

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Global and Cultural Competencies – One Student’s Transformation

We met [Elizabeth Myong](#), the high school sophomore, back in May’s *Transformative Teacher-Scholar* when she shared thoughts about her expectations of college and college teaching. In another piece about her own experiences as a student, Elizabeth [shares a reflection](#) which fits the classic mold for indicating a transformative learning experience.

As a faculty member, if you were ever to look for a textbook example of a student reaching a Transformative Learning outcome, reading Elizabeth’s words about the change in her thinking and the transformative realization she experienced about her fellow humans as a result of an experience abroad would fill the bill. The hallmarks of transformation in a reflective narrative are all there: 1) realizing the inaccuracies in long-held, confining beliefs; 2) a new, wider perspective taken because of a particular experience which produced an a-ha moment about self; 3) reaching an understanding about how one has changed and why the change is important.

You’ll enjoy reading how Elizabeth came to her realization: “I learned that when you are quick to judge, the only person you’re really labeling is yourself, and the only person you’re boxing in is you.”

Elizabeth’s transformative experience confirms the words of Mark Twain that are featured prominently outside UCO’s Centre for Global Competence:

Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness.

Elizabeth’s perspective, though, is interesting as a student of Asian descent who makes a trip to China where her interactions with two people “completely changed my perceptions of China.”

(There it is again — that phrase about perceptions being changed. It’s one of the markers of a Transformative Learning experience.)

When you read her descriptions of her encounters *before* her transformation . . .

When I got off the plane, I felt a kind of overwhelming superiority. The local people seemed indistinguishable from one another (ironic considering that this stereotype is often used on me), the language seemed crude and choppy, and there didn’t seem to be any definite standard of social conduct.

Ancient Chinese grandmothers in sun hats yelled across me, spittle flying where it may. Women openly stared as I passed. People jostled me without any remorse, knocking my precariously piled cart of luggage around. (Myong, 2012)

. . . you sense Elizabeth’s mindset about Chinese culture and people — she describes

her interactions in mostly pejorative terms.

Then, when you read her realizations *after* her transformation . . .

. . . I realized the Chinese were a group of individuals, with a brazen culture that forced everyone to be aggressive to survive — and that each unique person was none the lesser because of it.

Heidi and Ken slowly led me to unveil the secret of the Chinese people: They have a raw, refreshing honesty and bluntness that they don't try to hide with coy manners and idle chitchat. They get to the point. And if you happen to sidle along on their journey and interrupt their business, they'll openly kick you to the side and keep on moving.

Oddly enough, I found these aspects of the Chinese culture enthralling and endearing. I realized I was sick of the fake smiles and glass walls we Americans are taught to perfect, and would rather have someone stare me in the eye and express what they're really guffawing about on the inside. (Myong, 2012)

. . . it's easy to spot a profound shift in Elizabeth's estimation of Chinese people and culture.

Would it be a good thing if all Americans had such an enlightened understanding? Would that improve the potential for partnering with China in ways that benefit all parties? Most important, though, in terms of transformative learning experienced by a student, it's clear in Elizabeth's narrative that a shift in her consciousness, her perceptions, has taken place.

The way we know this is because of what Elizabeth wrote. When we try to assess whether our students have had a Transformative Learning (TL) experience, we have to "see inside their minds," just as we do when we try to determine what they know, or don't, concerning course content. With Transformative Learning, however, there's very often an affective aspect connected to students' a-ha moments, and recognizing the emotional impact of TL on a student is one way to know she has successfully achieved an outcome connected to one or more of our Central Six Tenets, just as Elizabeth's experience connects to our Global and Cultural Competencies Tenet.

Two important points related to assessing TL student outcomes are illustrated by Elizabeth's story:

- 1) Students have to reflect on their learning experiences in order to bring to conscious awareness shifts in perception that might otherwise go unnoticed. In Elizabeth's case, the prompt to reflect was that she was writing a Student Voices column for a newspaper; in the case of a UCO student in your class, the prompt will be your assignment to provide such a reflection, whether it's written, or spoken, or put into a PowerPoint or a multimedia assignment. But somehow, it has to be *prompted*.
- 2) Just because there's not an easily distinguishable a-ha moment described by a

student does not mean you've failed to help that student reach a TL outcome. Such realizations are often cumulative. The important thing for UCO faculty is that we are intentional in creating such opportunities across the curriculum and in all classes. Repeated exposure to activities and environments that are mindfully built to raise the odds that TL happens will help ensure that our students will leave us with the skills, knowledge, and values that enable them to become "productive, creative, ethical and engaged citizens and leaders serving our global community."

Myong, E. (2012, September 28). An open mind is the best travel souvenir. *Dallas Morning News*. Retrieved 2013-04-23 from <http://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/local-voices/headlines/20120928-elizabeth-myong-an-open-mind-is-the-best-travel-souvenir.ece>