

# TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING, STUDY ABROAD, & GLOBAL SERVICE-LEARNING IN COSTA RICA/NICARAGUA: PROGRAM PARTNER AND HOST COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES

-- DR. DON MOWRY, KINSEY THOMPSON, SAMANTHA PETTIT,  
SHAUNA STOEGER, TEHYA RICE, & TIA OESTREICH--  
UWEC SOCIAL WORK DEPARTMENT

## Abstract

Transformative learning can produce disorienting challenges for students resulting in changes in their frames of reference that lead to enriching the meaning of their experiences and enhancing their education. It has been suggested that study abroad excursions with home-stay and service-learning components cause transformative learning, as well as benefits of service-learning projects that contribute to sustainable economic, social, and cultural development for the communities that are served.

As students concerned with personal responsibility towards social justice and cultural sensitivity, we believe in the transformation and benefits attained from international service-learning projects and home-stay study abroad experiences.

## Methods

To test our hypothesis that home-stay study abroad excursions and international service-learning projects offer transformational learning and community benefits, we traveled to Costa Rica and Nicaragua to conduct qualitative interviews with 60 families that host students and 4 host program directors in order to gain their insight on the students' transformations, as well as the effects that hosting students has had on the families and communities.

Upon returning to the university, we transcribed and translated 71 interviews from Spanish to English and then proceeded to code them and unravel the themes noted among the interview responses.

## Interviewing

### Program Partners

When interviewing the study abroad program directors, we were interested in gaining their perspectives on the transformation or lack thereof that they have witnessed among students.

The following are some of the questions posed to the program partners:

1. In what ways do the students change/not change over the semester?
2. According to your observation, how have you seen/not seen changes in their attitude or personality during their experiences?

### Host Families

We conducted interviews with host families with a wide variety of experiences with students in study abroad programs. We were interested in engaging with host families to learn their insight on the students' educational and individual experiences while studying abroad in order to relate them with themes of transformational learning.

The following are some of the questions posed to host families:

1. What do you like most about hosting students?
2. What do you think impacts the students by living in a foreign country?



## Interviewing continued

### Service Learning Communities

We traveled to 4 communities that have hosted students and participated in their service-learning experiences. We were interested in gaining insight from the communities about the positive and/or negative impacts that the service learning projects and presence of students has had on their communities.

The following are some of the questions posed to community members:

1. Do you think the students benefitted from the volunteer work in this community?
2. How is the community continuing projects done by volunteers?
3. How did you feel with the presence of the students?

## Results

After conducting, transcribing, translating, and coding the interviews, we have created a list of recurring themes throughout all of the interviews. We have paired these themes with coinciding quotations taken from the interviews and translated to English. A brief list of the numerous themes and quotations is as follows:

### Sharing of Cultures

"We are more open and have more confidence, before we would see a *gringo* [white person from the U.S.] and we would avoid them; now we see them and we are happy, we see them as family, like brothers."

"It is an experience to learn about cultures; it is a friendship with someone from another country."

"It is a new experience to know their culture and they can learn our distinct culture."

### Forming Relationships

"Of course they are like my kids, part of the family, I say, 'there is your genetic family, but here is your *tica* [Costa Rican] family."

## Results continued

### Change of Values

"I think that they value or they see the difference in the types of lives; maybe it's a life more humble, to value our lives, the simple life. [...] Maybe they see that other cultures have the same values, the value of family, the coexistence with harmony and nature, and to coexist with the environment. I think that this is good because it is what impacts the students the most."

"The first student we had [...] came with a menu of what she wanted to eat, like lobster, but I never eat [like that]. Her parents had told her that in Costa Rica people are indigenous and have thatched houses and sleep on dirt floors [...]. She [became] very changed, we told her we are poor and we cannot make everything she wanted and she ate whatever we made and she apologized. Sometimes she cried because she did not have friends in her group. She [became] confident and comfortable with us, there was a change."

## Conclusion

The interview responses suggest that students who participate in home-stay study abroad excursions and international service-learning projects are very likely to experience transformative learning and that host families and communities positively benefit from the students, but not in the same ways or to the same degree as do the students.

