Transformative Learning in International Student Exchange: A Critical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

There is increasing interest in social work education in providing students with the opportunity for international study experiences, as short-term mobility travel, international field education placements or semester-long exchanges. This interest reflects the internationalisation of the social work curriculum, as well as the emergence of initiatives such as the "New Colombo Plan" in Australia. To support meaningful learning, such travel should be underpinned by intentional pedagogical approaches. Transformative learning theory suggests that learners develop frames of reference through which experience is mediated. These frames of reference may sometimes be disrupted by disorienting experiences, leading to reflection on the learner's underlying beliefs and assumptions, and a subsequent shift in their worldview. By linking a transformative approach with a critical social work perspective, international travel can become a rich source of such disorienting experiences.

This paper explores the ways transformative learning theory may be used in understanding and facilitating student learning during international experiences, and discusses an approach employed at James Cook University. The authors argue that the potential for transformative learning to occur is enhanced when preparation and facilitation of international student travel reflect the critical and emancipatory concerns characteristic of the critical perspective within social work education and practice.

INTRODUCTION

Global perspectives are an increasingly important influence in social work education, encouraged by universal understandings of the social work profession (Crisp, 2017). Efforts to develop an internationalised social work curriculum are driven by growing professional demands for social work graduates who are prepared to work across national borders with diverse communities impacted by issues that have global consequences (Bell, Moorhead, & Boetto, 2015; Pockett & Beddoe, 2017). Australian social work education programs have responded to these influences (at least in part) by increasing the opportunities for students to experience international environments. These opportunities include participation in short-term mobility programs, international field education placements and semester-long student international exchanges.

There are a number of compelling reasons for social work programs to develop international student exchange opportunities: for example, they contribute to enhanced student learning in the intercultural dimensions of social work practice (Bell & Anscombe, 2013); the development of a global understanding of social issues, such as gender inequality and environmental degradation (Bell et al., 2015; Boetto, Morehead, & Bell, 2014); the development of a sense of global citizenship (Trede, Bowles, & Bridges, 2013); and the opportunity to experience different worldviews and diverse ways to remediate social problems (Shwartz et al., 2011). However, immersion in an international experience alone might not facilitate the learning outcomes expected for students, and participation in short-term mobility programs may require a specific curriculum that facilitates students' engagement in critical thinking about their experiences (Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012).

Transformative learning theory, as developed by Jack Mezirow (1978, 1990, 2009, 2012), offers social work educators a guiding framework for understanding the ways in which international mobility can contribute to transformative experiences and student learning. Further, an exploration of the pedagogical strategies espoused by Mezirow provide social work educators with insights into curricula that can be purposefully and intentionally structured to encourage the transformative learning that is integral to the development of globally orientated social work graduates.

INTERNATIONALISATION IN SOCIAL WORK AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Much of the discussion relevant to the internationalisation of the social work profession relies on universal understandings about the nature and characteristics of social work practice and education. Core to these discussions are attempts to identify common foundations of professional practice, as well as fundamental elements of the profession that are universally relevant to diverse environments and populations. For example, a commitment to work with the poor and marginalised, a commitment to social justice, and a pursuit of human rights have all been identified as components of social work practice that "transcend national boundaries and give social work a global face" (Gray & Fook, 2004, p. 628).

However, attempts to develop a common identity for social work have inevitably confronted a critique that identifies the potential for this quest to become a poorly disguised imperialist project, where western paradigms and processes become the globally accepted understanding of what social work practice and education looks like (Gray, 2005). These universalising

processes ignore indigenous social work perspectives that reflect the concerns and realities of diverse cultures and locations. In particular, they potentially fail to recognise the impact of imperialism and colonisation and therefore risk perpetuating similarly destructive dynamics.

A less binary perspective argues that universal values may be identified at the global level, but these values can then be manifest in indigenous knowledge, skills and practices developed and employed at the local level (Yuong & Xiong, 2011). Trygged (2010), argues that international social work should be thought of as a critical modernity project, where universal principles are recognised and valued, but where complex differences and power relations are also recognised. Understanding international social work in this way opens up the possibility of exploring new and productive ways of exploring mutually beneficial international relationships, and fostering student learning that focuses on the development of a critical consciousness. These strategies become essential if international social work is to be more than an opportunity for "social work tourism".

Razack (2009) also advocates that teaching international social work in an equitable and just manner must be guided by a critical framework which alerts both educators and students to the complexities involved. She suggests that global literature must be included in curricula, postcolonial critiques must be integrated with knowledge and skills development, and critical reflection on the process of learning must be cultivated.

Social work education is not alone in examining the international dimensions of professional practice or in prioritising internationalisation strategies in the development of relevant curricula (Altbach & Knight, 2007). In Australia, higher education policy explicitly promotes internationalisation of the curriculum, and student mobility programs are an important mechanism to achieve the aims of this agenda. For example, the 2014–2016 Strategic Plan of Universities Australia promotes "an internationally engaged higher education sector that encourages students to include an overseas, particularly Asia-Pacific, study/internship experience as part of their study" (Universities Australia, 2014, p. 4).

Claiming similar goals, the Australian Government's "New Colombo Plan" (NCP) announced in 2013, provides scholarships and grants for Australian students to engage in international internship or exchange opportunities in the Asia Pacific Region. As a result, there has been a dramatic and consistent increase in the number of Australian higher education students travelling internationally as part of their university experience in the last five years (Potts, 2016). Given these general trends, it is unsurprising that social work education also includes a range of internationalisation endeavours, "driven by student diversity as well as by employer demand, the profession internationally, and by universities" (Grace et al., 2013, p. 121). These endeavours include the development and delivery of short-term international exchanges and international field education placements.

SOCIAL WORK INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY EXPERIENCES

Short-term international student exchange programs are reported as positively benefiting the development of social work students' intercultural knowledge, their attitudes to other cultures and their capacity to engage and work with people from different backgrounds

(Ahn, 2014; Trede et al., 2013). Despite these positive outcomes, the literature exploring student perspectives on international exchange experiences is limited, with much of the research focused on the description of international exchange programs and the perceptions, intentions and motivations of academics leading internationalisation projects (Bell & Anscombe, 2013; Trede et al., 2013).

While there is an acknowledgement that the disorienting nature of an international exchange experience has the potential to foster transformational learning for students (Trede et al., 2013), it is also argued that achieving such goals requires the development of supportive curricula built around the experience, enabling students to reflect on the exchange, during and after the experience (Gothard, Downey, & Gray, 2012). The importance of students' critical reflection on their motivations to participate in exchange, their place in the world and their role during the exchange has been identified, with the assertion that the absence of this critical reflection risks the reinforcement of existing inequities in North/South relations (Wehbi, 2009).

Often unspoken in these accounts of student experience in international exchange is the assumption that students involved in short-term immersion experiences are students from the Global North. Razack (2002) particularly addresses this when she questions the language of "exchange" highlighting the unidirectional flow of both social work knowledge and practice from the Global North to the Global South as a potential pitfall of student exchange programs. Transformative learning theory offers a pedagogical approach that can be used to develop and guide supportive curriculum, emphasising the importance of critical reflection, and which can be used to enhance the development of critical perspectives on intercultural experiences.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY

As demonstrated earlier, a body of literature now exists that describes the international travel experiences of students in higher education, and which attempts to document the learning that may occur through such experiences. However, less attention has been paid to exploring specific pedagogical approaches which may help us better understand the learning experiences of travelling students and to guide educators in the design and facilitation of meaningful learning. This certainly appears to be the case in social work education where it can be argued that enthusiasm for the opportunities presented by overseas placements and international mobility projects has raced ahead of the scholarly consideration of pedagogical approaches aimed at ensuring travel experiences go beyond "social work tourism". For social work educators, there is also the challenge of finding pedagogical approaches which are philosophically congruent with the values stance and ethical positioning of the profession itself. Transformative learning theory is an approach to adult learning that offers the potential to provide both a powerful explanatory framework for understanding students' experiences, but also to offer guidance for the facilitation of learning through an approach congruent with a critical social work orientation.

Transformative learning theory emerged from the work of Jack Mezirow (1978, 1990, 2009, 2012) and has been expanded by a range of other theorists (see, for example, Hoggan, 2016; Kitchenham, 2008). For Mezirow, the process of transformation, i.e., producing a signifi-

cant change in the way we see and make meaning of the world, is at the heart of adult learning. The notion of this profound "shift" is captured in Patricia Cranton's description:

At its core, transformative learning theory is elegantly simple. Through some event, which could be as traumatic as losing a job or as ordinary as an unexpected question, an individual becomes aware of holding a limiting or distorted view. If the individual critically examines this view, opens herself to alternatives, and consequently changes the way she sees things, she has transformed some part of how she makes meaning out of the world. (Cranton, 2002, p. 64)

Transformative learning theory is grounded in a constructivist interpretation of learning (Merriam & Kim, 2012). This constructivist paradigm is the basis for Mezirow's articulation of the nature of the meaning structures, or frames of reference, that form a central feature of his theory (Mezirow, 2000). These frames of reference, according to Mezirow, operate as filters as we encounter both new and familiar situations, selectively influencing what and how we attend to, and make sense of, these experiences. Built up over time through processes of socialisation and acculturation, frames of reference are usually acquired in an uncritical manner and may therefore reflect dominant social and cultural concerns. When a frame of reference becomes consolidated and entrenched over time, it constitutes a personal paradigm, or worldview, which becomes increasing less amenable to change. Fundamental to theories of transformative learning is the notion that individuals' frames of reference or worldviews often include distorted views of reality. Because of the uncritical and non-reflexive processes by which these structures are acquired, they often result in limited, uncritical, and skewed assumptions, particularly in relation to the sociocultural context in which they exist (Mezirow, 2012). Transformative learning, then, is the process by which such meaning structures are changed in the direction of more open, inclusive and integrative frames of reference.

In describing the process by which such a change may happen, Mezirow argued that transformative learning often occurs in response to an unsettling experience, or disorienting dilemma, which causes the learner to reflect on their existing frame of reference (Mezirow, 1990, 2012). In other words, a learner has an experience which is not easily accommodated within their existing worldview. Rather than simply ignoring, accommodating or rejecting the experience based on this incongruence, the learner is led to critically reflect on taken-for-granted assumptions which constitute this existing frame of reference. As a consequence of this reflection, the learner becomes aware of the limited nature of their frame of reference and begins to actively explore ways to shift their worldview towards one that is more open and inclusive (Mezirow, 1991, 2009, 2012).

Critical reflection and rational discourse are key elements of the transformative process. Mezirow argued that critical self-reflection of assumptions (including critical self-reflection on one's own assumptions and the ways in which one's worldview may be limited and distorted), was the most significant process in transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000; Taylor, 1998). Importantly, Mezirow also argued that such critical reflection on underlying assumptions and presuppositions is not a solitary activity but rather takes place, at least in part, through discourse, or "the process in which we have an active dialogue with others to better understand the meaning of an experience" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 14). In particular, Mezirow was concerned

with dialogue devoted to assessing contested beliefs, and argued that it is through such discourse that the process of transformation is promoted, developed and enacted.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THROUGH INTERNATIONAL STUDY

These elements highlight that transformative learning theory represents an important peda-gogical approach for social work education in general (Jones, 2009; Witkin, 2014); however, it holds particular potential for both understanding and facilitating the type of profound learning often associated with international study experiences. For example, Sim and Marvell (2015) describe international student field trips in a geography course which draw on Mezirow's approach to critical reflection to help students develop an enhanced understanding of self and place. Similarly, Choi, Slaubaugh, and Kim (2012) describe a student exchange program where students from the United States travelled to Korea, reporting that transformative learning occurred for many students, particularly in relation to their intercultural under-standing and the development of global perspectives.

Transformative learning has been identified as both an explicit goal and a potential outcome in relation to such international student experiences. Behnke, Seo, and Miller (2014) note that the transformations often described in relation to student mobility include characteristics such as self-improvement, cultural appreciation, and openness to diversity. Similarly, Intolubbe-Chmil, Spreen, & Swap (2012) identified transformative learning leading to increased cultural competence, civic identity, citizenship and community engagement as a consequence of engage-ment in international student travel. A focus on changes in personal and professional behaviours, values and attitudes as a consequence of involvement in an international teaching practicum is likewise discussed by Black and Bernardes (2014), who argue that intentional planning of transformative learning opportunities greatly enhances the outcomes for participating students.

Of particular interest to social work, the utility of a transformative learning approach has also been identified in relation to student travel in professional helping disciplines. McDowell, Goessling, and Melendez (2012), for example, discuss a family therapy course with an inter-national travel component. The authors report that the travel experience was personally and professionally transformative for participants, across a range of areas, including personal development and growth. Interestingly, McDowell et al. also note transformations relative to students' awareness of societal structures, including systems of power and privilege. How-ever, the important observation has been made that simply sending students overseas for a cross-cultural experience does not guarantee that shifts in worldview will occur (Roholt & Fisher, 2013). In their discussion of social work students involved in short-term international travel experiences, these authors emphasise the need for the use of intentional curriculum and pedagogical frameworks to support student learning. Roholt and Fisher also argue that facilitators have an active role to play in the transformative learning process, as "assumptions and commonly held frames for interpretation of these experiences must be challenged when necessary to ensure that issues of privilege and power do not remain unexamined" (2013, p. 50). They reach the conclusion that explicit pedagogies must be employed in order to support student learning and identify transformative learning theory as a means of deepening and enriching critical analysis and reflection.

Transformative learning theory offers a pedagogical framework with both explanatory and facilitative power, providing educators with useful guidance when it comes to ensuring that international study experiences yield meaningful and lasting learning outcomes. However, from a critical social work education perspective, there is an important tension between transformative change at the level of the individual learner and critical social work's concern with change at the macro or societal level. The degree to which learners' transformative experiences translate into analyses of power and oppression, and action for social change, is key in ensuring that international exchange experiences do not become vehicles for cultural imperialism (Razack, 2002). This tension suggests that educators wishing to draw on a transformative learning approach also need to be cognizant of the goals and concerns of the critical tradition within social work and need to attempt to bring these together in an effective and coherent manner.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

The critical approach in social work is characterised by an acceptance of social justice and human rights as philosophical foundations for practice, stemming from a recognition that some people are disadvantaged and oppressed through no fault of their own but rather as a result of the way that power, opportunities and resources are distributed in society i.e., "structural disadvantage" (see, for example, Hosken, 2016). Furthermore, it is recognised that this situation is inequitable and unacceptable because it denies people's inalienable rights such as those set out in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (Ife, 2012; Nipperess, 2016). Such a philosophical basis requires a dual practice focus of individual support and social change to address issues of oppression that are social and ideological in origin (Allan, 2003; Mullaly, 2007). Pease and Nipperess (2016) have characterised this critical perspective as "a group of approaches to social work that are diverse but share a common commitment to both personal and structural change" (p. 4).

While international mobility undertaken as part of social work education can involve travel to a wide range of destinations, recent evidence from Australia demonstrates that such travel is focused on countries and societies which are part of the majority world, or Global South, such as India, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, China and Samoa, amongst other locations (Harris et al., 2017). As noted previously, travel to such destinations often yields significant learning for students, particularly in the realm of self-awareness, personal growth and appreciation of cultural diversity.

However, without a critical orientation, even deeply transformative learning experiences risk overlooking the significance of issues such as histories of colonialism, the dynamics of cultural imperialism, the impacts of racism, and the ways in which global power relations operate to oppress and marginalise poorer nations and the communities within them. In other words, while transformative learning has clear connections to the emancipatory traditions represented by Freire, Habermas and critical social theory (Brookfield, 2012), such learning can remain an internal, individualised experience. A critical orientation would argue that this learning, while personally significant, may fail to recognise, analyse and challenge existing inequities, inequality, disadvantage and oppression. When learners are not equipped with the tools for critically analysing and understanding such issues, there is a serious risk that international study travel then becomes a voyeuristic exercise.

Transformative learning may indeed occur, but it remains an individualised, internal experience and therefore contributes little to addressing broader issues of social justice and human rights as they exist on the global stage. This is particularly significant in the context of international student travel, where a lack of awareness of power relations and the histories and dynamics of oppression may result in the reinforcement and perpetuation of unequal and oppressive relationships.

A critically transformative approach to international student travel in social work would address the issues raised above by bringing together the insights from transformative learning theory with the analysis and practices of a critical social work perspective. In other words, it would aim to prepare students for international travel by equipping them with a critical lens for analysing and understanding their experiences; it would facilitate critical reflection during the travel experience, ensuring that issues of power and oppression remain foregrounded; and it would ensure that there is a facilitated follow-up, post-travel, to reinforce those processes of critical reflection and explore the ways in which individual learning may be translated into efforts for social change.

A CRITICAL APPROACH TO TRANSFORMATIVE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCES

At James Cook University (JCU), social work staff involved in facilitating international student mobility projects have been developing an approach to student travel that reflects these concerns. Integral to the development of this approach has been the inclusion of student reflection and feedback on their international experience and the processes used to support and enhance their learning. Approval from the James Cook University Human Ethics Committee was sought and granted to engage with students in a range of feedback and debriefing strategies including written reflective feedback, specific debriefing focus groups and individual interviews. Students signed consent forms prior to their voluntary pariticpation in any aspect of the research project and could withdraw at any time. Ethical concerns include highlighting issues of confidentiality with students and encouraging them to discuss how this will be managed within the travelling group and the critical reflection opportunities provided for participants in the research.

While recognised as very much a work in progress, the practices described below give an indication of a desire to develop an approach to student travel experiences that is intentionally designed, critically informed and potentially transformative. The potential of the processes described is illustrated here through the inclusion of reflective feedback from students who engaged in the research processes described above in relation to short-term mobility experiences in either India or Thailand.

The foundation of the JCU approach to critical transformative international student travel experiences is the establishment and nurturing of reciprocal, sustainable relationships with international partners. This foundation is guided by a recognition of the power and resource imbalances which often exist between educational institutions in the Global North and South, and recognition that the history of international student mobility and exchange has often been one of unilateral benefit and, at times, exploitation (Miles et al, 2016;

Zuchowski, Gopalkrishnan, King & Francis, 2017). Social work at JCU has therefore engaged in a long-term developmental process of establishing and building relationships with specific partner institutions in Thailand and India. Reciprocity has been a key goal in these relationships and efforts are made to ensure that the benefits of the relationship flow in both directions. In a practical sense this is evidenced by, for example, social work at JCU providing financial support for Thai and Indian staff and students to visit Australia. This commitment to reciprocity and respect in relationship building is important in terms of modelling for students the intentional and critical recognition of power in international relationships. The impact of this is captured in the following comment from a student provided during a post-travel de-briefing group:

What has been most helpful to my learning has been the continuous contact with the Indian students and teachers during the experience. A once-off meeting only touches the surface of what there is to learn and it is quite overwhelming. Being able to continuously learn from these people has allowed us as students to continuously ask questions, to observe daily life and more opportunities to hear the knowledge that people have to provide us.

Preparation is an important dimension of all international student travel, whether for overseas field placements or short-term mobility projects and student exchanges (Bohman & Borglin, 2014). Evidence suggests that, in many instances, such preparation is primarily concerned with practicalities such as language, food, customs, travel logistics and risk assessment. All of these are, of course, important issues. However, they do little to equip students with the type of critical lens discussed above. In response to this, JCU social work staff have developed a set of intercultural learning modules that are a compulsory part of the preparation for all internationally travelling students and which must be completed prior to travel (Jones, Rowe & Miles, 2017). The modules cover a range of topics, including the nature of culture and cultural diversity, imperialism, racism, white privilege, intercultural practice and critical reflection. The modules make use of academic readings, video interviews, reflective exercises and opportunities for discussion, in an attempt to provide students with a critical lens through which they can view, analyse and understand their international experience. Importantly, the modules emphasise the need for learners to develop insight into their own cultural background and experience, and their own experiences of racism and privilege, as a prerequisite for meaningful intercultural learning (Jones et al, 2017).

As Simm and Marvell (2015) note, there is always the potential for international student travel to "remain an artificial and superficial experience hampered by the voyeuristic perspective of the tourist gaze" (p. 595). The critical lens provided by the JCU preparation materials represents an attempt to avoid such superficiality by creating a framework which can be used to guide reflection in a critically analytic and personally challenging direction. It equips students with a set of concepts that allow taken-for-granted assumptions and entrenched worldviews to be challenged in a way that can prove to be truly transformative, as they view and understand their travel experience through a critical lens. The following comment from a student provided as written feedback demonstrates the application of such a lens:

This experience challenged many of the cultural assumptions that I have made on a daily basis throughout my life. Being immersed within a population that holds greatly different worldviews

than I do, enabled me to better appreciate diversity and highlighted how I, as a white, educated middle-class Australian, hold a position of privilege and this awareness will enable me to question and challenge this.

The experience of student travel at JCU has included trips where students were accompanied by social work staff for the entire duration of their travel, and trips where students travelled without staff or were accompanied for only part of their trip. These experiences, along with the concern to adopt a critically transformative approach, have resulted in a belief that fully facilitated travel should be an essential component of international student trips. Such facilitation is not intended as a means to control what happens on such trips or what experiences students may have. It is recognised that often it is the unexpected and serendipitous experiences which provide the most significant opportunities for student learning. On-trip facilitation is intended to provide the opportunities for students to engage in structured and purposeful critical reflection on those experiences – with peers but also with an experienced educator/practitioner with the skills to keep foregrounding a critical perspective. The work of Morley (2016) and Morley and Macfarlane (2014) is instructive in this respect, exploring the links between critical approaches to social work and critical reflection as a process. Morley notes that "using a critical theory-informed curriculum and critically reflective pedagogical processes contributes to a form of transformative learning in students that inspires participation in collective social action" (2016, p. 51). The importance of critical reflection in developing students' critical consciousness is reflected in the following written student feedback:

I just think that you're critically reflecting about things, then you have to look at the challenges of what have made you a more open person. So these challenges and conflicts make you a better person.

Active facilitation during the travel experience also provides important support for students if, and when, they encounter unsettling or disorienting experiences. As Mezirow notes, such experiences can involve powerful emotional reactions including fear, anger and shame (Mezirow, 2000). Skilful support in such situations can assist students in resisting a retreat into the safety of existing, limited frames of reference, and instead encourage reflection on their own taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs about the world. As Behnke, Seo, and Miller (2014) note, international travel provides great potential for the experience of disorienting dilemmas, but these unsettling experiences must be given intentional focus to ensure that they are more than tourist experiences. This reflective process then becomes available for discussion with both facilitator and peers. The following student comment was made during an individual interview and demonstrates the ways in which active facilitation supports the processes of critical reflection and discourse which sit at the heart of transformative learning:

The group discussions during the actual trip to India helped me put "things" into perspective from a cultural diversity perspective and have a greater understanding of not simply transporting what we may know as a western culture to a non-western culture. I was also able to appreciate the importance of seeing how "things" are done differently when the core objectives are similar, that is, both Western and non-Western cultures have social justice at their core but what does that actually look like from another perspective?

A critically transformative approach to international student travel will also place emphasis on the importance of opportunities for follow-up and debriefing post the travel experience. This is particularly an issue for students who may do an international field placement as the very final element of their social work degree, returning home with no further contact required with their university. Experience at JCU has shown that students value an opportunity to look back at their travel, and the learning which ensued from it, and to engage with their peers in identifying those aspects of the experience which were most satisfying, challenging and personally significant. From a critical educator's perspective, this represents an ideal opportunity to evaluate the degree to which the critical lens that was embedded in the preparation process did or did not shape the students' understanding of their travel experience. Importantly, as is demonstrated in the written student feedback below, this is also an opportunity to support students in connecting their personal learning and transformation with the broader questions of social change and social transformation:

The overseas study experience to India has also had a massive impact on how I engage with different cultures. This journey has completely reconstructed the way in which I define "culture" and has made me question many aspects of my own Australian social construction/culture, especially in regards to white privilege, values and beliefs.

A critical perspective argues that emancipatory transformations at the level of the individual need to be translated into emancipatory actions in the social world. Similarly, transformative learning theorists have emphasised the idea that learning cannot be truly transformative unless that learning is then enacted in the social world (Brookfield, 2012; Mezirow, 2009, 2012). In other words, transformed frames of reference must be expressed through changes in what the learner does, not just in how they think. This translation, from an internal process of reflection and learning into an externalised form of action, is one that students may need support in exploring.

CONCLUSION

International student travel has become an increasingly common feature of higher education in the Global North. Interest in such travel, and the benefits that it may bring for student learning, are likely to continue to grow as the focus on internationalisation of the higher education curriculum develops and strengthens in the years ahead. This interest is certainly evident in Australian social work education, where a survey of the field reveals that most institutions are now engaged in some way with promoting and facilitating international study experiences (Harris et al., 2017). Given that the literature on international student travel reveals the potential for a number of significant benefits for students, this is hardly a surprising development. However, the evidence is less clear that such travel opportunities are always underpinned by a scholarly approach to pedagogy, or that they adequately reflect the concerns of the critical perspective in social work.

Transformative learning theory, as both an explanatory framework and a guide to educational practice, offers a useful means of developing our understanding of the experiences that social work students have while travelling overseas, and shaping our practice with such students to maximise the potential for critical and meaningful learning experiences. As a theory of adult

learning, it is highly congruent with the concerns and practices of social work education, emerging from a constructivist, emancipatory foundation and placing particular emphasis on the importance of critical reflection and rational discourse. When coupled with a critical perspective, concerned with foregrounding issues of power, privilege and oppression, transformative learning offers a powerful means of supporting students to move beyond the tourist experience, developing deeper and more critically informed understandings of other cultures and perspectives. Perhaps more importantly, such an approach offers students the tools to critically examine their own unquestioned frames of reference and worldviews, to engage in discourse with peers and mentors, and to test out transformed perspectives through action in the social world.

The experience of social work educators at JCU highlights the need for an intentional and pedagogically informed approach to international student travel. While the foundation of such an approach must rest on the development of equitable, reciprocal and sustainable international relationships, attention must also be given to implementing purposeful critically transformative practices while preparing students for travel, during the travel experience itself, and in the post-travel reintegration stage. Such an approach can never guarantee that students will experience critically transformative learning, but it enhances the potential for such valuable and meaningful learning to occur and helps ensure that such learning is translated into action for broader social change.

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