Study abroad is associated with transformative experiences—that is, events that lead to a change in how a person sees the world. In this study the authors sought to ascertain whether there are common themes of transformative experiences and whether these transformations are related to particular types of study abroad programs. Principles guiding the authors’ research and interview coding scheme are informed by study abroad and transformative education literature.

Study abroad can be categorized in three types: instructor-led topic/subject focused, engagement activity instructor-led, and immersion through university semester enrollment. The project engaged debates about whether a short-term faculty-led study abroad is as transformative as a full immersion semester at a foreign institution, and whether an international community engagement study abroad experience fosters transformations different from or similar to the other two types.

Interview Survey and Coding

The authors developed a pilot survey instrument and conducted recorded interviews to check internal consistency in delivery and question response. Subsequently, a random number process was used to select from 303 student participants in College of Agriculture and Natural Resources study abroad programs between 2008 and 2010. The 15 interviews, five for each type, averaged 20 minutes each. The open-ended interview questions asked participants to discuss their experience, highlighting significant, transformative, and resonant moments. Pilot interviews were coded by four researchers to verify and clarify codes and check inter-rater reliability. Final interviews were coded by two researchers with agreement on final codes. Interviews were coded for participants’ articulation of epistemic learning (respondent articulated shift in understanding where and how learning happens), relational learning (respondent indicated shift in understanding nationality,
group, or self because of their connectedness), personal adaptive learning (respondent indicated shift in image of self as a moral actor with the capacity to respond to challenges), philosophical learning (respondent indicated a shift in definitions of foundational definitions of being), and skills development (respondent articulated skills and attitudes useful for study abroad experience).

**Findings**

In instructor-led topic/subject focused programs and immersion-university semester enrollment programs, epistemic and philosophical learning transformations are the most cited, whereas in engagement activity instructor-led programs, personal adaptive and epistemic learning transformations are the most cited. All of the study abroad types resulted in recognition of learning as the result of disorientation and a general shift in worldview for the students.

Instructor-led study abroad participants articulated the highest rates of everyday learning, possibly indicating that these programs promote the recognition of this skill. Interestingly, participants in this type also indicated the least frequent recognition of learning outside the curriculum. This may indicate that instructor-led students recognized both the importance of everyday conversation to learning and that this opportunity for learning was built into their study abroad curriculums. These responders’ greater attribution of overall learning experience to curriculum is confirmed by their low articulation of learning as reflection, indicating that their learning was encapsulated in curricular experiences.

Engagement study abroad students articulated the most change in their conception and practice of learning. This seems to indicate that students on engagement study abroad articulate a broader awareness of learning styles and techniques. Similarly, engagement study abroad students more frequently articulated responses that framed learning as the result of disorientation. This may indicate a correlation between recognizing disorientation as learning and recognizing multiple pathways to learning.

Instructor-led and immersion program students articulated the highest rates of revision in their conceptions of nation and citizenship. Engagement program participants indicated a greater recognition of themselves as individual problem solvers of everyday or challenging problems but had the lowest recognition of national identities. This difference among the types may occur because engagement programs use projects as a core organizing feature. These students may focus more on daily requirements and
tasks, minimizing their awareness of themselves as embodying a particular national identity. This research was conducted through the Bailey Scholars Graduate Fellowship Program.

About the Authors

Natalie Graham is a University Distinguished Fellow at Michigan State University. Her research interests include identity performance and consumption, Black popular music, place-based studies, participatory engagement, and creative writing. Graham earned her bachelor’s degree in English with a minor in creative writing from the University of Florida, and she is a Ph.D. candidate in American studies at Michigan State University.

Pat Crawford is the senior director of the Bailey Scholars Program and an associate professor in Landscape Architecture at Michigan State University. Her research interests include community participatory design, design studio pedagogy, study abroad, incidental learning, and student professional development. Crawford earned her bachelor’s degree in horticulture from the University of Missouri–Columbia, her master’s degree in landscape architecture from Kansas State University, and her Ph.D. in environmental design and planning from Arizona State University.
**Transformative Experiences of Study Abroad:**

**Instructor-Led, Engagement and Immersion Programs**

**Introduction**

Study abroad is famed for fostering transformative experiences for college students. 

- Anecdotal evidence tells us that students feel they have changed during their international experience. 
- Research tells us that study abroad can enhance foreign language skills, understanding of different cultures, and transform the way students think about society and the world.

Study abroad can be broadly categorized into three types: Instructor-led, Engagement, and Immersion. The research focuses on the engagement and immersion types.

**Method**

This study examined transformative experiences of study abroad participants. The research team includes: Natalie Graham, Pat Crawford, and Robert Brown, Eric Cova, Rhonda Crackel, Suzanne Lang, Reg Motley, and Brianna Ziegler. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, with a focus on personal and epistemic learning transformations.

**Findings**

Instructor-led Topic/Subject-Focused Programs: Epistemic and Philosophical learning transformations are the most cited. Engagement Activity Instructor-Led Programs: Personal and Epistemic learning transformations are the most cited. Immersion - University Semester Enrollment Programs: Epistemic and Philosophical learning transformations are the most cited.

**Coding: Transformative Learning Experiences**

1. **Epistemic Learning**
   - Reflecting on the acquisition of new knowledge and understanding. 
   - Learning that is a result of everyday experiences and interactions.

2. **Personal Learning**
   - Recognizing the juxtaposition of U.S. as a nation in global context.

3. **Philosophical Learning**
   - Articulation of general shift in worldview

4. **Relational Learning**
   - Understanding the interconnectedness of self and others

**Semi-Structured Interview Protocol**

Interviews conducted by 2 graduate researchers and 1 undergraduate researcher. 15 interviews, 5 for each type, averaged 30 minutes each.

1. What initially interested you in a study abroad experience? 
2. Could you describe what your study abroad experience was like for you, what were your most significant experiences during your study abroad? 
3. Did you feel the experience changed you in any way? If yes, what changed about yourself, feel, take on, or do differently today that believe your experience contributed? 
4. What advice do you have to other students embarking on a study abroad experience? 