a part of the community. Living with a host family allowed her to learn about Argentinian customs, and also gave her the chance to develop a close relationship with her host mom. They would go to the movies every week, sneaking in a candy bar and connecting over the experience and the language. Sarah was able to build similar relationships with others in the community, as well:

The guy who did my laundry around the corner…at this little private laundromat we would talk once or twice a week. He would help with Spanish in the beginning…was
really patient and understand and let me kind of speak how I wanted…help me if I needed it…seeing that progress over time…Being able to visually see and hear that progress with the same person was a great learning experience.

Kyle similarly spoke about connecting with others through language learning: “I would just sit with the lunch ladies…and they became some of…like, friends, mother figures…I always loved talking with them.” This gave him the opportunity to learn from their stories, creating a human connection to apply his learning inside the classroom to real life.

Through creating relationships with people abroad, students were able to make connections to their new environments as well as learn how to communicate with others. While Alyssa learned the value of developing meaningful relationships with her peers, Sarah, Claire, Erick, and Kyle were able to learn more about their host culture through observation, listening and relationship building with local citizens to create a network for support and learning, improving their interpersonal skills.

**Connecting with Academic Mentors Upon Return**

Three students discussed the importance of reaching out to faculty or other academic mentors to facilitate further development upon their return home. Ericka shared how she met with her Spanish professor upon returning to process her experience:

I met with her and we just talked for two hours…she was just processing my experience with me and I think that was really great because that was early on and that was vaguely when I felt like my friends and family were not interested in hearing, but I really did want to talk.
Sarah shared a similar experience, sitting down with her Spanish teacher from high school upon return, to talk about what she learned while abroad and how it was contributing to her experiences at home.

Additionally, students discussed the role of formal education and engagement with faculty. Ericka, interested in learning and understanding more about Nicaragua’s history, reached out to a faculty member in the history department:

He let me into this upper-division history class…and then I wanted to be in this US Latin American relations course, and then he let me into the history capstone because …I really [wanted] to continue to understand the history that was covered in the course …I think that really helped in my transition, having someone who understands more of the systems that can help me contextualize some of my experience.

Claire took the initiative upon returning to put together an independent study course where she integrated books and readings that had been suggested by her professor in Senegal and other concepts that had been addressed during her time abroad. “At the end of every book I did a reflection as to, what is this book about and how did I relate to it with my experience in Senegal. And then at the end of it all I did a bigger reflection”. She worked with her faculty advisor, saying that it was nice to have someone “who kind of understands that experience of coming from somewhere else…and then coming back, has knowledge of how the systems and the philosophies behind colonialism work.” This independent study provided her an academic environment to interact with her faculty advisor around concepts she had learned abroad.

I was so aware of what our culture is, so just having a space to reflect really deeply in relationship to books and academics as well as my personal life was super impactful and helped me transition back into an academic mindset.
Through connecting with academic mentors upon returning home, students were able to develop the skills to interact with others from an academic lens which facilitated their development and ability to make meaning of their experience more intentionally.

**Conclusions.** Students’ relationships and interactions with other people had a significant impact on their experiences both while they were abroad and upon their return. Interactions with local citizens abroad, the relationships they developed with newfound friends, and their ability to effectively interact with their family, friends, and academic mentors upon returning home also influenced their learning and development.

Through building relationships with host families, local shop owners, and community members, students had the opportunity to cultivate empathy and understanding of their culture in a way that can’t be achieved solely in the classroom. By building a community with fellow students who had participated in study abroad, these students described the importance of creating space for a shared understanding and engaging in dialogue around common experience. Students also voiced the role of family, friends, and academic mentors at home in facilitating support that gave them the stability to process their time abroad and to effectively transition home. These experiences, for many students, resulted in the development of interpersonal skills and development of intentional relationships and spaces where they were able to communicate their learning and their experiences with others. These connections also provided students with the space to reflect on their learning about other cultures and their role as global citizens.

**Cultural Awareness**

All participants in this study discussed the importance of their experiences in broadening their awareness of the world around them. The third superordinate theme that emerged from this study was students increased awareness of culture. Through frequent comparisons between their
lives abroad and their lives at home, including observations of cultural norms and customs, expectations and differences, students shared what they learned about both their own culture and the culture of the places they lived and where they traveled. These discussions also centered, for many, around the feeling or sense of obligation to act as global citizens, aware of their space in time and their privilege to share their experiences with others.

**Increased Consciousness of Culture**

Each student in this study participated in a study abroad program in a different part of the world, experiencing different cultural norms and social expectations with a different language, daily customs, beliefs, and values. Each of these programs exposed them to a different cultural environment than they experienced at their home university here in the United States. As a result, many students shared their experiences with recognizing culture as a concept, acknowledging its existence and how it impacted their time abroad.

**Recognition of Culture.** Claire recognized she gained an awareness early in her time abroad, stating “wow, culture is a thing that exists.” She further explained by saying,

As an anthropologist, I would’ve thought that this was something that I knew or I knew it inherently like being in another place…it’s not just a comparison, we [in the United States] also have a culture that we are living in and that we’re indoctrinated in and that we function in, but somehow are able to ignore just so we that we can function.

Claire also gained an increased consciousness of how cultural expectations of how people interact with one another can vary significantly from place to place, between Senegal and home, for example.

I had learned these prescribed sets of how to interact with people in Senegal and there’s like very prescribed greetings when you talk to somebody and that depends on who they
are in relationship to you and how old they are and all this stuff…and then here it was like, do we have those sort of like, this is what you do, or is it something that I’ve just expected to know or then realize that things like that we’re just not conscious of them. Her experiences in Senegal gave her a newfound appreciation and recognition about the components of a culture that she hadn’t stopped to think about in the same way before.

Greg discussed his recognition of the differences in both his host culture, but also in the various cultures of his classmates from countries around the world. As a result, he talked about how he felt it was important to learn more about the French students and other Europeans studying at the business school, saying that it was important to bridge any barriers that hindered people from learning from one another. At the same time, it allowed him to be curious, asking questions about others’ culture norms.

Being surrounded by all new cultures just allowed me I think to see the world from so much of a different lens…Being super comfortable say, is this normal in your culture? And then people asking questions about American [culture], me asking about Chile [for example].

Surrounded by students from countries around the world, Greg was able to see a variety of cultural differences and was given the space to ask questions to understand further.

Kayla’s experiences in China felt more intuitive to her, as she described learning about their culture and way of life not really as formal learning but “gaining an understanding of how they do things” in China that is different than at home. Similarly, Sarah’s recognition of the culture of South and Latin America was developed as she continued her travels outside of her formal studies in Argentina: “Each flight I took out of Argentina and then out of Chile it just felt like a whole new experience where I was thrown into a different type of Spanish, a different
culture, different landscape, very different histories.” For her, it was evident that experiencing the culture of this region was so much more than the Spanish language, but also encompassed the physical landscapes and the cultural and political histories of its people. These experiences show that learning about other cultures, for students, was not a formal educational process but an opportunity to learn about the world around them more organically.

**Cultural Difference.** As students began to share specific stories about their engagement with their host culture, it became clear that many of them recognized elements that were different than the culture they grew up in, and many showed a curiosity for learning more. “In Japan, there’s a really strong working culture. Everything there is so scheduled.” Kevin realized this more specifically when describing the difficulty, he felt in creating relationships with Japanese students. They would say, “we can only hang out Thursdays for these two hours, and then Saturdays on these two hours between work and classes.” He further recalled the simple differences between Japan and the United States in what side of the road they drove on:

I remember, when I first got to Japan, it was a really busy morning. And taking the train from the city into the bus. I just got on the bus so fast. When the bus took off because they travel on the other side of the road there, I almost had a heart attack [because they were driving on the other side of the road from the U.S.].

John reflected that these simple cultural differences provided him the opportunity to learn more than he had thought:

I think…every day activities would definitely be the [experiences] that contribute the most [to my learning abroad]…Seeing how Portuguese people would react to that [riding the metro and have people ask for money] and kind of thinking about the way that they
handle situations like that…seeing the little ways that people around the world treat their citizens and how they react to those social cues.

Both John and Kayla talked about expectations they had for what they perceived as differences between their host culture and their experiences in the United States, also around education. This stemmed from an idea that students in other parts of the world were more dedicated to their studies than those in the United States, but as they began to interact with students in the classroom, they saw that there were more similarities among university students than they had realized. John connected this perception to his thoughts about what European students were supposed to be like:

I feel like even when I think of Europe sometimes, and European students, I feel like I have some ideal view of how it’s going to be in my head…Like the enlightenment, and people in Europe are much more studious and everything. In reality, it was just, students that were essential living similar lives to students in the US and just going to lectures, and not taking as much as they should…and the teacher having to prompt them for answers…I learned that people of the same age kind of act similarly across cultures.

Similarly, Kayla realized that, just because students were studying at a prestigious university, didn’t mean that they also procrastinated in completing assignments or studying for upcoming exams:

The people weren’t as excited to study [at home] as I thought they would be at university. They were trying to push off the homework or trying to push back tests and stuff…and then in China, people were still doing that. So, I found out that, that’s a universal thing, people do that.
Cultural Recognition Upon Return Home. Some students reflected on how their recognition of cultural difference impacted their return home, some of them naming reverse culture shock as a challenge of effectively transitioning home. For Kevin, it wasn’t a significant challenge to return home after time abroad, but he did notice some dissonance: “Just the first couple of days of things looking kind of weird. Like when you go to Canada, things look slightly different, but very familiar… things look weird. You don’t remember what street signs look like”. Sarah similarly described this feeling familiarity upon her return, but hesitation to be back in an environment that felt so familiar, still wanting to be somewhere new, exploring new environments, and new cultures.

At the same time, though, Kevin described the challenge of normalcy upon his return in a way that felt stagnant.

It’s challenging that everything’s normal again…everything was so new and interesting and special, and every day I woke up…I would learn something…and when I came back, it’s like ‘now what? I study it, and then it just kind of sits in my brain, falls out over the year …It feels like you’re moving backwards, you’re not going quite in the direction that I want to be moving in.

The knowledge he gained in developing his Japanese skills and learning about Japanese culture was on pause as he returned home, wondering when he could return. John described a similar feeling of challenge in returning to ‘normal’:

I had a lot of nostalgia when I got back about being in Portugal…it was most challenging to just get back into a normal routine and to be around these people that I had spent a lot of time with before, then I had left for a long period of time and now I was back with them. It was definitely strange to try to do that all over again.
As Kevin remarked, John also discussed his thoughts about returning to Portugal to live in a culture that felt more comfortable and aligned with his new-found values. Greg reflected on his realization that the values of his host culture made him reconsider his normal, remarking that “at the end of the day they valued human connection a little bit more [than your educational goals]” which he had originally been much more important to him than they were upon returning due to this new point of view.

Ericka described the surprise she felt upon returning home in wanting to be connected to her experiences in Honduras and her Honduran heritage in a way that she hadn’t recognized before but feeling unwelcomed in Latinx spaces at home due to her mixed heritage. She described this as a new feeling upon her return that resulted from her awareness during her time abroad. Claire also described this feeling of newfound aware that resulted in internal conflict upon her return:

Reverse cultural shock is real…I came back and I…had never been aware of our culture. It was just something that I was in. And so…coming back…I was a fish that was taken out of the water and then put back into the water realizing like ‘oh my god, I don’t know how to swim.’

These experiences, both while abroad and upon returning home, provided students with increased awareness of culture and the existence of cultural difference around the world. These experiences encompassed educational differences in the way students learning in and out of the classroom, as well as basic cultural norms around communication, transportation, and everyday living.
Here vs. There

Participants shared observations and reflections about their heightened awareness of new environments and cultures in many of our conversations. While this included discussion about new cultural norms, educational systems, physical landscapes, and the people who lived there, their language consistently voiced comparison: how components of culture and place differed from the environment they were used to at home. Sometimes this was shared with the excitement of exploring a new place, and other times it was described as a feeling of being overwhelmed. For all, it showed recognition of their ever-changing environment and what they learned during their time there.

**US Influence on Host Education System.** Studying abroad in Senegal, Claire made observations of her experiences as a student at the university, reflecting on the dynamic between her fellow American students and the Senegalese students in the learning process. While they were studying at a university in Senegal, the instruction was delivered in a “very American style of ‘read this, take it home and then come back and we’ll discuss it’”, according to Claire. She reflected that the Senegalese students, as a result, were definitely getting a cultural experience from their perspective, but that she felt conflicted because it felt like they were a part of the classroom experience for the American student’s benefit. In returning to her thoughts about the colonial history of Senegal, Claire was very conscious about how her privilege as an American student played a role in understanding decolonization in Africa and how to best make meaning of that experience without negatively impacting the people she was learning from.

Claire’s experience in Senegal prompted her to connect the differences between the educational system in the United States and Senegal, reflecting on how it impacted the students in her class in engaging with the material.
In a Western school setting, you can read and discuss cultural differences, and how people interact with religion and each other, but when that knowledge is immediately applicable, and you can discuss it with the people it pertains to, it becomes tangible and therefore has so much more meaning.

This presented a unique situation where her fellow American students were able to engage in dialogue with the Senegalese students to learn about their lived experience, their cultural experience, instead of through readings or a lecture. As a result, Claire shared the impact this cultural interaction had on her overall learning about those that are different than her:

I am so much more aware of the ways that people believe the world is, especially in regard to Africa and the Arab-Islamic world, even when there is a vacuum of knowledge, and education in the history, beliefs and functioning of such a large part of the world. So, I learned how much I didn’t know (to steal a Socrates line) and I’ve come back realizing that a lot of people don’t know much, but the world still turns with a semblance of functioning.

These experiences in the classroom were a salient experience for Claire as it was clear that it provided her with new perspectives about how other cultures engaged in education and how her experiences in the United States were much different due to cultural norms here.

Ericka noticed a similar experience in how the Honduran educational system was impacted by the United States, with an emphasis on structure and prestige that conflicted with other components of Honduran culture.

There was a lot of emphasis around structures and rules and seeing that reflected in my family [in Honduras] …I’ve been reflecting about how these values have been
incorporated in places where there’s been U.S. influence …that might contrast differently with what the existing culture is.

This pushed Ericka to think critically about how her experience in the educational system in Honduras may have been different had there been less of an influence from the United States.

**Critiques of American Culture.** Sarah outlined an overwhelming sense of how different her experience in Argentina was then at home in the United States as she explained a trip to the store upon returning, describing how American culture placed such a high emphasis on capitalism.

I remember walking into like a garden store [after coming home] and there were lots of little knickknacks that I was like ‘this is so unnecessary’…so many options, but it’s kind of an illusion of choice too…I was just really taken aback by how many things we have here in the US that are unnecessary or at a very large scale.

When I asked her what she meant by “the illusion of choice” as a phrase, she said it was,

Somewhat a critique of capitalism and in particular the US where it is very individualistic and the idea that there are so many options in the US, so many different things you can choose from, different brands, but really, that’s usually owned by the same brand like Coca Cola probably…my experiences in Argentina…there were different vegetable stands I could go to and choose different tomatoes…but if you’re getting a tomato, you’re getting what’s there.

This experience made her realize stark differences between her time in Argentina and Latin America and returning to her life in the United States.
Ericka also voiced a critique of American culture upon returning home as a result of her experiences abroad. She had a newfound recognition of how isolated or self-absorbed people were in the U.S.:

I found that I recognized how isolated we all were…how isolated each people lives in, at least here, in the US but maybe specifically here…I felt like there was no structured time for community and people weren’t interested in hearing about my experience, and maybe that was a reflection of everyone just being in their own life but that really became clear to me…at one point I was thinking ‘wow, everyone’s so self-absorbed they don’t want to hear about my experience’ but then I was like I feel self-absorbed for thinking that. It…didn’t feel very connected or like I had a community in coming back. As she had spent so much time in the company of others in Latin America while traveling, learning about how the community was formed and the value of making connections with one another, Ericka was taken aback by the lack of community in the United States.

While students’ awareness of culture as a general concept increased as a result of their time abroad, there was also an increase in their recognition of cultural differences between their host culture, other cultures around the world, and their own culture here at home in the United States. For many, this increased recognition was a positive experience, but for some like Ericka and Sarah, it led to a critique of American society and culture.

**Global Citizenship**

In describing their experiences abroad and how it impacted their awareness of cultural difference, students began to reflect on their development as a global citizen. Many shared an increased understanding of their role in the greater society and how their learning has an impact
on their ability to engage other people in this learning process in order to better understand the world around.

Greg discussed the difficulty he experienced upon returning home, navigating conversations with his peers around the importance of understanding their role as members of a global society:

Hearing people talk, I was very surprised that I was legitimately angry at their lack of understanding of the rest of the world…Before I would have heard all those things that people talked about and agreed that they very much mattered and then looking at myself and how my viewpoint was so different…It was just surprising to see that dichotomy between who I was and who I am now…and then realizing how much like small things just don’t matter.

He reflected on this recognition further in his journal responses, discussing the change in his priorities around professional and personal success based on his interactions with people from around the world:

I have learned that my professional success means much less in the grand scheme of things. I had previously had a value system which put me above others based on future job prospects…I now have begun to value people based on how they live their lives, how they treat others.

Claire remarked an increased awareness and recognition of her difference during her time in Senegal as a result of her race which led to a call to critically look at her home campus environment from a new lens:
Being called out for my Whiteness every day was really hard. But I think for the first time I have to learn how to be white… I’ve never been confronted about my race so blatantly…it was very privileged that I was able to…but it was definitely challenging.

As one of only seven students from the United States in her program in Senegal, she was aware of how her identity as a White student played a role in developing relationships with her peers to become more aware of their privilege and obligation to learn about others and the world around them.

Being conscious of my race, I came back to [my university] realizing how that operates in this sort of context in a very white place…When you’re a part of a racial majority, you never really think about it…we had a lot of discussions as to like ‘what is self-segregation look like?’ and that’s something that’s present and why don’t other people notice that or why do other people do that?...it’s something that I am more conscious of and how I’m interacting with the people in the spaces that I’m around.

Claire also discussed how the regular blogging she did while she was abroad made an impact in encouraging others to consider various perspectives and viewpoints:

Blogging was important to me…there’s all sorts of bloggers out there in the world, but I think it was my way of making my experience larger than just me because I wanted to be like ‘hey listen, I’m going to West Africa, but I’m not trying to fix things. It’s not a country that needs to be fixed, and I know a lot of people…who were reading the blogs are people who kind of have those sorts of mentalities. So, I think in presenting those sorts of viewpoints, I was hopefully able to show them that there’s a different way to think about the entire continent.
Ericka further addressed the struggle she experienced in connecting with her peers at home as she felt isolated during periods of political unrest in Nicaragua while she tried to navigate her place as an outsider.

I think feeling isolated [challenged me while abroad], especially when there was political unrest…I didn’t feel like I had many people, or really anyone, to talk to, because I didn’t want to take up my own emotional space when everyone else was experiencing it more profoundly…and when friends back home didn’t understand.

This experience was especially salient for Ericka as she spent extensive time in our dialogue discussing the impact it had on her. Through her conversations with local citizens in Nicaragua, she gained an enhanced awareness of the political climate there and how it continues to impact real people there every day. This awareness pressed her to think critically about her role as a member of society, and the role of all people in keeping each other accountable.

It’s really different to sit down and hear people’s stories and hear how difficult it is when they don’t get a livable family income and…with the political unrest sitting down and really talking about people’s political opinions and living that as well…living that and also speaking with people about that, connecting with farmers and hearing their experiences… It really became clear to me that…with the political unrest in Nicaragua that it’s important to always hold your governments accountable and voice your opinions and that looks different of course with every community, but I saw a lot of people were taking part and voicing their opinions against the government, and I see that happening here as well, although I feel that I personally have been complacent.
Ericka, Greg, and Claire all spoke of the role privilege plays in one’s increased consciousness of global obligation. Claire reflected on conversations she had with her brother prior to returning home,

We had a lot of conversations…about like, so what is coming back mean? How do we use the amount of privilege that I had going there, how I do I use that in order to spread my knowledge…or make space for knowledge to be spread?

She additionally addressed the importance of educating others on the challenges of saviorism and thinking critically about what people think they know about Africa in learning about new cultures:

One of the biggest things was realizing how much I learned and unlearned about like the way that I think the world works…I’m still figuring out how to like interact with people when they’re talking about white saviorism where they like ‘Yea, I want to go to Africa and save people’ and I’m like ‘no’, I don’t know how to address that yet.

Ericka echoed similar sentiments in her exploration of what it means to be an ethical traveler, new to an environment that is not your own. “It [studying abroad] needs to be done really consciously, and there needs to be a lot of awareness about why we’re going and the privilege in going.” She described how this could be seen through considerations that should be made around various aspects of being abroad.

[The] ethics of picture taking, and just existing in a culture that is not one’s own, and even though I feel like part of being Honduran, it is partly my culture but also I haven’t grown up there, so there is definitely [a feeling that] ‘Okay, I’m kind of an outside in this space’…I think it’s really important in study abroad…taking a look at history and even
political situations because I think it provides so much context as to how things function
and work and people’s perspectives, and just gives you a way to connect with people.

Finally, Greg wrote about the value he found in traveling alone after his studies in
developing increased awareness of what privilege he holds as an American and how it can
impact others: “I learned to embrace a way of life completely apart from the privileged American
mindset, and began to understand that learning from and about others across the world is
something I’d be lacking in my pursuit of personal growth.” These experiences impacted his
outlook on the world, as well as how learning from others can positively impact his own growth.

**Conclusions.** Study abroad provides students the opportunity to explore a new
geographical location and a culture different from their own, creating space for them to, not only
learning about these new elements, but also how they as students, people, and global citizens
engage with the world around them to make it a better place. Students shared stories about their
increased awareness of cultural difference, how people in different parts of the world engage in
their academics, perceive safety and security, and embrace others. Taking this learning from their
time abroad, students reflected on the challenges they faced in returning home to an environment
that was once familiar with new knowledge and perspectives on how to navigate certain
situations. These experiences, for some students, led to a natural inclination to compare their
time abroad with their return home. While some compared cultural differences in how education
is implemented, others described feelings of concern around how the United States culture found
its way into cultural norms around the world that may compromise their values. Finally, students
took all of this learning about cultural norms and differences to express their increased
consciousness of the role they play in becoming global citizens, setting an example for their
peers to explore the world around them responsibly and ethically to create a more connected global environment.

**Conclusion**

This purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how students returning from a study abroad program make meaning of their time abroad as a part of their re-entry process. Through dialogue with the eight participants in semi-structured interviews and collection of journal responses, three superordinate themes emerged, following the development of the student during their time abroad.

Students experienced personal development during their time abroad which facilitated their growth of self-efficacy, providing them with the confidence to be successful students both abroad and at home. Students communicated the difficulty they faced during their time abroad, and upon their return. As a result of these challenges and others, students described the coping mechanisms they developed and utilized throughout their time abroad to overcome difficulty and make the most of their time abroad to ensure personal growth. Finally, students discussed their personal growth through learning both in and out of the classroom, acquiring new language abilities, defining their future career goals, and learning new academic skills to be successful students.

Students described experiences both at home and abroad that led to newly established relationships with others and helped them to cultivate empathy, fostering interpersonal development. Through intentional community building, students described the importance of engaging with other students who had participated in study abroad due to their shared experiences, enabling them to learn from one another and feel supported in their environments both abroad and at home. Further, they described the importance of creating opportunities for
developing relationships and connections with people in their communities abroad to facilitate cultural exchange, language acquisition, and personal support.

Finally, as students were exposed to new cultures and new geographical locations across the world as a result of their time abroad, many described an increased awareness of culture. This included an elevated awareness of concepts of cultural norms and cultural expectations, as well as a tendency to engage in cultural comparisons between their lives abroad and their lives at home. These observations, for some, resulted in a consciousness of the importance of global citizenship and the role that their American privilege plays. These observations, their personal reflections, and the dialogue they engaged in with the various people in their communities abroad and at home contribute to the meaning that students made as a result of their participation in study abroad.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this research study was to understand how undergraduate students returning from a study abroad program making meaning of their re-entry experiences. Mezirow’s (1978) transformative learning theory was used as the theoretical framework to understand how students make meaning of their experiences through critical reflection and rational discourse to facilitate transformation. This study utilized the qualitative research approach as it sought to explore the experiences of students further, understanding how they make meaning of why a particular phenomenon has occurred (Creswell, 2013). As qualitative research looks to understand an individual’s lives through descriptive stories, this approach aligned well with this specific study. This study utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This method examines how people make meaning of their life experiences focusing on interpreting the particular experiences of a small sample size to understand their meaning (Smith et al., 2009). Through individual semi-structured interviews and journal responses of eight participants, this research provided a wealth of rich data to further understand the experiences of students upon their return from study abroad and how they made meaning of their time abroad and upon returning home.

Through analysis of the data, three superordinate themes emerged with nine sub-themes. Students made meaning of their experiences which helped them understand their personal development in the areas of self-efficacy, use of coping mechanisms to process challenges, and their identity as students. Through their interactions with others both while abroad and upon their return home, students described how they developed interpersonal skills to make meaning of their experiences intentionally. And finally, students expressed their increased awareness of other cultures through their observations and experiences both abroad and upon returning home.
to facilitate intercultural development. This chapter will outline the findings that resulted from these emergent themes, answering the research questions asked throughout this study. This chapter will describe how consistent reflection and discourse facilitated transformative learning opportunities for students to make meaning of their experiences both while abroad and upon their return home, as well as the role of intercultural sensitivity development in facilitating meaning for students. This chapter will further discuss how to apply this research and learning to impact future practitioners and recommendations to implement change. Finally, it will outline possible directions for future research to make an impact in the field of international education and higher education.

**Student Experiences with Transformation**

The first sub-question asked in this research was, “how do students experience transformation upon their return from study abroad?” Throughout their interviews and in their journal responses, students continually addressed their experiences with transformative learning. Mezirow (1978) outlined the importance of facilitating the transformation of one’s frame of reference or perspective through critical reflection and rational discourse. As addressed in Chapter One, beliefs, values, and assumptions acquired through their education, socialization, and personal life experiences form a person’s perspective (Dirkx, 1998; Christie, Carey, Robertson & Grainger, 2015). Further, Mezirow’s (2003) theory points to learning and education in facilitating the development of autonomy and one’s ability to reflect on their learning to regularly challenge their perspectives and engage in transformation. Students described how experiences abroad challenged their assumptions, leading them to explore their values and beliefs to develop and transform.
Cranton (1994) addressed three domains of learning that facilitate transformation as a part of Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory: technical, communicative, and emancipatory. In summary, technical learning provides more subject-oriented learning around concepts and skill-building, communicative learning offers one the ability to understand others and effectively communicate ideas, and finally, emancipatory learning focuses on self-reflection providing the opportunity to create one’s meaning of perspectives based on their own experiences. Experiences shared by students in this study showed how they experienced learning in these domains during their time abroad and upon return home, which contributed towards their development and ability to make meaning of their experiences as a part of the re-entry process. Students gained knowledge and skills around language acquisition, content in their major, and learning about the histories and cultures of their locations abroad through the technical domain of transformative learning to develop personally. Through communication, collaboration, and connection with others both abroad and at home, students gained the ability to understand others, empathize with them, and effectively build interpersonal relationships in the communicative learning domain. Finally, through learning about cultural norms and differences and evaluating the importance of global citizenship to create positive impacts in their communities, students utilized self-reflection to make meaning of these experiences through the emancipatory learning domain. All of this learning helped students to make meaning of their experiences abroad to evaluate their perspectives and create opportunities for transformation effectively.

Critical Reflection to Facilitate Transformation

The second sub-question asked in this study was, “how does critical reflection and rational discourse facilitate transformation upon their return?” Students shared in their interviews and their journal responses how they utilized both reflection and rational discourse to make
meaning of their experience and facilitate transformation. Students discussed how critical reflection facilitated transformation through personal development, such as increased self-efficacy and adaptability, development of internal coping mechanisms, the ability to navigate challenging situations integrating into new cultures, and increased skills and development in the areas of their academic learning such as language acquisition.

These experiences were similarly addressed in the literature, as students utilized various transformative learning practices to develop these skills. Strange and Gibson (2017) researched how transformative learning theory informed students’ opportunities for transformation through participation in study abroad and experiential learning programs. They found that students addressed the importance of reflective opportunities during their study abroad program to learn from their experiences and potentially transform their perspectives on a personal level. Petersdotter et al. (2016) examined the impact of international experiences in increasing students’ perceptions of their self-efficacy. Research findings documented an increase in student’s ability to overcome challenges, gain resilience and flexibility, ultimately increasing their self-efficacy. Further, students have the opportunity to reflect on their successes and challenges resulting in an increased belief in their abilities to succeed in similar situations in the future (Harrison et al., 1996).

These findings align with the experiences shared by the students in this study who outlined feelings of increased flexibility and ability to overcome difficult situations, making meaning of their experiences to foster development and transformation. The first finding in this study shows that through their experiences abroad, engaging in reflection, students were able to learn about themselves through transformative learning. They made meaning of their experiences to develop increased levels of self-efficacy and learned from their experiences to foster enhanced
abilities to navigate difficult situations and adapt to be successful. The experiences described by
the participants are also seen in the literature, which similarly outlines the importance of
individual reflection and outside support to foster personal development during study abroad and
upon return home.

**Rational Discourse to Facilitate Transformation.**

Further addressing the second sub-question, asking how rational discourse facilitated
transformation for students upon their return home, students discussed their experiences with
connecting with other people to develop interpersonal skills which facilitated transformation. By
cultivating empathetic relationships with friends who participated in study abroad, their family at
home, and their academic mentors, students were able to engage in discourse that facilitated
transformative opportunities. Additionally, through these interactions, students were able to
make meaning of their experiences through increased language acquisition and cultural learning.

Mezirow (2003) outlined that dialogue and discourse encourage the development of skills
in the areas of empathy and listening. Students in this study discussed the importance of
interacting with others in developing their understanding of other people’s experiences and their
own experiences. This search for empathy was common in the literature, as students returning
from study abroad frequently seek out other students who went abroad to process their
experience because there is a level of shared understanding (Raschio, 1987; Wielkiewicz &
Turkowski, 2010; Simon & Kugelmann, 2014).

As referenced above, students in this study outlined the importance of these experiences
in helping them to make meaning of their language learning and cultural immersion, aligning
with the literature. Magnan and Black (2007) researched the impact of social interaction on
increasing students’ language abilities. In this study, they specifically looked at students’
engagement with native speakers, the effect of living with host families, and the need to engage in local events and reading of local newspapers. Similarly, Schmidt and Rinehart (2002) discussed the importance of program duration in the impact on students’ language learning. Three of the students in this study addressed the value they felt in participating in a more extended program of five months or more to make optimal use of their time to gain increased language skills.

Participants in this study discussed the importance of connecting with others, both while abroad and upon returning home, in helping them to make meaning of their experiences and learning. The impact of interpersonal relationships in facilitating understanding of one’s experience was also a frequent issue addressed in the literature that aligned with the findings from this study (Dettweiler et al., 2014; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010; Raschio, 1987; Gray & Saviki, 2015). As students rely on their ability to communicate with one another, engage in dialogue to process their experiences, and connect with close family, friends, and mentors, they can reach a deeper level of understanding or meaning about what they experienced abroad.

The second finding resulting from this study focuses on how students utilized interpersonal skills to make meaning of their experiences. While they were abroad, students used their networks to learn new concepts and skills to make meaning of new opportunities to facilitate future development. Upon returning home, they engaged with other students who had study abroad to create space for empathetic listening and support and reached out community members to effectively process challenges and successes that contribute towards their new perspectives.
Development of Intercultural Sensitivity

The final sub-question in this study asked how students’ experiences contributed to their development of cultural sensitivity. Through both critical reflection and dialogue, students engaged in transformative learning practices which facilitated an increased understanding of the world around them and the importance of global citizenship. This was shared in their interviews, as many students discussed observations of their host culture’s differences, better awareness of their own culture, and increased consciousness of their role as global citizens to foster an inclusive environment for all. Transformative learning theory addressed the importance of looking at possible opportunities for enacting change in society as it provides the learner increased ability to make meaning of their environments to consider new perspectives that foster both personal change but also societal progress (Cranton & Taylor, 2012).

As previously discussed, Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) described the w-curve where students face challenges upon returning home from study abroad through the process of reverse culture shock. Through this process, they also addressed the fact that students’ core values may change as they consider new ways of thinking and new cultural norms. This change in values may impact how students returning from study abroad look at their home culture, the political system, education, and social systems, and how they critique those systems (Tomlin et al., 2014; Kartoshkina, 2014). These phenomena, outlined in the literature, was similarly seen in this research as participants described how their increased awareness of cultural differences impacted the way they thought about their home culture from a more critical lens.

Similar to the perspectives shared by research participants around the consistent comparison of cultures, the literature also discusses the central role cultural comparison plays in students’ experiences through study abroad (Saviki & Price, 2015; Engberg, 2013; Raschio,
Students in this research further discussed their awareness of culture as a general concept, their awareness of cultural difference, and their ability to adapt to new cultures and integrate new cultural norms. These concepts aligned with Bennett’s (2009) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity which outlines the six stages of development one goes through from a more ethnocentric point of view towards an ethno-relative perspective. Douglas and Jones-Rikkers (2001) addressed the fact that students who actively seek study abroad or cultural experiences have the opportunity to benefit most from cultural sensitivity development. The participants in this study described their interactions with culture that would suggest they made meaning of their experience to increase their intercultural sensitivity. They described not only their recognition of culture as a concept but their ability to recognize cultural difference and the ability to integrate and make connections within a new culture to be successful.

Engberg (2013) and Hadis (2005) discussed the role of cultural awareness as described above in fostering an increased sense of global mindedness or global citizenship, suggesting that students were able to look at the world from a wider lens as a result of their study abroad experience. This can be seen in the research as participants discussed their newfound sense of obligation to connect with their peers at home and others in providing education and space for dialogue around their responsibility towards being a global citizen. These experiences required not only individual reflection about their role in their environment but also the importance of dialogue to facilitate connections with others, providing the opportunity for transformative learning and development for both the students returning from study abroad and those in their community.
As a result, the third finding in this study outlines the importance of transformative learning practices in facilitating intercultural sensitivity for students who study abroad. Through self-reflection and recognition of their own culture and interaction and dialogue with others to understand and connect with other cultures, students had the opportunity to learn how to interact and exist within various cultural structures effectively. These processes fostered a sense of global citizenship, wherein students felt an increased obligation to become responsible citizens in a global world that facilitates dialogue with one another to create positive social change.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The problem of practice identified in Chapter One identified a need for international educators to understand the experiences of students returning from study abroad programs to provide resources and support during their re-entry process to ensure optimal student development and learning. Based on the conclusions and findings addressed above, there are four primary recommendations for practice.

**Pre-Departure Support.** As students engage in critical reflection and rational discourse or dialogue differently during their time abroad, the first recommendation is to provide students with the tools and resources before departure abroad so they can engage in intentional reflection and dialogue throughout their experience. Participants in this study described how they used journaling, blogging, and painting as individual reflection techniques to make meaning of their experiences. Additionally, they described the importance of connecting with fellow students and community members while abroad to make meaning of their experience. Students clearly utilize different strategies based on their individual experiences. As a result, providing pre-departure training and support can help students to more intentionally use these practices and opportunities throughout their time abroad to optimize their time abroad.
As stated above, pre-departure orientations typically range from a few hours to an entire weekend held in the U.S. before a student leaving for their study abroad program (Hoffa & Pearson 1997). They typically provide educational opportunities, introducing students to where they are studying abroad, important considerations for packing and living abroad, and tools for navigating a new culture. These pre-departure sessions should specifically include discussion around reflection techniques, so students can begin conceptualizing what methods might be most helpful to them. In addition to naming journaling as a general concept, these sessions should include exercises where students can engage in reflective journaling, providing example prompts and normalizing the idea of journaling and other internal reflective strategies for helping students to make meaning of their experience. If students go abroad with a catalog of reflective prompts, they may more readily see the value of taking time and space to reflect on their experiences while they are abroad and optimize their learning. By explicitly focusing these prompts, and the accompanying discussion during pre-departure programming, around concepts of self-efficacy, self-confidence, and adaptability, as well as an exploration of personal values and beliefs, students will have increased opportunities to enhance their personal development intentionally while abroad.

Similarly, students should receive education around how to engage in intentional dialogue while they are abroad, before their departure, to optimize their engagement with others. This could be done by providing students with strategies for engaging with their local hosts. As many students voiced the challenge of developing meaningful relationships with local students abroad and the value of participating in empathetic dialogue, it is vital to provide education and support before students’ departure around these concepts. Specifically, this could include intentional discussion about how empathy can contribute to their experience and the importance
of cultivating it to develop relationships with others. This could also include conversations around how to maintain relationships with fellow American students abroad while intentionally stepping outside their comfort zone to create opportunities to get to know local citizens.

By providing students with these tools before their departure, it would address the importance of focusing on their personal development as well as encourage purposeful interpersonal development to provide students with opportunities for intentional learning during their time abroad.

**Facilitated Re-Entry Programming.** While some students explicitly discussed participating in pre-departure programming before studying abroad, many students indicated they did not have an opportunity for facilitated re-entry programming. Some did not know if there was such programming offered at their institution. As a result, the second recommendation for practice is that, in addition to structured pre-departure programming, students receive comparable re-entry programming. As outlined in the literature review above, participating in a study abroad program alone was not sufficient for facilitating student development and learning (Pederson, 2010).

Discussing their re-entry process, students in this study pointed to the role that their family and friends played in helping with their transition home. They didn’t necessarily address, though, the role of family and friends played in facilitating their development. It was clear, though, that many participants voiced a need for creating space to further process their experiences through dialogue with friends, family, fellow students, and faculty. Transformative learning theory addresses the importance of creating a learning-centered environment with opportunities for interaction and group-oriented process to effectively facilitate transformational learning (Mezirow, 2003).
Taking these findings into consideration, re-entry programming should be a mandatory component of a student’s study abroad experience. Ideally, this would occur within the first 1-2 months upon a student’s return, and then potentially one year after their return, facilitated by the Education Abroad Office on the student’s home campus. Immediately upon their return, re-entry programming should be focused on both reflective exercises and dialogue opportunities to help students process their time abroad. Through questions that explore their learning abroad, asking about themselves, others, and the world around them, students have the space to see where their experiences abroad may have contributed to their learning, so they can integrate that learning into their lives moving forward.

In addition to providing space for students to reflect and discuss their learning abroad, re-entry programming can also play the important role of helping students overcome reverse culture shock. Students voiced the need to be in community with other students who participated in study abroad programs to empathize with one another and share in their common experience. Re-entry programming has the opportunity to provide students a haven for feeling understood and validated in both their struggles and successes. Taylor and Synder (2012) addressed the importance of providing an environment that fosters trust and inclusivity to facilitate optimal development upon re-entry. To ensure an environment of trust, re-entry programming should be in individualized or small groups with others they know or who have had similar experiences or studied in similar locations. This will provide structure with specified questions like those addressed above to engage students in self-reflection in a way that feels intentional, safe, and supported.

**Engaging Faculty in Re-Entry Programming.** Based on the findings of this research, the third recommendation is to encourage faculty members to look towards developing
coursework or other out of classroom opportunities to empower students who have participated in study abroad. Three participants explicitly outlined the role of faculty in providing support and opportunities for them to explore their learning further upon their return. These participants actively sought out these relationships, engaging in independent studies, or reaching out to faculty members in other departments to enroll in their classes.

The Education Abroad Office should provide training and education to faculty members about international education. By informing faculty about the variety of study abroad programs students are utilizing, the pre-departure support they receive before leaving, the re-entry programming they receive, and the role faculty can play in helping students upon their return, the Education Abroad Office has the capacity to engage faculty to ensure students have a successful re-entry experience. This could be done through outreach presentations to faculty groups during their department meetings, or through optional training sessions throughout the academic year. Similarly, research participants discussed how they worked with faculty on independent study projects to further their learning. Creating mechanisms at the institution to make independent study opportunities more accessible for both students and faculty to initiate would also encourage both parties to continue their education and exploration beyond their time abroad.

**Increased Global Citizenship Education.** Participants described an increased awareness of cultural identity, as well as a need to develop as global citizens. The final recommendation for practice as a result of this study is to increase educational opportunities, both on campus and through study abroad programming, around the concepts of global citizenship and cultural awareness. Through intentional education about what it means to be a global citizen, students can engage in dialogue with one another on their home campus. Additionally, they can encourage
one another to think more specifically about how engaging in study abroad can broaden their worldview and how they interact with the world around them.

This could be achieved by providing space for students to engage with one another. Through the implementation of regular small-group discussions through the Education Abroad Office, or in partnership with specific academic departments or student services resources on campus, students could participate in conversations with fellow students, faculty, staff, and even community members. These discussions could be about current events going on around the world, bringing awareness to a particular cultural phenomenon, or how to make a difference within their campus or local community that has global implications.

Additionally, this could be achieved by encouraging students who have participated in study abroad programs to present their learning and experiences to the broader campus community through panel discussions, poster presentations or interactive dialogue to raise intercultural awareness of the campus community.

Finally, the Education Abroad Office and other campus entities could highlight and utilize current faculty, other educators, and outside speakers to engage the campus community in dialogue and education to increase awareness of global citizenship, intercultural awareness, and the role that study abroad can play in facilitating one’s development, broadening and transforming their perspectives.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

There are many recommendations for future research as a result of the findings identified in this study. The purpose of this study was to understand how students returning from a study abroad program make meaning of their experience throughout their re-entry process.
Recommendations for future research involve specific questions around how various factors impact students’ experiences abroad and how they make meaning of those experiences based on those factors.

Participants in this study chose to study abroad for a variety of reasons. While some focused on learning a foreign language with the goal of fluency, others were interested in study abroad as an opportunity for a change of scenery from their home campus. Some participants chose to study abroad because they wanted to learn more about their intended course of study, which included learning about another culture firsthand. Research exploring students’ motivation to participate in a specific study abroad program and how it impacts how they make meaning of their experience, would further inform research in the area of international education. This research would assist practitioners in advising students before they go abroad effectively, as well as during their time abroad and upon their return to facilitate their learning more intentionally.

Program length, or time abroad, varied for each of the participants. While Ericka spent 19 months abroad, 4 of the students in this study spent 4-5 months abroad, with the remaining three students spending 10-11 months abroad. The Institute for International Education documents that only 3% of U.S. students participating in study abroad programs participate in programs of 10 months or longer (Open Doors, 2017). This study showed that students make meaning of their experiences using critical reflection and rational discourse regardless of their program length. In many cases, there was very rich data from those students participating in 4-5 months. Future research exploring students’ motivations for choosing particular program lengths and whether or not it impacts how they make meaning of their experience would further inform international educators as they work to educate students on the benefits of engaging in specific study abroad programming that aligns with student goals.
Three of the participants in this study participated in an academic program on their home campus structured around self-directed study and reflective learning practices. While all participants in this study engaged fully in the study, the depth of material from those students proved to be extremely rich. Future research exploring how students in more self-directed learning environments make meaning of their time abroad would provide additional context to understand further the experiences of this student in facilitating transformative learning. Additionally, a comparative study to understand the differences between students enrolled in a self-directed learning program versus a more regimented academic program would also be interesting to inform if a specific academic program has an impact on how students make meaning of their time abroad.

I asked the participants what strategies helped them to process their challenges upon their return home, as well as what role others played in their transition, and the support they wish they had when they returned home to facilitate their transition. Many of them voiced an interest in assisted resources to process their experiences in various forms. Future research exploring what role formal re-entry programming plays in how students make meaning would continue this research to potentially provide recommendations for international educators in creating intentional re-entry opportunities for students to make meaning of their experiences.

Conclusion

The primary research question guiding this qualitative research study was “How do American college students returning from study abroad make meaning of their study abroad experience as a part of their re-entry process?” There were three sub-questions asked:

- How do students experience transformation upon their return from study abroad?
• How does critical reflection and discourse facilitate transformation upon their return from study abroad?

• How do their experiences contribute to their development of cultural sensitivity?

These questions were informed by the content collected through both written journal responses and semi-structured interviews conducted with American undergraduate students returning from study abroad programs between 3 months and 15 months in length. Through their interviews and in reading their journal responses, students provided context for what they experienced while they were abroad, and upon their return, and how it impacted their experiences and learning as a result of individual reflection and dialogue with others.

Addressing the primary research question, participants outlined the various ways they made meaning of their experiences which emerged in the themes outlined in Chapter 4. They made meaning of their experiences which facilitated personal development through an increased sense of self-efficacy, the ability to develop coping mechanisms to navigate challenges, and increased individual awareness of their identity and abilities as students studying in their various academic disciplines. Participants described how they made meaning of the value of interpersonal development by discussing the importance of connecting with others throughout both their time abroad and upon returning home. These experiences included the development of relationships that fostered empathy and support. Finally, students outlined how they made meaning of their experiences to understand both their own culture and other cultures around the world. Through cultural comparisons, increased recognition of American culture, and a sense of responsibility they felt to become global citizens, students described how their specific experiences contributed to these concepts, assisting in the transformation of their views, perspectives, and behaviors. These experiences aligned consistently with the literature which
similarly outlined the development of students in these areas. Research focused on the development of self-efficacy and self-awareness, academic learning development, the ability to connect with others, increased intercultural awareness, and development of intercultural sensitivity.

Students consistently addressed the value of both individual reflection and dialogue with others in helping them to make meaning of their experiences and process their learning, which aligns with Mezirow’s (1978) transformative learning theory, the theoretical framework grounding this study. Reflective exercises like journaling and drawing helped students to develop coping mechanisms to overcome challenges abroad and provided them the opportunity to individually think about their experiences to make meaning of their learning. Opportunities to connect with host families, fellow students abroad, and community members provided students with the space to learn about new cultures and ways of thinking which contributed to their increased awareness of the world around them. Further, the relationships they built and maintained with friends, family, and mentors upon their return fostered opportunities for active dialogue to make meaning of their learning abroad to facilitate growth and learning.

Contributing to the third sub-question asked in this study, students’ experiences learning about and living in another culture contributed towards their ability to make meaning of their experience, which provided them with increased awareness of culture. This awareness manifested in various ways for students: an increased ability to recognize cultural difference, the ability to understand how to integrate into another culture effectively, and recognition of the importance of acting as a global citizen that sees a responsibility to communicate and operate within a culture different than their own.
In conclusion, experiences shared by participants about their experiences abroad and upon return home showed awareness of their development in many ways. It was clear that participants learned about who they are as individuals, assessing their learning and how they interact with the world around them. At the same time, participants shared how they made meaning of their experiences to inform further their knowledge of the world and the diverse cultures that live around the world, and how their experiences contribute to their ability to be responsible citizens that share their learning with others. Through their stories, it was also clear that students must engage in both reflective and interactive processes to make the most of their time abroad, providing opportunities to evaluate their perspectives and how they have changed as a result of their time abroad. Fostering these environments during their time abroad and upon return home, ensure students are gaining as much as they can from their experiences.
References


Pedersen, P. J. (2009). Teaching towards an ethnorelative worldview through psychology study abroad. *Intercultural Education, 20*(sup1), S86.


Appendix A

Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Dear (Participant):

My name is Suzanne Baker, and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University. As a part of my doctoral dissertation research project, I am focusing on how students who have recently returned from a study abroad program make meaning of their experiences studying abroad as a part of the re-entry process.

As an undergraduate student, I participated in a year-long study abroad program in Germany. This program impacted my life in many ways and has continued to shape my education and career. As I look to research a topic that I am passionate about and look to make a difference in the world of higher education, I hope to further understand the experiences of other students in how they make meaning of their time abroad.

For this project, I am specifically interested in exploring the experiences of university students at a four-year public institution in the United States who have studied abroad for an academic year (10-12 months) and have returned home within the past 11 months. This will be done through the collection of reflective written journaling prompts and semi-structured interviews.

Here is what will be asked of participants:

- Respond to two (2) reflective journaling prompts within 2 weeks of receiving the prompts.
- Participate in 2 recorded one-to-one in-person interviews at a time that is convenient for you following your submission of the above journaling prompts.
- Answer semi-structured interview questions in an approximately 60 minute to 1 ½ hour interview.
- Answer semi-structure interview questions in an approximately 30-60 minute follow up interview 48 hours following your first interview.
- Respond to possible follow up questions to provide clarity or additional information as needed

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you would not like to participate, thank you for your consideration.

If you are interested in participating or have any further questions, please contact me at 530-828-2061 or baker.su@husky.neu.edu at your earliest convenience.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best,
Suzanne Baker
Appendix B: Reflective Journal Prompts

- What experiences contributed to your learning the most during your study abroad program? Describe these experiences. Why do you feel this way?
- Now that you have been home for a few months, what do you think you learned from your study abroad program? What facilitated this learning?
Appendix C: Informed Consent

Northeastern, College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigators: Dr. Joan Giblin, Suzanne Baker
Title of Project: Returning Home: Making Meaning of Study Abroad Experience to Facilitate Transformative Learning

Dear [Participant],

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You have been selected because you have recently (within the past 11 months) returned from participating in a year-long (10-12 month) international study abroad opportunity.

Why is this research study being done?
This research project focuses on how students process and make meaning of their experiences studying abroad when they return home in order to facilitate transformative learning and development.

What will I be asked to do?
If you choose to take part in this study, you will be asked to recall your study abroad experiences, as well as your experiences upon your return home. This will be done through both reflective journaling and two interviews, the first of which will be approximately one hour in length and the second will be 30-60 minutes.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
Journal responses will be sent to you via a Qualtrics survey. There will 2 reflective journal prompts which will require approximately 2-3 pages per response. Writing can be done wherever you choose and will not be facilitated by the researcher. The interview portion of this study will take place in person over the course of two interviews. As a participant you have the option of choosing a private location where you would like to meet. If you have no preference, this interview will be conducted in the researcher’s private office. The first interview will last about 60 minutes; in this interview you will be asked to answer 10-12 questions. The second interview will occur 48 hours following your first interview and will be approximately 30-60 minutes. During the interview, the researcher will be taking written notes. With your permission, the interview will be recorded. All of your responses will be kept confidential, and only the pseudonym which you choose upon completion of your reflective journaling will be used when quoting content from written transcripts. The researcher will be the only one with access to recordings, which will be destroyed upon transcription.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefits for taking part in this study.
Who will see the information about me?
The researcher, Suzanne Baker and the Principal Investigator, Joan Giblin, will be the only ones with access to the recordings which will be destroyed after they are transcribed. Electronic materials, including recordings and transcriptions, will be stored in a secure, password protected computer and cloud account. Physical transcripts, coding documents, field notes and memos will be kept in a locked bookcase in the researcher’s office, to which she has sole access.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?
Participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and participants may cease participation at any time. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?
Participation in this research is not expected to result in harm to participants and there are no special arrangements made for compensation or payment for treatment solely based on participation in this research.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you do not want to participate in this study, you do not have to do so. You can refuse to answer any question throughout this process. Once you begin to participate in this study, you may choose to quit at any time. Further, if you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have [as a student, employee, etc.].

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please contact Suzanne Baker, 530-828-2061 or baker.su@husky.neu.edu or Dr. Joan Giblin, j.giblin@northeastern.edu, the Principal Investigator.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, Mail Stop: 560-177, 360 Huntington Avenue, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There is no cost to participate in this study.

I agree to take part in this research.

_____________________________________________          ____________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part                                               Date

_____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

____________________________________________          _____________________
Signature of person who explained the study and obtained consent       Date

_____________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix D: Interview Schedule

Interview questions:

- Tell me about your study abroad program: where did you study abroad? What did you study while you were abroad? For how long were you abroad?
  - How did you choose your specific study abroad program?
  - What was your preparation like before departing on your study abroad program?
  - How was this preparation helpful or not helpful to you during your time abroad?
  - What is your favorite memory from your time abroad?
  - What experiences contributed to your learning the most while you were abroad? Describe these experiences. What do you think facilitated this learning?
  - What experiences challenged you the most while abroad? Describe these experiences. Why do you think these experiences challenged you?
  - What role did reflection play during your time abroad? What did this look like?

- Tell me about your transition process upon your return home.
  - Now that you have been home for a few months, what do you think you learned from your study abroad program? What facilitated this learning?
  - What experiences surprised you the most upon your return home? Describe those experiences. Why were they surprising?
  - What experiences challenged you the most upon your return home? Describe those experiences? Why were they challenging?
    - What strategies have helped you to process these challenges? Describe these strategies.
    - How do you think they helped you?
  - What role, if any, have other people played in your transition home from your time abroad? Describe specific experiences or examples.
    - Why do you think they’ve played a role in your transition?
  - What support or resources do you wish you had when you returned home to facilitate your transition?
    - How do you think those would have helped you?