

**Learning for Change:
Experiences Among International University Learners**

by

Moonerah Mesfer AlHasef

University of Ottawa

Faculty of Education

Abstract:

Students returning from their bivouac abroad report that their study-abroad experience has changed the way they look at themselves and the world. My research will examine the theory of identity development, as well as the transformative concept of adult learning. It also explores the critical theory of Mezirow and analyzes international students' transformational learning experiences. Subsequently, my study attempts to discover how these experiences may impact students' flexibility, identity, adaptation, and well-being. I will also explore the identity changes and the notion of adaptation that may affect the personalities of international university students from different countries who participate in long-term study-abroad programs. The research will discuss my personal philosophy of practice and how I relate this experience to my own meaning-making. I anticipate that the findings and interpretations of this research will confirm that as we strive to understand our own existence, we must work hard to advance our education. If we reflect on anything we have learned, we can realize that it is the product of repeated exposure and thought. I also hope that my review of the literature will help in leading adults to recognize and reshape their patterns of believing, thinking, and feeling.

Key words: International students, transformational learning, identity, adaptation

Introduction:

Our world, the place in which we find ourselves and where we play out the significant events of our lives, is sending us distress signals. We must concede that the planet which we inhabit is in trouble. It is difficult to go anywhere today and not be confronted by the wounding of our world and the tearing of the very fabric of life. The great challenge for us is to have the courage to embrace that world and bring it into our hearts. (O'Sullivan, 1999, pp. 235)

As a result of studying theories on transformational learning and having my own experiences as an international student living and studying in Canada for four years, I thought it would be fascinating to learn about this facet of my personal situation. Therefore, I decided to perform research and explore the experiences and challenges of young adult international university students from various countries who are currently living in Canada. What kinds of experiences do they have, both positive and negative? What aspects of their values appear to change the most as a result of moving to and studying in a different place? What kinds of adjustments and changes have they had to make in order to adapt to living here, and what are the greatest challenges they have dealt with? What is the impact

of long-term study and living abroad on the identity development of international university students?

Adult education stretches beyond the classroom and intellectual content, educating students about a variety of skills, values, and dispositions. More importantly, examining and understanding traditional and transformational learning and learning theories is essential to enhancing instructional and pedagogical development. Theorists Illeris (2000) and Ormrod (1995) defined learning as “a process that brings together cognitive, emotional, and environmental influences and experiences for acquiring, enhancing, or making changes in one’s knowledge, skills, values, and worldviews” (cited in Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 277). Taking eleven courses in Ottawa university, including some courses in adult education, increased my understanding of the process of learning, particularly transformative learning. I came to understand how I might promote and foster my transformative learning as an international student and discovered the role of positivity in transformative learning. In the literature related to adult education, transformative learning is defined as a learning action that transforms existing frames of reference to make them more reflective, open, wide, comprehensive, and able to change (Mezirow, 2000). I found that positive emotional experiences played a significant role in both identity development and the offsetting of negative emotions.

The literature regarding international students studying abroad pays little attention to those students who attend community colleges. Indeed, there is a lack of information regarding international students’ perceptions of their identity and self-development during their learning experience. Therefore, this research presents a transformative learning framework for analyzing and realizing international students’ experiences of learning and living in Canada. The paper also focuses on the identity development theory developed by Arthur Chickering (1993), as well as Piaget’s notion of adaptation (1985). According to the concepts described by Chickering, students can gain skills necessary to become successful in their respective fields. Particular attention will be paid to the ways in which these changes in identity and progress influenced the students as adult learners in a university and the factors that facilitated those identity changes. The research addresses how this identity development relates to Mezirow’s transformative learning theory. By reviewing the proposed ideas in the literature review, the current research aims to answer the following question: How can international university students maintain their cultural identities while simultaneously adjusting to living in a new culture?

In this paper, I argue that we should strive to reflect on what we have learned. My insights are associated with issues of power, the importance of students' stories, how they communicate with others, and how to develop their own voice. Furthermore, it is important to perform more research to study how individuals' narrative identity construction changes over the life span. This paper is divided into seven sections. The first section introduces the paper in terms of the explanation of the purpose and problem of the study. The second is a literature review that explains transformational theory and the key theory of transformational learning created by Mezirow. The third is also a literature review that attempts to connect identity development theory and studying abroad. The fourth section examines Jean Piaget's notion of adaptation and connects it with the international learner's experiences. The fifth section examines how the theories reflect my own experiences and what I have taken from the theories and implemented in my own learning practice. The last section contains the conclusion of the research and future directions.

Literature Review:

I- Transformational Learning Theory:

To date, most of the research on transformational learning has concentrated on fostering transformational learning in formal higher education and professional development settings (Taylor, 2007). Transformational learning means transforming a problematic frame of reference so as to make it more dependable in adult life by generating dramatic changes in opinions, ideas, thoughts, and interpretations, especially in learning and experience beliefs, leading to deep self-reflection and a discourse on that reflection (Mezirow, 1990). Transformational learning reshapes the learner and significantly impacts him or her; it accomplishes a shift in perspective and experience (Moore, 2005). Transformational learning is performed by adults as they make meaning of their lives. It shapes who they are as individuals (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Because it reshapes and significantly impacts the learner, transformational learning creates a shift in perspective and experience (Moore, 2005). This is important because for adults, the meaning-making process can change how they look at work, family, and the world.

There are many significant theorists who have contributed to the field of transformational learning. All provide theories that explore how this learning happens, but they do so from two different perspectives. Mezirow (1978) deduces that transformation results from critical reflection,

primarily from a personal experience that empowers people to reintegrate themselves.

Although many empirical studies support Mezirow, others have concluded that critical reflection is given too much importance and that the process focuses too greatly on a rational perspective (Dirkx, 1998). This paper will limit the comparison of transformational learning to critical reflection based on Mezirow's theory in order to analyze learning experiences among international students. The paper has not included theories that illuminate the affective perspectives. Instead, the emphasis has been placed on transformational learning as a rational process because we must consider how we can help students connect with the rational by using feelings and emotions, both in critical reflection and as a means of reflection (Taylor 2007).

Mezirow's Transformation Theory and Studying Abroad:

The transformational learning theory was initially developed by Jack Mezirow (1991). It is a relatively new theory in which Mezirow defines learning as that which generates dramatic change in the learner, especially in their beliefs regarding learning and experiences, leading to deep self-reflection and a discourse on that reflection (Dirkx, 1998). Mezirow provided a fully developed theory of transformational learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 2007). He states, "No need is more fundamentally human than our need to understand the meaning of our experience" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 11). According to Mezirow, transformational learning is a change in meaning schemas that is accompanied by changes in ways of being, resulting in new thoughts, ideas, manners, and behaviors, which are integrated into new roles and relationships as these changes are integrated into the subject's life (Mezirow, 1990). Meaning schemes are defined as "specific knowledge, beliefs, value judgments, and feelings..." (Mezirow, 1991, p. 5).

Transformational learning takes place through critical self-reflection, reflective dialogue, and reflective action. Mezirow (1981) assumes that these reflective processes occur through ten stages:

A disorienting dilemma; self examination; a critical assessment of personally internalized role assumptions and a sense of alienation from traditional social experiences; relating one's discontent to similar experiences of others or to public issues – recognizing that one's problem is shared and not exclusively a private matter; exploring options for new ways of acting; building competence and self-confidence in new roles; planning a course of action; acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans; provisional efforts to try new roles and to assess

feedback; and a reintegration into society on the basis of conditions dictated by the new perspective. (p. 7)

The stages continue as a student begins exploring options for new roles, relationships, and actions; planning a course of action; acquiring knowledge and skills; trying new roles; building competence and confidence; and reintegrating these into his or her life (Mezirow, 1990). While these stages are sometimes experienced in different orders, all ten steps must be taken to fulfill the transformational learning process (Mezirow, 1990).

First phase: Disorienting dilemma/integrating circumstance

Mezirow's first research project, which aimed to facilitate the entry of women into higher education, found that women experienced dramatic changes in how they understood themselves and their world. He described these deep shifts as "perspective transformations". Mezirow (1978) claimed that "the process of perspective transformation begins when a woman becomes aware of the ways cultural assumptions and their psychological consequences have placed their stamp upon her" (p. 11). This assumption of power led Mezirow to describe a "disorienting dilemma", a change that occurs in one's life, causing a shift in values, beliefs, and identity and causing a person to change his or her ideas about these things altogether. To "experience" a disorienting dilemma is to live through some situation that causes one to rethink and perhaps alter one's thoughts and courses of action in a way that might not have occurred otherwise (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). "Experiencing a disorienting dilemma" means having or making a choice that is so stressful that it causes people to lose their sense of who they are, where they are, or how much time has passed (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). Moving to another country can be seen as a disorienting dilemma because it often presents international students with many experiences that are outside of the ordinary. The disorienting dilemma may present itself as a general culture shock, the density of which depends on the width and depth of the differences between the home culture and the host country. Erichsen (2011) argues that many factors influence international students' experiences with transformational learning: isolation, gender, age, study habits, learning approaches, culture shock, language difficulties, length of stay, lack of clarity in one's expectations and instruction, and a lack of participation in the classroom environment. Shames and Alden (2005) claim that students who move to study in a new country face challenges in adjusting to life in the new country both socially and psychologically. They suffer from symptoms such as a lack of confidence, longing for their home countries and families, and an

unwillingness to communicate with others. When learners first come to a new country, they usually do not have friends or families. Then, they begin to realize that their new identities as international graduate students in the new place are not as successful or respectable as their identities in their home countries. Therefore, they feel lonely, isolated, and ignored (Liu, 2011).

Second phase: Self-examination:

Mezirow (1991) claims that the second stage of transformational learning is self-examination, which is often accompanied by “feelings of guilt or shame” (p. 168). New international students’ culture shock results in a number of negative outcomes for their identities. For example, they face feelings of self-doubt and consequently low self-esteem as they struggle to make themselves understood in the new culture or language community. Furthermore, the lower the international students’ English proficiency, the less confident they are in communicating with others and thus the more difficult it is for them to enhance their English language skills and adapt to the host culture (Jackson, 2002; Trice, 2004). Liu (2011) describes his situation when he first came to Canada as an international student in the following way:

In this new society, I lost my sense of achievement and comfort. I began to worry about my situation and felt lost, and I chose to keep to myself in my own world and associated mostly with other Chinese graduate students, something Siu (1952) defines as “in-group tendency.” (p. 79)

Third phase: Critical assessment of assumptions:

Mezirow (1991) states that the self-examination phase leads to the critical assessment of a person’s epistemic, socio-cultural, or psychic assumptions. After a period of self-examination, most international students explore the newly discovered “misfit” between their ideas and their environment.

Fourth phase: Recognizing that others have gone through a similar process

Through the critical assessment phase, the learner recognizes that other options are available and realizes that others have negotiated similar changes in perspective. A course of action is arranged, leading to increased competence and self-confidence. Then, the learner integrates new assumptions into his or her life on the basis of conditions dictated by this new perspective.

Phases of the transformational learning theory process that were evident in international students' learning as they developed plans for implementing a course of action include the following: planning a course of action, acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing plans, trying new roles, building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships, and reintegrating into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective. Liu (2011) argues that in this phase, international students "choose to maintain contact with people who share the same or similar language and culture, which provides a safe and comfortable environment" (p. 79). They acquire knowledge and skills for their plans through on-going discussions with their groups and friends regarding how to respectfully interact with others, and they try out these new roles in different ways, rather than simply interacting with other international or immigrant students who have had the same experiences. Then, they begin interacting and forming relationships with other classmates and teachers. Finally, they gradually gain confidence in their ability to participate in their community. Throughout their final university years, the students begin to find a balance between competitiveness and communicating with others.

Lytle (1989) and Cesar (2003) argue that while most students will experience some stages of transformational learning, not all students will experience all ten stages. However, students must experience the first nine stages before they will be able to experience stage ten, a reintegration of learning into their lives (Lytle, 1989).

Mezirow's picture of the adult learner emphasizes the significance of individual perspectives, which he also calls "meaning perspectives" and "frames of reference". Meaning perspectives are obviously essential to the individual's identity. It is also clear that adults will resort to holding on to and adding to meaning perspectives. Indeed, in Mezirow's theory, the strengthening of and adding to existing meaning perspectives characterizes much adult learning. Mezirow distinguishes between meaning perspectives and "meaning schemes" in his theory of transformational learning, published in 1991. He explains, "Each meaning perspective is made up of a number of meaning schemes" (1991, p. 44). He refers to the term "meaning perspective" to define a frame of reference or a collection of meaning schemas.

A meaning perspective is a habitual set of expectations that constitutes an orienting frame of reference that we use in projecting our symbolic models and that serves as a (usually tacit) belief system for interpreting and evaluating the meaning of experience. (Mezirow, 1991).

Fursova (2013) uses the term “newcomers’ schemas” when she refers to Piaget (1975), who argued from a psychological framework point of view that people must adjust their schemas in order to adapt to a new environment.

II- Identity Development Theory and Studying Abroad:

Due to the academic trend toward the internationalization of knowledge within higher education, international students find that the majority of their worlds and the contexts within which they live require personal adjustment, change, reflection, and the reorganization of their thought or belief systems, assumptions, and habits (Gill, 2007). Through their experiences in new society, learners develop a recognition and a better understanding of their own cultures and thoughts, and they increase their self-reliance and self-confidence (Holland, 2003). The notion of identity is the story we tell of ourselves and the stories that others tell of us (Sarup, 1998). Identity is considered to represent self-coherence from space to space or the compromise of shared psychological space made sense of through a variety of mutualities (Kegan, 1982).

Arthur Chickering’s theory of adult student identity development was originally summarized in *Education and Identity* (1969) and revised in 1993 by Chickering and Linda Reisser. Chickering’s theory describes students’ learning experiences with identity in terms of seven vectors of development. “Vector” is a term used in Chickering’s theory to refer to stages in personal development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The term “vector” was used in his theory to illustrate the various areas of identity development because he considered them to be directed in a forward motion. Chickering’s theory was developed around the interests of the “emotional, interpersonal, ethical, and intellectual aspects of development” (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 38). In order to spread the awareness of the significance of studying abroad in a student’s life, I will provide an analysis of the development of international experiences using the Chickering theory of student development. Based on the current literature, most international students demonstrate high levels of growth in terms of Chickering’s seven vectors.

First vector: Developing competence:

This vector includes three levels of competence: intellectual, physical, and interpersonal. In the first level, it is important for the students to become “skilled at using the mind” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Intellectual competence focuses on acquiring complete knowledge or skill in subject content, developing an ability to solve problems, and engaging in critical and reflective thinking. Students gain additional frames of reference

with which to understand their realities. When studying abroad, Waldbaum (1996) argues that there must be an increase in a student's self-esteem and self-efficacy from their living abroad. He also recorded increases in international understanding and cultural and political knowledge. The development of international students' intellectual competence is supported by a form of active learning in which students are motivated to participate effectively in discovering knowledge and acquiring new sets of skills (Waldbaum, 1996). In contrast, the lower international students' language and knowledge proficiency, the less confident they are in developing an identity and therefore in interacting with others. Liu (2011) narrated his experience with having low self-esteem because he was not speaking the host country's language. He claimed:

As a new international graduate student, I felt frustrated with my English. Because of my low self-esteem, I avoided speaking and interacting with other students in class, and this prevented me from getting to know people and making friends. It also affected the development of my oral English skills. (p. 80)

Physical competence refers to the success students achieve when challenged in different areas, including any sort of manual activity, such as sports or art. In the case of international university students, Achterberg (2002) argues that without gaining physical competency, students will lack the ability to relate to others in the new place in which they learn and work. The international student's participation in athletics and the arts may foster their overall competence. These types of activities will lead them to adapt with the new situation and work in a team environment.

Interpersonal competence not only signifies the students' ability to interact effectively with others but also how they are able to work in a group environment, maintaining personal thoughts while compromising with others (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Hunter (2004) claims that developing competency refers to one's ability to empathize and approve of other ways of life, as well as the ability to communicate effectively across a variety of cultures. In her study case, Ngai (n. d.) investigated the experiences of female Japanese immigrants living in Los Angeles. Ngai (n. d.) claimed, "Their overall positive experience and ability to adjust relatively easily to a new culture can be attributed to their ability to integrate into American culture while maintaining their Japanese identities" (p. 12). Therefore, international students must master active listening, question asking, in-group dialog sharing, and teamwork skills. Mastering these skills will allow students to create great relationships with others and therefore gain overall competence.

According to Pederson (1997), in order to pass this vector successfully, the international students must first go through an initial stage of delaying any involvement with others and separate themselves from participation in the host culture. This stage is followed by the next stage, facing, when they begin to compare the new culture with their home experience and long for the familiar sights, sounds, and activities of their own culture. In the last stage, students begin to leave thinking of their home culture behind, and instead, they start to capitulate to the learning experiences of the new culture (Pederson, 1997).

It is quite significant that all of the previous studies emphasized the significance of schools as places to learn and communicate, as well as the role of teachers in supporting learners in their quest to gain their intellectual, physical, and interpersonal competency. Universities, schools, and educators must be aware of how to provide their students with guidelines to use in assessing their own competence and how to give specific feedback about students' strengths and weaknesses (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Second vector: Managing emotions:

In this vector, adult students begin to learn how to develop techniques for treating situations before they become too hard to handle. The adults' flexibility and ability to control their emotional expressions are key elements in this vector. Chickering and Reisser (1993) state that awareness of emotion is a crucial component of students' ability to reach a higher level within this vector. Emotions are important in adult education because they can either hinder or motivate learning. Erichsen (2011) argues that at the beginning of their stays in new countries, international students experience a great deal of external disjuncture. She argues that "Their disjuncture may have been due to either positive or negative experiences, and their motivations were described in many ways, but their commonality was the desire for a change in their lives, or a means of dealing with an internal feeling of disharmony or disjuncture" (p. 120).

From my own experience, certain emotions may hinder new students' development, such as fear, anxiety, anger, depression, guilt, loneliness and shame; therefore, students must learn how to control these feelings. Most international students are able to deal with the challenges of living in a distinctive cultural environment. However, some face some challenges in recognizing these emotions and lack the ability to express their feelings. Students must be aware of their emotions "to learn to identify and accept feelings as normal reactions to life experiences...." (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 97). It is important to learn about this vector because learners must

practice balancing between positive and negative emotions in their personal lives in order to direct these emotions toward achieving their goals. In this case, it is very important to know that teachers also have a responsibility to help students share those feelings through support groups and writing assignments. Teachers must also help students to deal with their emotions by creating a safe learning environment and encouraging them to practice communication and observational skills, which helps them to interpret others' behavior and validate their own emotions and feelings.

Third vector: Moving through autonomy toward interdependence

Students become emotionally independent in this vector. They gain the freedom and ability to stand behind their own decisions. Being independent when making choices helps a student to develop relationships with others that are more meaningful than their previous relationships. Students who prove a high level of competence in this vector have the power to make decisions on their own, and they do not require the guidance or assistance of peers, parents, or teachers (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). In a qualitative study of ten Israeli and ten Japanese newcomers to Canada, Magat (1999) revealed that "their ability to create a comfortable 'home' for themselves in a new country is largely... related to the nature of self (individualistic versus self-sacrificing) and the ability to commit to the new place" (p. 199). Andrade (2006) claimed the following:

Autonomous international students participating in a cultural exchange program with graduate counseling practicum students indicated a greater need to adjust to American culture, understand non-verbal behavior, develop friendships with diverse peers, communicate effectively with professors and be involved in the university community (p.141).

Consequently, universities, colleges and instructors are required to assist their new students in achieving interdependence by involving them in countless group activities and learning communities. Students will be more aware of their own autonomy when they appreciate supportive relationships and understand their place in society (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Fourth vector: Developing mature interpersonal relationships:

Within this vector, international students have the ability to maintain deep and meaningful relationships. Adults who have gained high levels in this vector have a recognition of and the ability to embrace differences, are sensitive to culture and ethnicity, and have moved beyond making initial judgments of others (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). They respect others, avoid ethnocentrism, and have an overall appreciation of the world in which they live. They are also able to share their own personal convictions

with others. In our lives and because our world is growing more diverse, students must understand the differences between people and also respect and value these differences.

To me, the volunteering opportunity provided a friendly, low-stress, and meaningful opportunity to interact with people respectfully. First, I am interested in teaching because my background is in teaching English as a second language in China. Second, I feel more confident and proud to teach my mother tongue with its culture and history to people who are interested. (Liu, 2011, p. 83)

According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), "Tolerance enables students to bridge gaps, to be objective, to transcend boundaries by gaining a clearer view of unknown customs and values, and to understand how labeling, stereotyping, or discrimination can diminish communities" (p. 146). From my own experience, I argue that acknowledging this vector is important because some international students fail to understand cultural differences and free themselves from limited and biased stereotypes and point of views. Because I experienced a culturally diverse environment and communicated with peers who had different ideas than my peer group in my home country, my perspective changed. I adopted the point of view that diversity expands my vision and brings a rich layer of fulfillment to my life and world. Accordingly, when students become open and respect other cultures, they will increase their self-awareness, mutual communication, and life satisfaction.

Fifth vector: Establishing identity:

Chickering's vector of establishing identity seems to be the most complicated because it produces the least amount of development in students who move to study in a new country (Erichsen, 2011). This vector depends on students' ability to deeply connect with their inner selves, defining who they are in terms of their roles in the world and their personal lifestyle choices. According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), "We define who we are in part by discovering who we respect, how they feel about us, and how to deal with reactions that do not confirm our self-image" (p. 198). Some students are able to easily adjust within a group of peers who truly understand and accept them. They are able to maintain their cultural identities while adjusting to living in a new culture. They develop a better understanding of how they fit into the world socially and, as a result, find themselves stronger and more open, confident and extroverted. Indeed, some students became more deeply devoted to their values and became advocates for change within their communities. To fulfill this goal of establishing identity and recognizing that each person is shaped and

influenced by belonging to families, ethnic groups, and countries, students must be aware of the important of the place they come from. Then, they must develop their identities and be able to understand the social context of their lives. Morey (2000) states that when students have knowledge of different cultures, political systems, and societies, they become aware of their commitment in this area. This commitment makes up the core of the students' beings and identities. As mature international students, we must be confident that we are competent, worthy, and needed. We must understand our weaknesses and adapt to progress toward being more knowledgeable and capable members of society.

Sixth vector: Developing purpose:

Many adult students are expected to know what they would like to pursue in terms of life goals by the end of their learning experience. Students who set these goals find the clarification they were looking for (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Achterberg (2003) claims that it is important to encourage adult students' awareness of purpose in order to give them the skills they will need to be successful in the workforce, as well as in life.

Furthermore, I see that even those students who do not specifically set goals find that their experiences learning abroad lead them to clarify their futures in terms of career and lifestyle. Examples of development in this vector include students who commit to attending graduate school in their respective fields. Service-oriented careers and lifestyles, such as volunteering, are often included in students' pathways following a study-abroad experience. Although some students were already interested in service, their interest in pursuing a lifestyle that included helping others was renewed. When students come back home from studying abroad, they can take this newfound perspective and expand upon it in every facet of their lives (Morey, 2000). In order to progress in this vector, international students must learn how to make plans for the future and how to develop and follow these plans in their lives. Moreover, they must explore their interests, talents, and hopes, as well as use prior experiences to make the best decisions for the future.

Seventh vector: Developing integrity:

Chickering and Reisser (1993) state that the developing integrity vector contains three components: humanizing values, with which students balance their own interests, beliefs, and values against the interests and values of other individuals and society; personalizing values, which are

gained when students learn to value the beliefs of others while still adhering to their personal set of beliefs; and developing congruence, which balances “personal values with socially responsible behaviors” (p. 51).

Magat (1999) claims that the experiences students have while away lead to a deeper understanding of themselves, other people, and life in general. As a result of this, students must become socially conscious of their beliefs, and then stand for what they believe is right. At the same time, they should learn to trust individuals who do not share the same value system and eventually learn to respect differences of opinion.

III- Constructivism: Jean Piaget’s notion of adaptation

The term ‘constructivism’ is given to a domain of theories about knowledge and learning that aims to explore what ‘knowing’ is and how we ‘come to know’ (Wadsworth, 1996). Jean Piaget (1926, 1965, 1969) contributed to constructivism by describing the internal processes that supply individuals with the ability and motivation to learn (Wadsworth, 1996). Piaget developed constructivism in such a way that it differs from other theories of cognition in terms of what is called knowledge. Piaget argued that constructivism does not need to have the function of making representations of an independent reality. Rather, it uses an adaptive process instead (Fosnot, 1996). Piaget stated that adaptation widens the path to knowledge, and he argued that there is a relationship between individuals and their environment, with those individuals evolving or fitting in with their environment (Fosnot, 1996). Piaget argued that every person organizes his/her experiences and perspectives into “schemata”. These schemata are cognitive structures that adapt and change with mental development (Wadsworth, 1996). Human experiences that are faced for the first time fall under one of two processes: assimilation, in which a new idea is placed into an existing schema, or accommodation, which is creating new schema to contain novel information. Block (1982) revealed that assimilation involves “the utilization of existing adaptive structures or schemes to integrate or make sense of new experiential elements” (p. 285) and is likely to be attempted initially so as to avoid change. In contrast, accommodation entails “the formation of new adaptive structures or schemes to integrate or make sense of previously discrepant experiential elements” (p. 285).

When applying Piaget’s (1978/1985) theory to the experience of international students studying abroad, it can be argued that when people integrate into new society, they face diversity and novelty. They must use the process of accommodation to reach “equilibrium”, which Piaget described as modifying one’s current schemas in order to understand and

process a new social culture. Kumagai (1977) studied Japanese students before and after they came to the United States for graduate education. He found that students increased in their sense of well-being, achievement, and femininity. When students stay abroad for a long time, they may begin to adapt by using the process of assimilation. For me, as an international student who spent a long time studying and living in Canada, I experienced both the assimilation and accommodation processes. I began to feel more comfortable with the culture here. Then, I developed a considerable facility with the language, formed more permanent friendships, and became more familiar with my surroundings. According to Piaget, assimilation without accommodation will not be sufficient to adapt to the new culture and may contribute to re-entry culture shock and the corresponding sense of disequilibrium (Kumagai, 1977). Cultural adaptation and assimilation involve the learners' incorporation of new social behaviors, thoughts, and ideas into their current communicative schema.

IV-What I have learned from theories (the impact of the theories on my own experience):

Mezirow (1978) describes transformational learning as “a structural reorganization in the way a person looks at himself and his relationships” (p. 162). From my own experiences as a teacher and then as a master's student living in a foreign country, transformational perception shifts are not easy; they require one to become something or someone ‘other.’ I agree with Dirkx (1998) that a full understanding of one's personal situation depends on a deeper understanding of the social, political, and cultural contexts in which one lives. In order to foster transformational learning, we must understand the self of the learner in the appropriate context. When I think of my role as an educator, it reminds me of the many influences that shaped my choices as a teacher and led me to come to Canada. These influences included the political climate of the time, the job market, public opinion, and educational directives.

In order to gain a better understanding of the three theories, it is important to understand the social nature of discourse and further explore the role of communicative interaction in shifts in individuals' perspectives. My decision to enroll in the M.Ed. program, resign from teaching, and move to a new city affected not only my role as a teacher but also my perspectives and beliefs as a person. As Dirkx (1998) states, “Each of these views of transformative learning also stresses the importance of a dialectical relationship of self and society within the learning experience” (p.10).

Positive emotional experiences played a significant role in offsetting my negative emotions. Now, I realize what Erichsen (2011) means when he claims that transformational learning is “a process of calling our old meanings and past experience into question due to something new in our lives or epiphanies, and then attributing new meanings to our lives and experience” (p.114). This has not only developed my understanding of how and what to teach my students but also my understanding of my students as they evolve and reshape my own personal narratives of teaching.

As an international student studying in Canada, I have learned that it takes time to learn and gain knowledge because learning is not instantaneous; it is a continuous process. As we work hard to understand our own existence, we must do our best to advance our education. If we reflect on anything we have learned, we can realize that it is the product of repeated exposure and thought. Our new personal perspectives must transform our lives in a way that makes us see and understand ourselves, our context, and the world around us.

I recognized that as foreign students, we tell stories about our lives as an ongoing process of developing our identities and making sense of ourselves in relation to others and our worlds. Kegan (1982) argues that “it is about the courage and the costs which we discover again and again in giving ourselves new form” (p. 1). Our identities are formed by our biology, our history, and our culture. Therefore, transformational learning should find and integrate connections (adaptation and transformational shifts) and allow for differentiating and reshaping oneself within a new context (identity development). We must learn to adapt in order to change, and we must change in order to learn.

V- Conclusion and Future Directions:

Students returning from their studies abroad state that their living-abroad experience has changed the way they look at themselves and the world and that they have further developed their identities. The idea that higher education students develop their making meaning abilities with regard to their own identities is a widely accepted outcome of university attendance for students. Achterberg (2003) argues that without global qualifications in higher education, students will lack the ability to deal with others in the society in which they live, study, and work. Experiencing studying away from home leads the student to become more independent and self-confident. Most new international students realize that their new environment is their personal challenge. Stephenson (1999) claims that for international students, the factors that were “most difficult to adjust fell into three distinct groups — beliefs/values/cultural differences, social

interactions and the university environment” (p. 11). However, Yang and Noels (2013) argue that “it is the choice we make” (p. 320). Students understand that they are contributing to their own difficult positions. Studying abroad gives the students the chance to begin to view their countries and themselves away from the home environment and the influences of personal cultural bias (Holland, 2003). Students often find that they have different personalities. Whether these were hidden or created while abroad, they are new to the student.

Throughout this research, I examined the identity development theory, the notion of adaption, and transformative concepts of adult learning, and I explored critical theories and the developmental theories of Mezirow and Piaget. I analyzed international students’ transformational learning experiences and discovered how those experiences may impact the students’ flexibility, identity, adaptation, and well-being using a literature review of previous researchers.

My research paper examined transformational learning as it concerns adults who engage in action learning, critical reflection, and experiential learning, which causes them to recognize and reshape their patterns of believing, thinking, and feeling. I explored the learners’ changes in identity and adaptation, which may affect their personality during their long-term study-abroad programs. The paper also discussed my own personal philosophy of practice and how I relate this experience to my own meaning perspective.

This research helped me to understand the theories and perceptions of adaptation and identity development in higher education experiences. I found that there is, according to the literature, an increase in students’ observed levels of identity and adaptation, particularly in the areas of self-confidence, independence, patience, world-view lens, relationship needs, political views, emotional risk-taking, comfort in being alone, and appreciation of diverse environments.

Studying abroad, as experienced by international learners and immigrants, appears to be a successful influence on students’ thoughts about their identity and adaptation development. It also gives them the tools to become successful in their futures (Fursova, 2013).

In the future, it would be useful to conduct an expanded study of the effects of studying abroad and its relationship to identity and adaptation development in a long-term context. However, little research has been done to study the learning experiences of international graduate students. It would be beneficial to hear these students’ voices and gain a better understanding of their learning experiences in order to help support them

while they study abroad (Waldbaum, 1996). Moreover, the socio-cultural nature of transformational, identity, and adaptation processes are typically investigated in western, post-industrialized contexts. However, there is also a pressing need to study adaptation and identity formation in various other world contexts (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The influence of new communication theories on learning, such as on transformational, identity, and adaptation practices, is still not sufficiently understood in many places in the world. Every university in the world needs to engage in discussions to deal with cross-cultural and diversity learning problems. Educators must plan a developmentally adequate and suitable curriculum that improves their students' logical and conceptual growth (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Teachers also must emphasize the crucial role that students' experiences and interactions with their environments plays in their learning (Cesar, 2003). It is vitally important for educators, administrators, and researchers to take these discussions and suggestions seriously in order to foster a wider, more holistic approach to learning and teaching. These are important issues that must be addressed in the future.

The information provided by my research paper can also contribute greatly to the fields of learner identity development and adult education by providing learners with a deeper cultural understanding. Studying learners' narratives in various socio-cultural places promises to be profitable path for studies on adult learning and development. These goals are essential to make the transition to a different culture a smoother one and to make the experience more positive.

The findings prove that these are important issues that must be addressed in the future. My findings prove that students should work hard to reflect on what they have learned. These insights associated with issues of power, the importance of students' stories, how they communicate with others, and how to reach their own voice. Furthermore, I deduce that in the future, it will be important to conduct more researches to study how individuals' narrative identity construction changes over the life bezel. Universities, educators, and administrators must take some suggestions into consideration in order to overcome diversity learning problems.

References

- Achterberg, C. (2002). Providing a global perspective: An educator's duty. *About Campus*, 6, 17-22.
- Andrade, M. S. (2006). International students in English-speaking universities: Adjustment factors. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 5, 131- 154.
- Block, J. (1982). Assimilation, accommodation, and the dynamics of personality development. *Child Development*, 53, 281-295.
- Cesar, C. J. (2003). Adult motivation to complete their baccalaureate degree. *Graduate School of Education and Psychology*. Malibu CA, Pepperdine University: 163.
- Chickering, A.W., & Reisser, L. (1993) *Education and identity, 2nd Edition*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Dirkx, J. M. (1998). Transformative learning theory in the practice of adult education: An overview. *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 7, 1-14.
- Erichsen, E. A. (2011). Learning for change: Transforming international experience as identity work. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 9(2), 109-133.
- Evans, N.J., Forney, D.S., & Guido-DiBrito, F. (1998) *Student development in college: Theory, research and practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Fosnot, C. T. (1996). *Constructivism: Theory, perspectives & practice*. Columbia: Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Fursova, J. (2013). A journey of her own: A critical analysis of learning experiences among immigrant women. *RCIS*, 3, 1-18.
- Gill, S. (2007). Overseas students' intercultural adaptation as intercultural learning: A transformative framework. *Compare*, 37, 167-183.
- Holland, M.K. (2003). The not so accidental tourist-internships abroad. *Global realities: Celebrating our differences, honoring our connections*. Chapter 25. U.S.; North Carolina
- Hunter, W.D. (2004) Got global competency? *International Educator*, 6-12
Retrieved from http://www.nafsa.org/File/go_global_competency.pdf
- Jackson, J. (2002). Reticence in second language case discussions: Anxiety and aspirations. *System*, 30, 65-84
- Kegan, R. (1982). *The evolving self: Problem and process in human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kumagai, F. (1977). The effects of cross-cultural education on attitudes and personality of Japanese students. *Sociology of Education*, 50, 40-47.
- Liu, L. (2011) An international graduate student's ESL learning experience

beyond the classroom. *TESL Canada Journal/Revue TESL DU Canada*, 29(1), 77-92

Lytle, J. E. (1989). The process of perspective transformation experienced by the registered nurse returning for baccalaureate study. *Department of Leadership and Educational Policy Studies*. Dekalb IL, Northern Illinois University: 178.

Magat, I. N. (1999). Israeli and Japanese immigrants to Canada: Home, belonging, and the territorialization of identity. *Ethos*, 27(2), 119-144.

Merriam, S. B., Caffarella, R. S., & Baumgartner, L. M. (2007). *Learning in adulthood*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1978). *Education for perspective transformation: Women's RE-entry programs in community colleges*. New York: Center for Adult Education, Teachers College, Columbia University.

Mezirow, J. (1981). A critical theory of adult learning and education [Electronic version]. *Adult Education*, 32(1), 3-24.

Mezirow, J. (1990). *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Moore, J. (2005). Is higher education ready for transformative learning? A question explored in the study of sustainability. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 3(1), 76-91.

Morey, A.I. (2000). Changing higher education curricula for a global and multicultural world. *Higher Education in Europe*, 25, 25-39.

Ngai, M. M (n.d.). Perceptions, experiences, and challenges of female Japanese immigrants living in the Los Angeles area. California State University, Long Beach.

O'Sullivan, T. (1999) *Decision making in social work*. Ottawa, Basingstoke : Macmillan

Pedersen, P. (1997). *Culture-centered counseling interventions: Striving for accuracy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Sarup, M. (1998). *Identity, culture, and the postmodern world*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.

Shames, W., & Alden, P. (2005). The impact of short-term study abroad on the identity development of college students with learning disabilities and/or AD/HD. *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 11, 1-31.

Stephenson, S. (1999). Study abroad as a transformational experience and its effect upon study abroad students and host nationals in Santiago, Chile. *CIEE Resident Director*, 1-38.

Taylor, E. W. (2007). An update of transformative learning theory: A critical review of the empirical research (1999–2005). *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 26(2), 173-191.

Trice, A. G. (2004). Mixing it up: International graduate students' social interactions with American students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45, 671-687.

Trilokekar, R. D., & Kukar, P. (2011). Disorienting experiences during study abroad: Reflections of pre-service teacher candidates. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27, 1141-1150

Wadsworth, B. J. (1996). *Piaget's theory of cognitive and affective development* (5th ed.). New York: Longman Publisher.

Waldbaum, R. K. (1996). A case study of institutional and student outcomes of an educational exchange program: The University of Denver and the University of Bologna. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 57 (07), 2908. (UMI No. 9639143).

Yang, R. P., & Kimberly A. N. (2013). The possible selves of international students and their cross-cultural adjustment in Canada. *International Journal of Psychology*, 48(3), 316-323