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Nicole Leggett
University of Newcastle

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A Fish Out Of Water: Developing Intercultural Understanding Of Students In Higher Education

Nicole Leggett
University of Newcastle

Abstract: Experiential learning is a critical, dynamic and powerful element of learning in Higher Education. Often named international and domestic study trips or study tours, this educational strategy has the potential to transform the lives of students through engagement with another community or culture. This qualitative study explored the effects of experiential learning during a two-week study tour to Italy, involving two groups of students from an Australian University during 2017 and 2018. Students enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood/Primary) degree, who were in their third year of studies, could enrol in the elective course entitled 'Intercultural Understandings' which offered four international destinations. The aim of this study tour was to immerse students in the social-cultural facets of life in Italy as well as gain first-hand experience from educators in early childhood centres in Reggio Emilia. Dewey's (1938) philosophy of education that enabled the learner to not only learn from teachers and texts, but to learn through experience, underpins this study. In addition, a conceptual framework offered by Kolb (2014) provides a tool for analysing and demonstrating the potential of incorporating experiential learning through higher education. Findings from this study, revealing both intentional and incidental learning, support the philosophy that education is to not only educate the mind, but to develop more complex types of intellectual development necessary for effective citizenship.

Introduction

Experiential learning often defined as 'learning from life experience' is in direct contrast to lectures and classroom learning. Developing intercultural understandings in students means putting away the laptops and venturing out of their comfort zones into unknown worlds. Learning based on experience is an integral part for how humans learn and is necessary for personal change and development. Traditional pedagogical methods are often criticised as adding relatively little to students' knowledge since they ignore the role of experience in knowledge formation. Guyton, (2000) warns that reliance on lecture may be turning students into passive underachievers – those who possess facts but are unable to apply such information to real-world issues.

Learning to live and survive as part of a new and different, dynamic culture challenges one's own beliefs, values, biases, assumptions, knowledge and capabilities. Taylor (2001) cited this process of 'perspective transformation' enhancing learning and personal growth. The often stress and anxiety experienced from 'culture shock' encourages personal, professional and intellectual growth and development of a global perspective (Stone et al., 2014). This paper reports on a small group of students who together with one academic and

an on-site program coordinator (fluent in Italian), ventured out from the University grounds and encountered a very different life-learning experience in Italy.

Open to all students, this course attracted mostly early childhood applicants, as the academic focus was on the Reggio Emilian approach to early childhood education and care (ECEC). This paper presents a recent study where two groups of Australian university students over two years shared their experiences of becoming a 'fish out of water' in a new social and cultural land. Firstly, this paper explores the personal growth acquired through experiential learning and the perspective transformation of students. Secondly, Dewey's (1938) philosophy of 'education is life', is utilised as a theoretical framework for analysing the social and cultural dimensions of change through a shift in ethnocentric positionality. Findings are presented from data that is then analysed using Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model for interpreting data. This research suggests that providing students in higher education with real-life experiences through social and cultural immersion creates a new learning dimension, firstly through personal transformation and later through professional change.

Experiential Learning and Perspective Transformation

Keeton and Tate (1978) defined experiential learning as:

learning in which the learner is directly in touch with realities being studied. It is contrasted with the learner who only reads about, hears about, or writes about these realities but never comes into contact with them as of the learning process...It involves direct encounter with the phenomenon being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter or only considering the possibility of doing something with it (p.3).

Active participation therefore enhances the learning experience. The aim, therefore, is for experience to be transformed into learning and reliable knowledge through combining personal experience with academic guidance.

Perspective transformation involves a process whereby adult learners develop different frames of understanding and action as a result from a transformative learning experience (Mezirow, 1978). Taylor (2001) explains that perspective transformation implies not just a change in perception, but action as well, as it is not enough to see the world differently; one must act differently in it. Change occurs when learners engage in questioning their understandings and experiences by critically reflecting on the underlying meaning, assumptions, and implications (Brookfield, 1990). The process of learning through changes in viewpoints and actions allows a more democratic way of perceiving and interacting in the world. Critical reflection is central to emancipating learning. It is through study tours that students are able to examine what brought them to the point of questioning their positions, values and/or power of not only themselves, but also of groups or societies (Freire, 1970). Transformative learning provides an opportunity to free oneself from personal, rather than societal constraints. In order to encounter such change, it was necessary for students to be immersed in another culture to experience a shift in their ethnocentric positionality.

A recent study by Petersdotter, Niehoff and Freund (2017) found a significant shift of general self-efficacy in students after a stay abroad program and as a result recommended students enrich their academic and personal career through study abroad experiences. Other findings indicated significant improvements in writing, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity and research skills of students who participated in an off-campus experiential activity (Berry & Robinson, 2012; Chua, Morris, & Mor, 2012; Crotty & Brett, 2012; Falk, Ballantyne, Packer, & Benckendorff, 2012; Howard & Gulawani, 2014). While education

essentially provides students with knowledge, theories and methodologies, culture provides the framework for by which we organise our thoughts, emotions and behaviours (Neuliep, 2012; Stone et al., 2014). Overall, short term study tours not only provide students with academic consolidation of theoretical knowledge; they have profound effects on cultural attitudes (Lumkes, Hallett, & Vallade, 2012; Melles, 2015) and in the development of global citizens (Tarrant & Lyons, 2012). Successful education is to not only educate the mind, but to provide life-changing experiences gained from immersion in diverse social and cultural dimensions.

Education Is Life

The most influential thinker for experiential learning in the field of education was undoubtedly John Dewey (1973). Dewey (1973, 1981) once wrote ‘education is life’ explaining that what students learn and the way they learn it, should be rooted in society and social experiences. In 1938, he wrote *Experience in Education* in an attempt to challenge ‘traditional’ modes of learning with a more ‘progressive’ approach. Dewey’s philosophy of education sought to enable the learner to not only learn from teachers and texts, but to learn through experience. This fundamental unity is found in the idea that there is an intimate and necessary relation between the ‘processes of actual experience and education’ (Dewey, 1938, pp. 19-20). The learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied rather than merely thinking about it. Dewey later challenged his philosophical work considering the ‘cultural’ dimensions of learning rather than mere ‘experience’. Dewey came to the realisation that experience is culturally mediated. While he acknowledged it was necessary to draw out meaning from experiences, he observed that the reflective process was initiated by the strangeness of something outside of our usual experience (Dewey, 1973).

One aim of the intercultural understandings elective course was for students to be provided with a different experience to their own, through cultural immersion in the Italian lifestyle. What was learnt from these interactions formed a foundation for understanding how children are educated within their communities. Study tours offer students enriching experiences that Dewey recognised as essential for successful education as it is through lived social and cultural events that students develop ways of knowing. Through a process of decentralisation and disequilibria (or ‘fish out of water’ experience), students come to know and appreciate that there are other ways of knowing, living and learning.

Personal Transformation Through Dysfunctional Learning

Displacing students and immersing them in a new culture, and with relatively unfamiliar fellow students, provided opportunities for individuals to reveal parts of themselves they would not normally share. Hopes, dreams, fears were often discussed. Power reveals itself in unsuspected places and the extent of learning depends on how willing individual students are to be open and ready in the face of change. Experiential learning can be viewed as a type of ‘dysfunctional learning’. Dysfunctional learning grows out of the need to avoid feelings of powerlessness. Cell (1984) described this as learning that principally stems from obstacles students encounter in their struggles to become a significant person. In order to make sense of new situations and to act effectively in them we need to find meaningful interpretation. Cell believes that in light of that interpretation we get a sense of: “This is who I am, this is what it means to be me in this situation” (p.4). It is this personal transformation that is often missing from formal education. Experiential learning through

study tours illustrates the interrelationships between experience, personal and academic learning. Findings from research on two study tours from Australia to Italy during 2017 and 2018 revealed some of the hopes and fears of students as well as the personal changes and subsequent academic growth encountered. The next section draws on this research.

Australian Research: Student Study Tours to Italy

The purpose of the study tour to Italy, as one of four international options under the Intercultural Understandings elective course, was to provide students with deeper understandings for how social, cultural aspects of life in another country contribute to the formation of differing approaches to ECEC. The aim of the course was for students to:

1. Develop cultural awareness of designated Study Abroad country including some basic language, literature, history, geography and cultural studies.
2. Visit designated country and participate in activities with students and/or teachers in that country, usually assisting in teaching classes and also meeting and engaging with members of the teaching profession there.
3. Reflect on their experiences in terms of good teaching principles from an Australian perspective but also acknowledging how others may see teaching differently.
4. Reflect on the barriers and supports that influence intercultural understandings.

The above course objectives were not assessable through written tasks; in order to fulfil the course requirements, it was essential that students visited another country and participate and engage with the culture. This course was implemented in three stages. Stage one consisted of three pre-departure meetings during the academic semester for participants to get to know each-other, find out about the specifics of the tour, and to prepare for the culture shock that may occur due to language barriers and other unfamiliar circumstances. Stage two consisted of a two-week tour of Italy commencing in Rome, and travelling north to Florence, Bologna, Venice and finally Reggio Emilia. Visiting key destinations along the way to Reggio Emilia was intentionally planned in order to expose students to the way of life in Italy, with the aim for students to later make connections between the dynamics of cultural and social facets of life, with the early childhood educational approach taken by educators in Reggio Emilia. In stage three, on return to Australia, the students submitted selected diary entries for the purpose of this study, as well as a visual presentation as their final course assessment.

Participants

In order to participate in the study, students had to have completed at least 80 units of their undergraduate studies in the Bachelor of Education (Early childhood and Primary) degree program. Most students who applied were in their third year of studies. Participants also had to complete an expression of interest form for why they wanted to be part of the tour, as well as meet with the academic course coordinator prior to selection for an informal meeting to determine each candidate's suitability for the tour. The number of participants was limited to sixteen for tour one (2017), and eighteen for tour two (2018), as this was the requirement of centres in Reggio Emilia for group visits to children's educational facilities. Priority was given to students in their 3rd year of studies, who had a high-grade point average, and who expressed interest in learning more about the Reggio Emilian approach to ECEC.

Following ethics approval through the University ethics committee, students selected for participation in the tours were given an information statement and consent form regarding

their elected involvement in the research. Student could enrol to be part of the study tour and complete their elective course requirements without being involved in the research. Participation in the study was purely voluntary and had no bearing on the outcome of the course grade. The aim of this study was to investigate the transformative growth that occurred through students' experiences while involved in a study tour to Italy (Cell, 1984; Dewey, 1973; Taylor, 2001). Over the two-year period, there was a total of 34 participants in this research project.

Research Methodology

As part of the course requirements, students attending the study tour were to complete three assessment tasks. These included one written assessment on the Reggio Emilian approach prior to departure, a daily diary of reflections on their own learning during the two-week tour to Italy and a visual presentation of their overall experience on return to the University. The last two assessments were also used as data for the purpose of the research component of the study tour for participants who signed their permission. Participants were provided with an option to photocopy parts of their diary for submission to the researcher as well as submit material without identification. All participants were deidentified for the purpose of this study. In addition to the two assessment tasks, participants were given a pre- and post-study questionnaire to complete.

This qualitative research draws on grounded theory as a methodology to elicit rich data (Charmaz, 2014) on the process of experiential learning. In higher education today, experiential learning including internships, apprenticeships, study programs and various other forms of field trips, are becoming more popular as educational contexts are shifting to a global one. Accessibility through technology and various funding sources are enabling students and academics to take advantage of experiencing learning in another culture, while granting academic credit for a degree. The potential of higher education that offers experiential learning is to not only educate the mind, but to develop more complex types of intellectual development (Kolb, 2014). In order to understand the processes of experiential learning, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and model provides a useful tool. The following Learning cycle at figure 1 outlines the four stages that Kolb claims must be fulfilled in order for learning to take place. These four stages involve students actually doing the activity, reflecting on the performance, applying theory to the experience of doing the activity and considering theory and reflection to guide future planning for subsequent experiences.

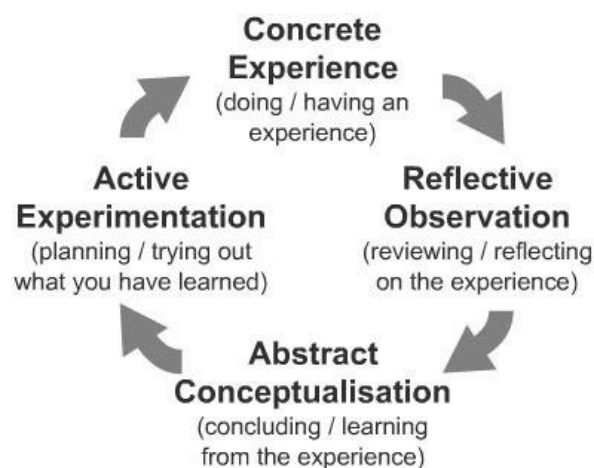


Figure 1: Kolb Learning cycle 1984

A growing number of intercultural educators recommend that formal intercultural education accompany ‘real world’ experience (Bennett, 2008; Guilherme, 2012; Jackson, 2015). In the experiential learning cycle, the learner gains concrete experience, reflects on this experience, engages in abstract thinking and then actively experiments, putting into practice new understandings (Kolb, 1984). Learners who engage in critical reflection in this process can experience personal transformation in response to significant events such as entering unfamiliar environments to live and study. Stepping outside of one’s comfort zone and experience ‘other’ ways of life also create a wider appreciation for culture through the act of decentralisation. In order to understand the effectiveness of learning from concrete experiences outside the walls of the University, Kolb’s experiential learning model served as a conceptual framework. Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Model defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p.38). This model is based on the following six propositions by Kolb and Kolb (2006):

1. Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes.
2. Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience.
3. Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world.
4. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation.
5. Learning results from synergistic transactions between the person and the environment.
6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge (p. 47).

Experiential learning involves a critical process in learning where students are better able to connect theories and methodologies to the realities of practical life. Research has indicated a relationship between experiential learning and lifelong learning, bridging a gap between theory and practice in a short time (Gomez-Lanier, 2017). Although the study tours were only brief (two weeks), students from these study tours were able to enact Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle through concrete experiences (immersion in the Italian way of life); reflective observation (keeping a diary) abstract conceptualisation (critically thinking about their learning, completing a post questionnaire and concluding their learning from their experiences through a visual presentation on return to the University). The fourth stage of Kolb’s learning cycle (active experimentation) is what will eventuate in their future teaching practices and what refers to as ongoing developing citizenship.

Participants for this research committed to participating in set social and cultural learning experiences such as visiting art museums in Florence, key tourist destinations including the Tower of Pisa, the Colosseum in Rome and Venice. In addition, students were

provided with free time to explore various cities and to live life as a local where possible. As part of their teacher training, one week was dedicated to visiting early childhood centres in Reggio Emilia as well as attending workshops and lectures by key academics from a local University. A limitation of this study was the timeframe for which to fully appreciate the process of how knowledge is created through the transformation of experience and the impact of this learning on participants as future educators. For each student participant, this learning process would have different timeframes. For some, learning may have had an immediate effect, taking place while on the study tour, whereas for others, the process of reflecting and learning from experiences may continue for many years. In this study, data was analysed using coding of key words that were categorised into themes relating to personal and professional changes as a result of lived social and cultural experiences. The next section will report on these findings.

Results

Findings from this study confirmed that real experience was necessary in order to meet the outcomes of the course. In addition to the set course material, it was the incidental learning and personal experiences that contributed largely to the process of transformation. Younes and Asay (2003) state that international learning experiences culminate through intentional (formal) and incidental (informal) experiences. They identify three themes of learning: educational learning, group learning and personal learning experiences. Students in this study participated as a group and were able to transfer personal learning to educational practices. As part of this study, students completed a pre-questionnaire. Students were asked: what do you hope to gain from this program? Some responses included:

The most exciting part of this program to me is the knowledge I may gain from visiting Reggio Emilia, the Municipal early childhood programs and the Loris Malaguzzi centre.

Going on this study tour would provide me the experience of visiting a country and exploring what it has to offer, being able to use these experiences and apply that to my teaching philosophy.

I feel as though this trip will allow me to expand my knowledge, as well as seeing these differences first-hand, which will be beneficial to my future teaching career as I can take these insights into my next journey.

I am motivated to explore this approach (Reggio Emilia) in depth to equip myself with the knowledge and skills to positively influence a child's learning experience in my Early Childhood career.

These responses reflect Dewey's initial thoughts of experiential learning and knowledge transformation. While formal learning experiences were planned with the aim at broadening students' understandings of a different educational approach to ECEC, it was the incidental, informal learning that had a significant impact. Students in this study expressed their personal growth from experiencing the 'strangeness of something outside of their usual experience' (Dewey, 1973). What they were not prepared for was the experience of 'culture shock'.

Culture Shock

For four of the participants, this was their first trip overseas and it didn't take long for them as well as other students to record their thoughts regarding personal learning and experiences with 'culture shock'. The following examples of dialogue from student diaries expressed some of these feelings:

- *Arriving in Rome has already displayed a vastly different culture and customs. The language barrier has already become an issue.*
- *I was very aware of the social and cultural differences as soon as we got off the plane. I noticed that everyone smokes!*
- *Knowing I'm in Italy, yet feeling like I am not, it is a strange sensation trying to get my head around being in another country – is this what they call 'culture shock?'*
- *I thought it would be cool to see the fashion capital of the world, but boy did I feel like a fish out of water!*
- *I felt very underdressed here. Someone even made mention to my friend 'where are you from' to which she replied with Australia and the man said, 'oh that explains why you look like that'.*
- *I feel like a child again, lost in a completely different culture and language and have a fear of speaking to people and saying the wrong thing – It's so confronting.*

According to Bodger (1993), participation in an international study tour "provides an immediate and personal experience of an event, place, or issue that cannot be duplicated (p.3)." From the student comments there is a sense of needing to be comfortable where security is found in the familiar. Surrounding ourselves with others who share the same value systems hinders learning from others who have a different view of the world, resulting in fewer options to participate fully in what Corey and Corey (2002) describe as the 'human community'. As uncomfortable as it may have been, as an academic and researcher, I felt an obligation to expose students to the diversity of the world, however uncomfortable it may have been for them. It is interesting to note the statement 'becoming like a child again' as it infers a need to re-learn; to learn from and through experience, different ways of knowing and understanding. Within this first stage of Kolb's (1984) learning cycle, it is evident that students experienced stress from being placed in a new culture with limited/no language skills for interacting socially with others. And it is often this very stress that transforms us.

Personal change

The difference in cultures became apparently clear as students walked around towns and experienced life in Italy. Perspective transformation accounts for personal growth particularly when stress, anxiety or vulnerability are present. Change occurs when students engage in questioning and reflecting on their own understandings and experiences. Throughout the study tour, students were asked to record their thoughts in a personal diary and engage in reflective observation (Kolb, 1984). Over time, many students were able to move from a position of vulnerability to self-efficacy. What were initially feelings of fear and anxiety were now turning to positive feelings expressed as 'surreal', or 'magical experiences'. The following statements represent some of the transformations in thinking and attitude experienced personally by students:

- *It's still quite surreal to be standing right there in front of something so iconic (statue of David. How lucky I am to be able to witness such beauty in real life.*

- *We caught a glimpse of the Coliseum from up the street which was so surreal to think we were actually standing right there.*
- *We went shopping and wandered around Rome. This is when we really noticed how beautiful and surreal it is to just get lost within the streets and culture but never feel stressed, unsafe or worried.*
- *Waking up in a different country was like something out of a dream. I woke to the sound of church bells ringing.*
- *The Sistine Chapel was so magical.*
- *Milan: We ventured out at night; the Cathedral looked magical.*
- *Venice, the city of love. It certainly lived up to its name, it's beautiful. It was just magical.*

Once students had developed confidence to interact within their new environment, it was evident from their diaries that they were learning about the social and cultural facets of Italy, in particular: language, food, alcohol, dogs, fashion, beauty, love/passion, coffee, social interactions, family, rules/cars, history, spirituality and pace of life. The following excerpts represent some of the statements relating to these categories:

- *Italians also have many dialects.*
- *Everyone is dressed immaculately.*
- *Dogs are truly treated as children, welcomed anywhere in the cities, shops, restaurants.*
- *Food, I'm beginning to understand, is key to their culture, it is the centre of their life.*
- *The pace is slow, and people are enjoying their food and the evening.*
- *Food and meals are about relationships. Taking time out to spend with your family and friends.*
- *Italians really worship coffee*
- *I have also noticed through walking around the town many occasions of locals who are talking to each-other during their morning errands.*
- *I really get a sense of the big Italian family feel and how important family is in the Italian culture (in a restaurant).*
- *Relationships play a major role in the culture.*
- *Cars: In Italy they don't have rules; they have suggestions*
- *It was fascinating to see the cars driving on the other side of the road and completely oblivious to the road rules and safety.*
- *I can't believe how insanely beautiful the buildings here in the heart of the city are.*
- *There is a rich source of history combined with colour and lots of people.*
- *The beauty in everything around us was so fantastic.*
- *Wine is enjoyed in a social way. Unlike Australia, you don't see people carrying wine bottles home to drink alone and noticeably in the hotel rooms there are no facilities to have a drink in your room.*
- *They spoke with passion about, not only their wines, but their region, and you could see the love they have in the way people spoke, their mannerisms and in what they said – it was fascinatingly interesting.*
- *We went into a church on the way back, we could hear the nuns singing hymns but couldn't see them. We stayed to listen with goosebumps on our arms.*
- *What I found amazing was how inspirational religion is in Italian culture. Divinity was the muse of so much art.*

- *It became common to see the homage to divinity in the simple beauty of men and women – “God is in the details”.*

From the student diaries it was becoming evident that they were connecting observational reflections of social and cultural life in Italy to the Reggio Emilia approach of early childhood education and care. The following excerpts express the passion, aesthetics, love and inspiration they experienced towards teaching:

- *Remida recycling centre: The lady who took us around was beautiful, you could really sense her passion and love.*
- *Educators at the Reggio Emilia preschool – I’ll never forget or take for granted their passion for what they do.*
- *Pedagogista (teacher)- she was so passionate!*
- *It was inspiring and I know I will take all of their passion and wisdom into my teaching.*
- *The visit has given me so much inspiration and excitement in what you can do as a teacher.*

At the conclusion of the study tour, students presented their final thoughts in their diaries and presented them for assessment as part of the course as well as deidentifying parts for the research study. From the excerpts presented, it was evident that many had entered the third stage of Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle. Through abstract conceptualisation, students were able to conclude on their learning experiences by demonstrating some of the personal changes encountered from the study tours:

- *Leaving two daughters: what an opportunity to show them how to be a strong independent woman.*
- *The whole trip has definitely changed me – I’m more aware of my personal boundaries and what I can tolerate. I feel I have grown personally into a better person and a teacher for my future ambitions.*
- *I have learnt a lot about myself and now view myself more competently especially regarding self-organisation and travel skills.*

From these examples, it is evident that these participants found a significant shift of general self-efficacy as reported in a similar study by Petersdotter et al., (2017). According to Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle, these students were also able to experience personal transformations in response to unfamiliar and new experiences. The final focus of this study was to analyse and report the potential of experiential learning to not only educate the mind, but to develop more complex types of intellectual development necessary for the future teaching careers. The following quote from a participant demonstrates the power of experiential learning for professional understanding and change. This student expressed the frustration of not being able to communicate in a different language with a child who does make the effort:

A 5yr old girl said to me “Oh right, you’re Australian. I can speak a little bit of English” (she said in perfect English). I tell you what, nothing makes you feel like a massive boofhead like a 5-year-old speaking to you in a second language because you’re a huge dunce.

The frustration felt by this student, amplifies the many reports that Australia is significantly falling behind other countries in language education. Despite living in a country that embraces global education, it is reported that less than ten percent of year 12 students are now taking a language (RUMACCC, 2007). 72 percent of residents reported speaking only English at home placing Australia at the bottom of the OECD tables for generating a bilingual population (2018). Students in this study were able to relate this to the frustrations a child who comes to Australia with no English must feel, stating “*to have so much going on in your head, but not the language to communicate it*”. This shift from an ethnocentric

positionality, provided these students with an opportunity to develop appreciation and knowledge towards children and families from diverse communities whom they may care for and teach as educators. Perhaps immersion in another culture as part of their degree studies for a longer period would also aid the problem of a developing monolingual society allowing students time to pick up some of the language.

Professional Gain

From this study, it was evident that through social and cultural transactions, students experienced personal transformation, and this ultimately led to changes in their professional identities. Gaining first-hand knowledge from experts on the world renowned Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education and care provided further opportunities for professional change, not otherwise found in the classroom or lecture theatre. The final part of Kolb's (1984) learning cycle is represented in the following statements made by students wanting to apply new knowledge and personal experiences to their future teaching practices. In the post-questionnaire, students were asked the following questions: Has your involvement in the study tour had an impact on you? If yes, how? What did you learn from taking part in the study tour? Following are some of the responses by students:

- *I have had an amazing time...it is a trip I will never forget. I have learnt so much about myself, Italy and the Reggio Emilia approach.*
- *I can take away many attributes that are going to help shape me into the teacher I want to be.*
- *I feel as though this is a huge asset to my own pedagogical practices.*
- *It was really interesting to hear about all this from an Italian's perspective instead of reading it out of a textbook. We got to hear it from the educators.*
- *These experiences, you most definitely could not learn out of a textbook or in a tutorial. Being part of the social and cultural life really helped me understand how they educate children in Reggio Emilia.*
- *For me I really noticed how education was approached so much more holistically and authentically. I honestly think that the Italian culture and way of life is reflected in education which is more community orientated.*

Taking part in these study tours has introduced students to the Italian lifestyle where they were able to learn from first-hand social and cultural interactions. From these experiences, students came to appreciate how the Reggio Emilia approach belongs to a culture and a people. One key learning point involved understanding that you cannot separate a child from his/her communities; and in this way, you cannot separate education from the social-cultural environment. What students encountered through their everyday life in Italy (such as food, aesthetics, spirituality, and families), was very much reflected in the educational experiences of the children. These encounters attributed a holistic experience that has not only enhanced their learning and personal growth but has developed an enriched appreciation for the holistic nature of educating children.

Conclusion

The focus of any international study tour must be on the personal and educational journey of students. Transforming students into effective citizens requires growth that can only occur through a process of separation and connection. Separating students from their familiar, comfortable surrounds, and guiding them through challenging social and cultural

contexts, connects students to new and different ways of viewing the world not otherwise explored. It is evident from the findings presented from two years of study tours in this paper, that many participants encountered life-changing experiences. The personal and professional growth acquired through experiential learning and the perspective transformation encountered by those students has been immeasurable. From these findings it is highly evident that it is this personal transformation that is missing from formal education. Providing students in higher education with first-hand knowledge through cultural immersion creates a new learning dimension. Faculty-led student study tours showcase how learning based on experience is integral for not only knowledge formation, but to learn how to participate in a human community – no matter what pond.

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