



# How Disorienting Experiences in Informal Learning Contexts Promote Cross-Cultural Awareness in Preservice Teachers: Findings From a Study Abroad Program

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## ABSTRACT

In this study we discuss how disorienting experiences in informal learning contexts promote cross-cultural awareness in preservice teachers during a study abroad program to Honduras. We used interpretive phenomenology via semi-structured interviews to examine how nine preservice teachers made sense of their experiences studying abroad. We found that immersing preservice teachers in informal learning contexts and diverse cultural settings other than their own fosters new socio-cultural insights in relation to their roles as future educators.

## Introduction

In recent years, providing multicultural education that promotes preservice teacher cross-cultural awareness has become one of the core principles of teacher education programs in colleges and universities in the United States (Colón-Muñiz, SooHoo, & Brignoni, 2010). This is evident in the increasing number of teacher education programs that have infused cross-cultural international field experiences into their curricula through study abroad programs (Cushner, 2007). International field experiences include formal learning through traditional coursework and

classroom observations in international K-12 settings. Informal learning refers to cultural immersion activities such as residence with host family, interacting with the host community outside school settings, free community schools, and cultural sightseeing (Tang & Choi, 2004). Scholars report that international field experiences in flexible and diverse contexts offer opportunities for engaging in race, class, and gender issues that have consequences for preservice teachers' understandings of cultural difference in the classroom (Malewski & Phillion, 2009; Talburt & Stewart, 1999). More specifically, scholars note that disorienting study abroad experiences prompt critical reflection on racial, socio-political, and cultural identities of participants, and is a necessary component for preparing teachers for diverse contexts (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011).

Building upon the work of Trilokekar and Kukar (2011), we report on how disorienting experiences through informal learning contexts promote cross-cultural awareness in preservice teachers during a study abroad program to Honduras. For the purpose of this paper, disorienting experience is defined as a challenging cultural encounter which makes study abroad participants uncomfortable (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011), and provokes critical reflection on how participants view themselves and others. Trilokekar and Kukar (2011) point out that physical appearance, cultural representation, and language differences are factors that can be a source of disorienting experiences for participants who have gone on a study abroad program to countries different from their own. By cross-cultural awareness we mean the ability to recognize cultural difference and worldviews different from one's own (Dolby, 2004). We will provide a brief literature review of research on study abroad in teacher education, the conceptual framework that scaffolds the study, the study abroad program to Honduras, the research design, findings from the study, and conclude with the implications of disorienting experiences in informal learning contexts for preparing preservice teachers to be sensitive to cultural diversity.

## Literature Review

Study abroad research indicates that international field experiences promote personal and professional development of preservice teachers by enhancing their cross-cultural awareness and prompting reflection on their own beliefs and practices (Walters, Garii, & Walters, 2009). For instance, Cushner (2007) notes study abroad among teacher education students shows a heightened sense of empathy for diverse learners, increases self-confidence and efficacy, promotes intercultural sensitivity, and increases awareness of personal biases in and outside the classroom

(Keengwe, 2010). Research notes that study abroad promotes global citizenship (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002) as well as sensitivity to local cultures (Talbert & Stewart, 1999). Research also suggests that the context of study abroad (Jiang & DeVillar, 2011), the diverse contexts of cross-cultural interaction during study abroad (Marx & Moss, 2011), and full language immersion (Shondel, 2009), offer a diverse array of cross-cultural experiences to teacher education students that are not possible in traditional field experience settings (Malewski & Phillion, 2009).

Many scholars emphasize study abroad as a rich context for engaging preservice teachers in racial difference, outsider status experience, risk-taking within the host culture, and reflection on social power dynamics (Colón-Muñiz, SooHoo, & Brignoni, 2010). A recent direction for research on study abroad programs for preservice teachers suggests that cultural dissonance, disorientation, and discomfort offer learning opportunities for preparing teachers who are sensitive to cultural and learning diversity in their home countries (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). Experiential dissonance caused by cultural, linguistic, and social identity differences impacts study abroad participants' perceptions and understandings of the world and influences understandings of the teacher-learner relationship (Shondel, 2009). In many cases, dissonance leads to critical examination of preservice teachers' identities, beliefs, attitudes, and practices, which are critical for the development of cross-cultural awareness as it pertains to teaching and learning. While the literature suggests that social identities might cause discomforting experiences during study abroad (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011), there is little research on how disorienting experiences of race, class, and gender in informal learning contexts promote preservice teachers' cross-cultural awareness. Therefore, this study seeks to address the absence in the study abroad literature regarding how disorienting experiences of race, class, and gender in informal learning contexts promote preservice teachers' cross-cultural awareness.

## Conceptual Framework

Trilokekar and Kukar (2011) report that racial and cultural identities that preservice teachers bring into the host country play a central role in preservice teachers' disorienting experiences. Delineating four categories for examining disorienting experiences during study abroad, Trilokekar and Kukar (2011) suggest the first step in cross-cultural interaction is "experiencing racial dynamics" (p. 1144) or difference in race between self and others. The second is "experiencing outsider status" (p. 1145) or the experience of being a minority or an outsider. The next step is "engaging in

risk taking/experimenting with new identities” (p. 1146) that leads to engagement through cross-cultural interaction, in spite of outsider status. The fourth step is “recognizing privilege and global power relations” (p. 1146) or when participants reflect on power differentials, and their own beliefs and attitudes about themselves and others. Together, the four steps lead to critical reflection on how identities are constructed, prompting participants to examine their own cultural beliefs and develop attitudes that are more understanding of cultural difference. Trilokekar and Kukar (2011) note that critical reflection promotes a frame opening, rethinking previous ideas, adaptation of new ways, and eventually worldview alteration. Keeping the four categories in mind, this study specifically examines how preservice teachers interpret discomforting experiences based on race, class, and gender in informal learning contexts during study abroad, which offers opportunities for changing their perceptions of others and enhancing cross-cultural awareness.

## Honduras Study Abroad Program

Developed by a faculty member at a Midwestern university in 2003, the Honduras study abroad program for preservice teachers is an annual short-term summer program. Preservice teachers attend pre-trip meetings on campus, spend three weeks in Honduras, and finish some assignments after the trip along with post-trip interviews. The program consists of formal coursework and observations in multiple educational settings, as well as informal learning contexts such as public rural schools, social events, and cultural tours.

Once preservice teachers are registered for the program, they attend three pre-trip on-campus meetings that give travel information, are shown a video of Honduran culture, and are given an outline of their coursework. As part of the program preservice teachers are enrolled in two courses, *Exploring Teaching as a Career and Multiculturalism and Education*. In the former course, preservice teachers explore their perceptions of what it means to be culturally different, the social, historical, and political nature of schools, and the overt and hidden objectives of schooling in US American society. The latter course, *Multiculturalism and Education*, aims at developing preservice teachers’ multicultural competencies by questioning their own beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives; examining how they view race, class, gender, and other differences; and critically reflecting on the implications of their perceptions for classroom practices.

Written assignments for the two courses include autobiographical reflections and journal entries in which students are encouraged to make connections between coursework, multicultural experiences in Honduras, and field observations in various school settings. An important component of coursework is field observations either in an elementary school in Zamorano or a secondary school in Tegucigalpa. In addition, preservice teachers visit three rural schools where they participate in project learning activities. By visiting multiple learning contexts preservice teachers experience cultural diversity and critically reflect on how inequity and privilege are enacted in formal and informal settings.

## Research Methodology

The qualitative research method that we used in this study is interpretive phenomenology. We designed this research to understand how disorienting experiences influence the preservice teachers' informal learning to promote cross-cultural awareness during a study abroad program in Honduras. Therefore, phenomenology was used as a method since it allowed us to "make interpretive sense of situations and relations of living" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 2). According to Merriam (2009), the phenomenological method is underlined by five features: (1) focusing on the experience itself; (2) how the experience is transformed into consciousness; (3) using particular "tools" to interpret the importance of the experience; (4) involving in-depth interviewing; and (5) producing a "composite" description that gives the "essence" of the phenomenon. Keeping these features in mind, we chose to conduct a phenomenological study in order to be able to focus on preservice teachers' disorienting experiences during study abroad and how the experience promotes cross-cultural awareness in the preservice teachers. The questions we explore are:

1. How do disorienting experiences in relation to race, class, and gender promote cross-cultural awareness in preservice teachers?
2. How do informal learning contexts during study abroad promote cross-cultural awareness?
3. What are the implications of disorienting experiences for preparing preservice teachers for culturally diverse classrooms?

## Participants

Participants in this study consisted of nine preservice teachers from elementary or secondary education majors enrolled in the 2011 Study Abroad Honduras Program. The following chart provides demographic details as identified by the participants.

**Table 1**  
*2011 Honduras Study Abroad Participant Demographics*

Name	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Language Other Than English	Previous International Travel
Sandy	Asian	female	Korean	Asia, Europe
Sara	white (Middle Eastern)	female	Arabic (oral comprehension)	Middle East, Europe
Kim	white	female	none	Canada
Amanda	white	female	none	Canada
Justin	white	male	none	none
Kelly	white	female	none	none
Ashley	white	female	basic Spanish	El Salvador
Kathy	white	female	none	none
Graham	white	male	none	none

## Data Collection

The study abroad program was designed to promote reflection through journal writing, discussions, course assignments, and structured interviews, which constituted most of the data. Data were collected in three phases. In the pre-trip phase a demographic chart was drawn for each year's participants, listing names, subject major, international travel, age, race, class, gender, and languages spoken. During this phase, in hour-long pre-trip interviews, all the participants were asked about their perceptions of Honduran culture and schooling, cross-cultural challenges they anticipate, and what study abroad in Honduras might offer them in terms of personal and professional growth.

In the next phase of the data collection, on-site individual and focus interviews were held. The on-site focus interviews were held weekly and for one hour

each, aimed at letting participants share experiences, and discuss their unique perspectives. The individual interviews focused on how each participant's study abroad experiences of race, class, and gender, disorienting experiences if any, how the participants were negotiating disorienting experiences, and their changing perceptions of self and other. During the post-trip phase, all the preservice teachers were asked about the impact of their experiences studying abroad both in formal and informal learning contexts. Other forms of data consisted of participants' course assignments and reflective journals, and researchers' observations of participants' and field notes. Interviews were digitally recorded, professionally transcribed, and stored in a data base.

## Data Analysis

We analyzed the data to search for the themes that come from preservice teachers' disorienting experiences of race, class, and gender with a focus on informal learning contexts. Data were analyzed by making links to previous literature, the conceptual framework, as well as in keeping with process phenomenological research as described by Creswell (2007).

1. Building significant statements from data collection methods.
2. Developing clusters of meaning.
3. Writing textural and structural descriptions.
4. Composing an essential description that focuses on common experiences of participants.

We use three vignettes from informal learning contexts to examine preservice teachers' disorienting experiences of race, class, and gender, respectively.

### *Vignette one: Sara's engagement with race.*

Sara is a female preservice teacher of Middle Eastern background with light skin, grew up in the US Midwest, identifies as white, upper-middle class, US American, and has travelled to Europe and the Middle East. In this vignette taken from a post-trip interview, Sara speaks of disorienting experiences she experienced when interacting with local Hondurans in relation to her race/ethnic identity and how the experience prompted reflection on her racial identity in the US.

*Interviewer: Having a Middle Eastern background, did that influence your experience with your peers in any way?*

*Sara: I don't think so. Because, I'm still American like they are. I grew up here (US) and I still have the same ideas that they do...*

*Interviewer: So how was it with people in Honduras?*

*Sara: They (Hondurans) thought I was Honduran. So they tried to speak Spanish to me a lot. And I had no idea what they were saying. So that was a problem...*

*Because I have dark hair like they do. And I have a tan, so I had the same color skin. I mean even people here in America think that I'm Hispanic. And, they (US Americans) try to speak Spanish to me as if they don't understand English. So in Honduras if somebody was trying to communicate with our group they would pick me first to try and talk to. And I'm just like no. I'm not the one you want to try and talk to (laughs)... It's not a good decision.*

Born and raised in the US Midwest, Sara perceives herself an “American,” “just another” one of her white peers. As the literature suggests, social interaction in informal settings in Honduras outside the comfort zone of her home country provided her a context in which to question racial similarities and confront differences that set her apart not only from other Hondurans but also her US American peers. Revealing a previous sense of color blindness towards the construction of her own identity, Sara realizes that others view her as non-white because of her skin color. As Trilokekar and Kukar (2011) suggest, at first, Sara encounters experiencing racial dynamics when Hondurans speak to her in Spanish and identify with her skin color. She in turn tries to distance herself from Hondurans, emphasizing that she is different from them because of not knowing Spanish. Her “experiencing outsider status” leads to “experimenting with new identities” by recognizing that her previous affiliation with White “Americanness” was questionable. Further, she reflects on the complex social construction of identity to recognize “privilege and global power relations” when she realizes her middle-class status had kept her color-blind to racial difference. For Sara, recognizing the construction of race promotes new meaning and disrupted her previously assumed similarities with peers, in turn heightening her cross-cultural awareness in terms of the nuances of racial power and privilege.

*Vignette two: Kim's engagement with social class.*

Kim is a white female preservice teacher self-identified as upper middle class. During her experiences in Honduras she observed the vast differences in wealth within Honduras and compared to the US. In this vignette, taken from a post-trip interview, Kim recalls her visit to the orphanage in contrast to her brother's cruise trip to the Honduran coast.



*Actually my brother and his friends were in Honduras at the same time as I was, but they were on a cruise, and they stopped at one of the beaches. We returned home at the same time, so we were doing our slide shows for the family. Here were his pictures, ocean, beaches, trees, drinking and everything. Here are my pictures with little kids, the orphanage. It was weird... from the same home and gone to the same country but having completely different experiences. He and his friends always say that Honduras is one of their favorite places because they only saw the beaches, but for me, I learned about the kids in the orphanage and their lives...*

While Kim's experiences gave her a glimpse of economic stratification within Honduras, she emphasized how Honduras was represented in distinctive ways to her and her brother. This gave her a deeper understanding of how representations of people and places influence the meanings that become attached to them. It was of great interest to Kim as to how the process of meaning making occurred. Kim's analysis of poverty was understood in the context of economic realities in Honduras. Her disorienting experience came from comparing her visit to the orphanage with the artificially constructed reality of her brother's experience that camouflaged the poverty of people in Honduras. Overall, the discomfort in realizing how her brother was isolated from the parts of Honduras she experienced raised some awareness of how perceptions are socially constructed and the need to analyze the nature of poverty and social class.

*Vignette three: Amanda's engagement with gender issues.*

The racialized "other" and realities of poverty accentuate gendered relations for contexts unfamiliar to US preservice teachers. Awareness of gender roles is heightened, but seldom critically connects back to a participant's home context. Amanda is a female preservice teacher, self-identified as white middle class, raised in a "traditional" nuclear family in the US Midwest. This vignette is taken from a focus interview in which Amanda recounts her interaction with a male tour guide at a waterfall during a cultural tour of Copan that provoked Amanda to confront gender issues that she had never experienced or acknowledged.

*Here is the picture of the waterfall that we went to and four of us went behind the waterfall and jumped off...which was really fun. And that was the only time that I saw discrimination between female and male. There was a male that...got to jump off a rock that was a foot higher than where I was allowed to jump off. I thought it was really interesting just because...like I was stepping on the rock and going to jump off but then the guy [tour guide] objected saying, "no, no you need to be on the ground."*

This was a disorienting experience for Amanda as she felt discriminated against because of her gendered identity. During the discussion, other students like Sara noted that male teachers garnered more respect from students at the school in Honduras. Honduras provided the context for Amanda to question gendered norms in Honduras and the US. Amanda signaled discomfort at social norms, making her realize that gender as a construct is different in different parts of the world, and that the US is not the universal norm. At the same time, while Amanda comments on gender roles in Honduras, she uncritically assumes US social norms without truly questioning gender in her home country. While she experiences some form of cross-cultural awareness, there is scope for further critical engagement with the power dynamics of gender.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of our study was to examine how disorienting experiences in informal learning contexts promote cross-cultural awareness in preservice teachers during a study abroad program to Honduras. What we found is that informal learning contexts offered opportunities to preservice teachers for experiencing life in social, cultural, and economic contexts which were, in some cases, far removed from their lived realities in the US. Consistent with study abroad in teacher education literature about preservice teachers' cross-cultural experiences related to their identity(ies), all the participants in our study expressed the initial desire to study abroad to experience "something different" within a culture other their own, which suggests they were hoping to experience difference. In encountering social class, preservice teachers consistently expressed feeling driven to "do something" about the poverty, and acknowledging positions of privilege coming from the United States. Many preservice teachers expressed revelatory experiences throughout their time abroad as contributing to changes in how they view poverty in the US, at one end of a revelation-spectrum, and developing a more nuanced educational worldview at the other end.

After studying abroad, most preservice teachers were motivated to work with culturally diverse students; however, one of the participants, Graham, was the exception. While Graham admitted that his experiences during study abroad have given him a deeper understanding of his own identity and helped him to figure out his professional interests, he felt that he was not suited to developing teaching as a career. He added that his experiences in Honduras provided insights into the role of teachers in the classroom, teachers' ability to work with culturally diverse students,

and that he needed more exposure and training in attending to the linguistic, social, cultural, and academic needs of students. Graham found the prospect of teaching in culturally diverse classrooms challenging and changed his academic major to explore another profession, besides teacher education. Study abroad offers participants opportunities for self-reflection, exploring their own identities vis-à-vis cultural difference, and developing multicultural competencies; at the same time, Graham evidences unintended consequences of study abroad (Phillion, Malewski, Rodriguez, Shirley, Kulago, & Bulington, 2008). On the one hand, his decision to leave teacher education is a loss for the program, on the other, as Graham noted, his study abroad experiences have made him aware of the challenges of working in culturally diverse environments, an insight that will continue to benefit him in his personal and professional life.

All the preservice teachers, including Graham, claimed that their study abroad experience led them to question assumptions they made about what they called “poor countries” and people living in them. Their “revelations” or increased cross-cultural awareness focused on structural issues in Honduras regarding poverty and includes an opaque understanding of what it means to be a teacher within that context and how that meaning transfers to teachers in the US teaching students who come from different race, socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds than their own. More importantly, preservice teachers recognized their own assumptions about race, class, and gender in the US, how their own identities are socially constructed, and the impact of teachers’ identities in classroom practice.

Beyond the literature, we found that immersing preservice teachers in cultural contexts different from their own fosters new socio-cultural insights in relation to their roles as future educators and professionals. All the participants in this study came from a relative position of privilege within the United States; their perspectives were challenged by their disorienting experiences, leading them to analyze how race, class, and gender impact teachers and students. Eight of the preservice teachers expressed a desire to “work” with “underprivileged” children and students in the US through organizations such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters or as summer camp counselors for “underprivileged” children, with a focus on activities outside formal educational structures. All eight indicated that their disorienting experiences informed their philosophy of teaching, and all nine participants were motivated to being less materialistic in their lifestyles, and to live with greater appreciation for their social situations.

In conclusion we posit the following:

- Study abroad programs offer new cultural insights to preservice teachers and enhance their cross-cultural awareness.
- Study abroad programs infused with informal learning experiences in diverse out of classroom contexts offer opportunities that promote cross-cultural awareness by engaging preservice teachers with issues of race, class, and gender within the US.
- Extensive and varied disorienting experiences may better provoke preservice teachers to challenge their assumptions about race, class, and gender differences in the US.
- Study abroad programs infused with disorienting experiences in informal learning contexts have implications for preparing teachers who are sensitive to cultural and academic diversity in and outside the classroom.

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