

The Importance of Reflection for Transformative Learning: A Portrait of Service Learning

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to observe transformational learning and identity development at the intersection of motivational and adult learning theories among 21 participants (18 emerging adults and three adults) during a two-week international service-learning trip to northern Peru. Exploring transformational learning and identity development in emerging adults (Arnett, 1997) is crucial, as existing learning theories may not fully explain their experiences in this transitional developmental phase. As participant-observer, the researcher, supported by one research assistant, collected qualitative observational data during the service, and follow-up survey responses at the end of the service-learning experience. Findings were analyzed using social science Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman-Davis, 1997) and arts-based analysis and representation. Findings confirmed salient themes in service-learning research; while participants experienced cognitive dissonance, the reflection process failed to challenge perspectives or push the boundaries of dissonance. This allowed participants to confirm preconceived biases, in some cases resulting in essentialized identity. This research confirms the importance of intentional and ongoing critical reflection, but highlights that for service learning to move beyond “voluntourism,” facilitators must engage participants in critical reflection that supports addressing difficult issues and promotes genuine growth.

KEYWORDS: arts-based research, identity development, international service learning, reflection, transformational learning, portraiture

Service learning is a teaching tool used to connect learning in the classroom with meaningful, hands-on community experiences that address real-world issues. Service learning has been a growing component of higher education since the 1970's, with a notable surge in implementation and research in the past decade. When implemented well, service-learning fosters transformative learning (Kawai, 2021; Mezirow, 1990, 1997; Papastamatis & Panitsides, 2014) in emerging adult participants. Transformative learning involves a ‘disorienting experience,’ something that runs counter to participants’ lived experience, followed by reflection on the experience that moves the learners toward reorganization and refinement of their worldviews and beliefs (Kawai, 2021; Leroux et al., 2004).

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Emerging adulthood is a developmental category that follows adolescence and precedes adulthood (Arnett, 1997; Arnett & Mitra, 2020). Sometimes described as a prolonged period of adolescence, emerging adulthood offers an extended period of identity exploration before the commitment and responsibility of adulthood is fully assumed. Because emerging adults are still navigating identity development, transformative learning is a particularly powerful process for identity clarification and self-authorship (Arnett & Mitra, 2020; Kawai, 2021; Magolda, 2023; Sherman, 2021).

In this research, I examined the experience of 21 participants (three adults and 18 emerging adults) engaged in international service learning in northern Peru. I used thematic and arts-based approaches to analyze qualitative observational and survey data to explore the process of transformative learning and identity development for emerging adults through international service learning.

Literature Review

In higher education, service learning is an approach to university-community engagements wherein students complete service as part of their assigned coursework, with the intention of both contributing meaningfully to the community and augmenting learning through real-world experience (Raddon & Harrison, 2015). Service learning can take many forms, varying in length from a few hours to a multi-semester activity, and can involve service to campus and local community, or can extend beyond state and national borders to overseas locations in the case of international service learning. Additionally, service learning can occur at the classroom level with direct application to course material, and it can take place as a program, separate from major fields of study, that designs and implements service opportunities for any university student who wishes to be involved. In this research the working definition of service learning is any service-based experience in which students work to address an identified community need and engage in reflection on that service in ways that integrate the experience.

Service learning is designated by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) as a high-impact practice, meaning that service learning can result in “significant educational benefit” (AAC&U, 2025). There are many noted positive outcomes of service learning that go beyond deeper understanding of academic content, including feelings of empowerment (Gardner, 2021; Myers, 2019; Salam et al., 2019); cultivation of positive mindsets and wellbeing (Chittum et al., 2022); enhanced ability with foreign language in cases of international service learning (Salam et al., 2019); expanded social responsibility and understanding of social issues, including a sense of opportunity and resource inequity (Chittum et al., 2022); increased ability to acknowledge and address social justice issues (Mitchell, 2018); and improved image or reputation of the university itself (Raddon & Harrison, 2015).

Despite the myriad documented benefits of service learning, there remain critiques and limitations of that need to be addressed. The traditional approach to service learning identifies dichotomous groups of privileged and underprivileged (Bruce, 2013). This approach invites students to participate in primarily charitable projects, wherein students fill an identified gap or address a need. This approach is problematic in that it does not challenge the structural components of injustice and instead serves to reinforce existing inequality (Bruce, 2013). Additionally, traditional service learning is often rooted in settler-colonial logic (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019), where the underprivileged group being served is recognized as having knowledge or wisdom that is then extracted for the benefit of the students (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). Traditional service learning conveys the perception that change requires external intervention because the individuals in need of service are incapable of helping themselves, a view could be held by the students performing

the service, the community receiving the service, or neighboring communities witnessing the service (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019; Trigos-Carrillo et al., 2020).

Another limitation of traditional service learning is the potential for students to essentialize identity, distilling peoples lived experience to a set of innate, unchanging elements that define who they are from birth to death (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). Essentializing identity not only minimizes the complexity of lived experience, it also carries the implication that people and communities being served are in need of outside intervention because of who they are and are also therefore limited in their capacity for change, even with outside intervention (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019).

The social justice orientation to service-learning foregrounds issues of power, privilege, and oppression, while seeking to analyze the institutionalized manifestations of that oppression (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). Critical service learning extends the social justice approach by adding the critical self-examination of each participant's positionality and relationship to colonialism and knowledge (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). The social justice and critical orientation to service learning incorporate meaningful and ongoing reflection that supports students as they navigate situations that challenge their worldview. Critical reflection promotes growth and understanding for students engaged in service learning.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning theory, first conceptualized in adult education research, describes the developmental process for autonomous thinking to replace uncritical reliance on previously acquired points of view, beliefs, and worldviews (Mezirow, 1997). Adult learners have many years of experience with and within the world, and as such have developed networks of understanding that allow them to quickly make sense of new learning and experiences. Mezirow (1997) termed these networks 'frames of reference' (p. 5), which define the limits of learning because, once established, adults rely on their frames of reference as heuristics for decision making and understanding and ignore or reject ideas that do not easily fit within existing frames.

Mezirow (1997) further divided frames of refence into 'habits of mind' and 'points of view' (p.5). Habits of mind are deeply ingrained assumptions that are acquired through cultural or political experience and education. Habits of mind are more enduring than points of view. An adult can assume varied points of view, but a habit of mind is a lived experience and, once acquired, is not easily changed (Mezirow, 1997). Transformation of frames of reference occurs through critical reflection on experiences that are not neatly explained by existing habits of mind (Mezirow, 1990; 1997). While originally developed as a theory to understand learning in adulthood, transformative learning theory can also elucidate the learning process in emerging adulthood.

Most undergraduate college students in the United States, while perhaps meeting the legal definition of adults, are better described by the developmental category of emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is the stage between the end of adolescence and the onset of adult commitments (Arnett, 1997). It is a period of life that is characterized by continued identity exploration as young people delay the commitments of adulthood, such as marriage and having children (Arnett, 1997). Arnett and Mitra (2020) identified five distinct developmental domains of emerging adulthood: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities and optimism. Identity explorations create a sense of instability, as the lives of emerging adults shift depending on which identities are being explored (Arnett & Mitra, 2020). Emerging adults tend to move away from their parents for the first time, and delay having children until their late 20's, which gives them an extended period of time to focus on themselves. Emerging adults often feel somewhere in-between adolescence and adulthood and maintain that many possible futures still exist as viable options (Arnett & Mitra, 2020).

Emerging adulthood as a developmental period has been observed in the United States and Canada, though more traditional non-Western cultures tend to have more concrete understandings of when the transition to adulthood happens (Arnett & Mitra, 2020). Additionally, the developmental tasks identified by Arnett and Mitra (2020) may not be limited to the developmental period of emerging adulthood. Most of these domains continue to be relevant in later age ranges as well (with the exception of feeling in-between). Despite this limitation to the theory of emerging adulthood, this unique extended period of identity exploration provides a useful frame for understanding the process of transformation through service learning.

Emerging adults in the United States commonly enter college as the next stage-appropriate step for their life, and bring with them a set of well-formed and unexamined values

and beliefs. Through various dissonance-producing experiences in college, emerging adults make sense of competing ideas and perspectives, and in so doing begin to clarify and develop their own values and beliefs (Sherman, 2021). Dissonance-producing experiences include observations and interactions that do not readily fit with pre-existing values and beliefs, and include experiences of high-intensity dissonance, which triggers intense emotional reactions and self-questioning; and low-intensity dissonance, which is more familiar and less contradictory to pre-existing beliefs (Trigos-Carrillo et al., 2020).

Sherman (2021) made the case for mindfulness as an important component of the transformative process, because it moves students beyond the uncritical and automatic organization of perception through preexisting values and beliefs. Mindfulness supports critical thinking by encouraging students to step back, recognize inattention, and generate new ways of looking at the issue. Students who participate in service learning are often faced with real-world circumstances that do not align with their pre-existing frames of mind or beliefs. In order for transformational learning to occur, the students need to reflect on the space between their service experience and their pre-existing understanding, which provides powerful opportunities for self-clarification of identity (Sherman, 2021).

Critical Reflection in Transformational Learning

Reflection is not only important to transformational learning, is the medium through which self-clarification and self-authorship occur (Salam, 2019; Sherman, 2021). Critical reflection is a rigorous process aimed at identifying and disassembling faulty assumptions while navigating the discomfort of experiences that challenge preexisting worldviews (Kawai, 2021; Leroux et al., 2025). As an ongoing and iterative process, self-clarification can be made explicit through supported reflection on disorienting or dissonance-provoking experiences with service. Reflection can also support students in processing difficult emotions that surface as through their service encounters (Trigos-Carrillo et al., 2020). For example, students participating in international service learning may witness extreme forms of poverty or other inequality, forms of high-intensity dissonance which can elicit powerful emotional responses. Supportive reflection can help them meaningfully navigate the emotional elements of the experience and can also support development of relationships through empathy building (Leroux et al., 2024). The collective process of clarifying identity, worldviews, and beliefs is known as self-authorship (Magolda, 2023), which Magolda identified as a 21st Century skill.

Critical reflection is not likely to happen spontaneously; if left on their own, students are more likely to dismiss the dissonance generated through the disorienting dilemma or explain it away using preexisting frames of mind. Service-learning facilitators need to plan for regular, structured, and longitudinal reflection support (Trigos-Carrillo et al., 2020). Reflection prompts should be structured in a way that encourages students to move beyond descriptive accounts of

their experience toward deep inquiry, and to provide for students clear examples of the types of reflection responses that constitute meaningful engagement with the reflection prompt (Gardner, 2021; Leroux et al., 2024). Finally, critical reflection is unlikely to take place as a one-time question-answer exchange. Service-learning facilitators are encouraged to push students toward confronting the contradictions and biases that surface through their service encounters, and to provide ongoing reflection support even after the service has ended (Taylor et al., 2018).

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to examine the potential for transformational learning and identity development of adults and emerging adults during a two-week international service-learning trip to northern Peru. Transformational learning was operationalized as meaningful engagement in self-authorship activities after encountering high-impact dissonance during their service. I examined the potential for transformation learning through arts-based research, which includes the systematic use of artistic methods or media in any portion of the research process (McNiff, 2008). In particular, I used social science portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) and arts-based analysis and representation of findings (Beddes, 2017) to describe the learning and limitations of this ISL experience. Arts-based research embraces subjective human experiences – including sensation, emotion, imagination, and ways of knowing and being in the world as necessary for a robust understanding and representation of the complexity of human experience in research (Wang & Fu, 2025).

Portraiture is a technique in which the researcher works to ‘record and interpret the perspectives and experiences of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions – their authority, knowledge, and wisdom’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Successful Portraiture requires extensive context and description and is transparent in the knowledge that there is never a single story, rather, the researcher selects the themes that will be portrayed (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In portraiture, the researcher, or portraitist, seeks to construct an aesthetic representation of the themes under study, embedded within context. As portraitist, I approached the data with the goal of constructing a “credible story – putting pieces together to create a logical coherence” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 246). In this research, I extend the practice of descriptive portraiture to include a visual representation of the research findings.

The service trip under study was hosted by a community-engaged learning center at a large university in the western United States. The service was not directly tied to any academic major, and no college credit was offered for involvement. Participants self-selected to participate and paid their own way, either through private means, raising donations, or applying for service scholarships. Ethics approval (Institutional Review Board, #14-005) was obtained through the university hosting the service. Names of participants and locations have been changed.

Participants

Of the 23 students and alumni who attended, 21 agreed to participate in the research. At the time of service, 16 participants were enrolled as traditional-age undergraduate students, two were recent graduates who had completed their baccalaureate work one month prior to the service, and three were alumni who had graduated at least five years prior to the service. Two alumni had also completed master’s degrees. All participants were white from middle class backgrounds.

Positionality Statement

At the time of data collection, I was mid-way through my dissertation work in educational psychology and was interested in better understanding the processes of meaning-making that occur through service-learning. I was approximately the same age as the participating alumni and one of the trip organizers. I had previously worked at the university sponsoring the service and had a working relationship with both trip organizers and several of the recent graduate student participants. At that point in time, I had also lived most of my life in the region of the sponsoring university and had grappled with the self-clarification process in my own frames of mind. While I was drawn to this research in part because I had never been to Peru, my primary reason for participating in the service and research was excitement at the prospect of witnessing transformation in people who had similar background experiences to my own.

Data Collection

There were two participant-observer researchers during data collection: the principal researcher and an assistant. As participant-observers, we were both active participants in the research, and our research activities were known to the group (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Both researchers kept observation journals and were engaged in data collection through observation. Observation was focused in nature; the researchers paid particular attention to students' interactions, how they approached service activities each day, and their levels of engagement. Because our role as participants came first, our observation notes were often documented as reflection or memories of events during breaks, meals, after conversation with participants, and while on the bus in transit to or from service sites. Additionally, both researchers kept descriptive notes of the settings for each service site. A benefit of assuming the role of participant observer is the depth of information we were both privy to during the service, while also being seen as somewhat outside of the group of full participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Observation also took place during group reflections at the end of each day. Reflection themes were selected by the trip organizers and were usually announced a day in advance so that participants had an opportunity to prepare their contribution to the group conversation. The reflection meetings occurred at the end of each day and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The group sat or stood in a circle and participants were allowed time to write about the day's topic in their reflection journals, and then the trip organizers asked for participants willing to share their perspectives. Out of concern that participants would be less willing to speak freely if reflections were audio-recorded, we chose not to use audio recording and instead relied on detailed observation notes.

Triangulation of data for internal validity was approached through daily systematic comparison of observation notes of both researchers and through regularly following up with participants throughout the service to ensure documentation and interpretation of their statements on was accurate to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, all participants were invited to complete a follow-up survey at the end of the trip, asking for more information about their experience. The open-ended questionnaire was distributed via email, and participants who did not respond within one week were sent one reminder. Nine of the 21 participants completed the survey: five undergraduates, two recent graduates, and two alumni. Responses from the follow-up surveys were woven into the written portrait and discussion sections. These multiple materials were examined during data collection and throughout data analysis to confirm emergent themes were present in multiple data sources, lending support for the interpretation represented in the written and visual portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1998; Richardson, 2024).

Data Analysis

I used arts-based analysis (Beddes, 2017), and Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) to analyze the data. Arts-based analysis is a reflexive and iterative process (Beddes, 2017). I first recorded myself reading aloud the information from the data set. I then listened to, read, and re-read the data, clustering participants into various groupings, for example undergraduates versus alumni, and day-by-day reflection notes, to better understand the occurrence of the themes as they emerged: identity, international travel, traditional service learning. I made additional notes and sketches as I immersed myself in the data, a form of arts-based thematic coding. Following the sketches, I experimented with various mediums, including charcoal on paper and oil painting; the end result took the form of a colored pencil drawing.

Following systematic arts-based analysis, I loaded all transcripts into Atlas.ti and analyzed the data beginning with the themes that had emerged through my arts-based analysis. I also documented emergent codes, including those relevant to varied perspectives on service learning, intrapsychic factors, components of service learning, and components of transformative learning. This process crystallized the representation of findings in my arts-based analysis, and revealed additional themes relevant to this research, which became touchstones for the written portrait.

Table 1
Themes and Subthemes of Arts-Based Research Analysis

| Themes | Description | Subthemes |
|--------------------|---|--|
| Emerging Adulthood | Statements representing aspects of this period of human growth and development. | Self-authorship Self-focus Optimism |
| Service-Learning | Statements addressing theoretical framework of or purpose for participating in International Service Learning. | Traditional service-learning orientation International Travel Identity exploration |
| Reflection | Statements of participants' experiences that moved beyond simply recounting events of the day by acknowledging lessons learned or beliefs challenged by the experience. | High-impact dissonance Low-impact dissonance Emotion |
| Development | Participants either articulate or demonstrate a shift in belief, perspective, or understanding as an outcome of service participation. | Growth Learning Transformation Confirmation of previously held beliefs |

Through Portraiture, I pulled from the most commonly represent themes from the analysis to provide a narrative of the International Service-Learning trip, using rich description of participant experiences as documented in the dataset. Within portraiture I am not claiming to represent a single objective story; rather, I relied on systematic analysis of the data to select which

themes are relevant to this narrative as work to present an aesthetic whole,; one interpretation of events framed through context and reflexivity (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The results are represented in narrative form; this is not a simple travelogue or moment-by-moment account of what occurred; I have combined ongoing conversation with participants and observation of service and reflections with post-trip surveys to present an aesthetic whole (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1998).

Context for the Service-Learning Trip

In the months leading up to the trip, participants engaged in donation drives to gather books and laptop computer donations that would be used to establish a library at one of the service sites. Participants also had the opportunity to attend Spanish language workshops to learn communication basics, a valuable tool for international travel.

The first day in Arroyo Seco, Peru the city in which the majority of the service took place, was hectic and disorienting. The group was given a warm welcome at the airport and allowed three hours to settle into their respective host sites. Around noon, participants gathered for an elaborate welcome presentation at La Universidad, the partner school in Arroyo Seco that was collaborating on the service projects. The presentation included a luncheon of traditional Peruvian specialties such as papas a la Huancaína, ceviche, and lomo saltado. During lunch, students of La Universidad showcased traditional dance and musical performances. Between each performance an employee from La Universidad gave a short welcome and expression of gratitude for the group's willingness to travel and serve in Peru.

After approximately four hours at La Universidad, the group toured each of the service sites for an orientation on expected work to be performed at each location. There were multiple service locations in Arroyo Seco, all within about a 30-minute drive from La Universidad, our headquarters for the week.

On a typical service day, participants had a choice between four service sites. At the morning meeting, the students who had been working at each site designated a spokesperson to give an overview of the day's expected projects and requested the number of volunteers and supplies needed for the day. After site reports, all participants selected their service site for the day.

Logistical Challenges

A large-group ISL trip will inevitably encounter logistical problems. Discussing logistical challenges is important in that they influenced data collection and informed the results and interpretation of data. First, the trip organizers did not plan around the limitations of cell phone service and Internet access in Peru. There were five host sites where participants slept and ate breakfast, each approximately 10 minutes apart by bus or taxi. When there were changes to the day's agenda, the information could not be effectively disseminated until all participants had gathered at headquarters. This contributed to a growing feeling among participants that decision-making was a top-down endeavor, and that feedback and discussion were not expected.

Second, there was poor communication between the ISL organizers and the partners at La Universidad. The president of La Universidad, 'Paulo,' was engaged in a political campaign for mayor of Arroyo Seco at the time of the service trip, which was not communicated to the group until our arrival in Peru, and the overlap between our service and the political campaign became a source of tension and frustration.

A third setback and logistical limitation was illness that moved through the group in waves. As a rule, and for safety reasons, all participants were asked to stay in groups of three; thus, when

one participant was too sick to engage in the day's activities, three participants were out for the day. One service participant fell seriously ill on day three and was hospitalized, which effectively created an unexpected service site, as two healthy participants, one of whom had to be fluent in Spanish, were assigned to stay with her at the hospital.

Another logistical limitation pertained to organization and time management. With host sites and service sites spread across Arroyo Seco, daylight hours were eaten up in transportation. In the beginning, a bus picked participants up from host sites and delivered them to headquarters at La Universidad where service assignments were established. Participants were then bussed ten minutes to the nearest site. After unloading participants and supplies, the bus continued to the next site, and so on. At approximately 12:30 pm, the bus picked up participants in reverse order and returned them to headquarters for lunch. The process then repeated for afternoon service. With this schedule, the site of final drop off and first pick up lost nearly four hours of potential service per day.

Finally, as participant observers, my research assistant and I made conscious effort to minimize our influence on conversations between participants. In retrospect, we could have spent more time cultivating relationships. Relationship building was difficult due to the large distances between each host site; all down time outside of organized service was spent in small groups of participants. Due to this logistical limitation, it is possible that we missed out on potentially meaningful interactions.

Results: A Portrait of Service Learning

The following written portrait is a chronological synthesis of the data collected throughout the international service-learning trip.

Culture: Day One

Students were asked to reflect on cultural differences they had observed. Several students reflected on the level of poverty they were witnessing for the first time. Participants who had experience with international travel made connections to previous travel. Zach drew similarities between the cultures in Peru and Jamaica in terms of living conditions and access to resources. Lucas observed that the people we had met and worked with thus far 'live really simple. Just the basics.' Glen spoke about the chaos of traffic and his surprise that it seemed to work in spite of the 'madness.' One of the trip leaders built on Glen's observation, saying that traffic can be used as a metaphor for culture in general, by standing back and studying the chaos in order to figure out how you can fit into the pattern. Several participants commented on feeling frustrated by the slow pace of the day, saying they had to remind themselves to 'reflect and enjoy the culture' and to be 'willing to take it in.'

Status: Day Two

The reflection theme for day two was to observe and reflect on examples of status. Some of the female participants spoke about their status as women, stating that community members at the service sites seemed to believe that women would not or could not participate in manual labor. Hunter spoke about elderly residents in the community around Garcia Lorca Park who would come out, sit in the shade, and observe the service while younger community members worked alongside the group. Hunter cited this as a marker of status rather than a diminished capacity for work in old age. Krista observed that our ethnicity defined status for us as a group, because simply being a

white and from the US in Arroyo Seco ‘elicits responses’ from people, for example many community members would come out ‘simply to watch the white Americans work.’

Josh (research assistant) and Lucas relayed an experience that occurred at the Perrito Moreno Daycare. The two were in an alley behind the daycare, shoveling dirt into a wheelbarrow that would later be mixed with water and rice husk to create adobe mud for mortar. As they worked, a taxi driver stopped to find out what they were up to. The man was friendly, and he thanked them, saying it was nice to see gringos in the ‘barrio.’ For Josh and Lucas, this experience underscored their status as white men providing service in a neighborhood considered by many as too dangerous for service.

People: Days Three and Four

Participants were instructed to think about someone who had made an impression on them and to consider how that person had impacted their thinking. Based on an interaction that had occurred at his host site, Alvin shared, ‘it is interesting to see how Peruvian people have less material things and are happy.’ He stated that the service and the experiences with his host ‘shifted my perspective and makes me want to be less materialistic when I get home.’

Cassie spoke about a worker at the Perrito Moreno Daycare, ‘Sancho,’ a short and solid 66-year-old man who wore a back brace and worked ‘like a beast,’ (a western United States colloquialism for working hard, getting the job done, and not complaining). According to Cassie, ‘Sancho worked constantly, doing hard work, lifting anything you put in front of him. I am learning what work actually means thanks to Sancho.’

Jess spoke of the children she had met up to that point at the various service sites. She talked about her own daughter, eight-years-old at the time, and expressed a desire to create a broader world by teaching her about other cultures. Jess said that the children made her realize that ‘it is important to know what is going on outside yourself.’ Star also spoke about children, although her tone was markedly different. She shared, ‘this has been the best experience for me. I came not knowing what a third world country would be like. It is hard seeing people in these circumstances, but they are happy.’ Star spoke with admiration about the children who brought her water and fruit throughout the day. She expressed a desire to ‘take them home’ with her.

Morale: Day Seven

There were no reflections on days five and six; over the weekend, groups were taken on a guided site-seeing expedition and excursion to the beach. By day seven, several participants had fallen sick and one had been hospitalized. Participants were growing frustrated with various aspects of the service, with some complaining about poor communication and wasted time and resources. The objective of this reflection was to bring the group together and boost morale. Participants were asked to indicate with their fingers, out of ten, what they felt the group morale was at that point, and then what their individual morale was (one being the lowest and ten the highest). The group averaged five, and the individual average was seven.

Zach spoke about his perception that some of the members in our group were working harder and contributing more than others and identified perspective as a barrier to morale. ‘Some people in this group are looking at their experience here as a vacation over service. We need to shift perspective.’ Gale and Glen validated what Zach observed but shifted the conversation to the frustration with the limited work being accomplished. Gale stated, ‘I think people (in the group) are worried and discouraged at the amount of work we have left.’ Glen said that the group was

confused and needed better organization and leadership. ‘We want to serve and do what we can, we want to be productive. We need to feel like we are accomplishing our goals.’

Cassie expressed disillusionment from seeing ‘negative progress at the sites.’ After a day away from service the group returned the park and found new broken glass in the sand and more garbage and litter where the students had already cleaned. Cassie said, ‘It is hard to think about coming back in a year, it is discouraging to see negative progress. I guess we need to enjoy the moment and pray success will continue.’ Cassie also noted that residents in the neighborhoods were watching us, and she wondered, “Do they think what we are doing is beneficial? Or are they thinking we are wasting our time?”

Seasons was also frustrated with the lack of progress and asked the group organizers what the community members had been promised. ‘We need a schedule that we all have access to so that we can accomplish more and get closer to our goals.’ At this point, the participants began to take ownership of the projects and identify ways to maximize the time spent on each site. Outcomes of this conversation were to increase service time by having lunch on-site, identifying tangible goals at each site, and streamlining communication from each job site so that the supplies were available in the morning.

Also notable, although participants had flexibility with which site they would serve, by this point in the trip they had established relationships at specific locations and developed feelings of ownership for the projects at that location. As a result, most participants spent the remainder of their time at a favored service location.

Name One Success: Day Eight

The group used the next day’s reflection time to share successes. Participants listed tangible examples of progress, such as completing painting projects, digging holes for playground equipment, and finishing cement floors at the daycare. Star said that her success was when ‘a girl gave me her favorite bracelet. This shows the community is really excited.’ Zach voiced a desire to do work that has a more lasting effect. While tangible successes were great morale-boosters, he wanted to do something more meaningful and enduring than painting playground equipment. This was a reference to installing a water pipe in The Barrio and setting up microbusinesses for women; projects that had enticed him to sign up for the service trip in the first place which had been cancelled upon our arrival in Peru.

Education: Day Nine

Participants were asked to reflect on ways that education can change a community or a person. Star was the first to share her perspective on this theme, ‘I have gained new perspective from being in a third world country. It’s worse than I thought. Our example is more important than anything. They look up to us, and education helped me get here.’

Cassie connected this reflection theme to her academic experience working on a secondary education teaching degree. Cassie stated, ‘We are doing long-lasting work at the day care, but education happens everywhere, and I am excited about what it can do. Education can happen in more places than the classroom.’ Cassie spoke about the importance of dedication and drive, and how lucky she has been with her opportunity. She closed her reflection by once again referencing Sancho and stating, ‘education doesn’t need to be formal. We can be self-taught, and I feel extremely lucky to witness the self-education of the Peruvian people.’ The assumption that he had no formal education was purely conjecture. Sancho owned his own business, supervised employees, and had at least two college-educated children. While we did not know his educational

background, it is more likely that he had at least completed the national compulsory education and some formal training in construction than that he was ‘self-taught.’

Others echoed Cassie’s reflection by reiterating the idea that opportunity is ancillary, and that drive and motivation determine who people become. Krista stated, ‘No matter where you come from, who you become is up to you.’ Jess contrasted Cassie’s reflection with an experience she had shared with Glen and the researchers earlier that day at the Perrito Moreno Daycare. A teenager, Jesús, had been hanging around while we worked. Jess self-identified her bias and admitted feeling uncomfortable with his presence at first, as he just sat and watched. Eventually the job foreman put Jesús to work carrying heavy buckets of sand and cement. In the afternoon, as participants sat waiting for the bus, Jesús asked if they would teach him some English words. He procured a piece of wood that had been used to level cement and scraped off the large, dried chunks. He pulled a torn scrap of folded graphing paper and the nub of a pencil from his pocket and crouched with his tools like a student at a desk. For nearly thirty minutes he asked how to say various words and phrases in English, neatly and phonetically writing the words in small, careful print.

Jess, through an interpreter, asked Jesús about the school system in Peru. She learned that many families choose to pay for their children’s education rather than send them to the public school, and that the national public school system only covered students until age 16. She learned that Jesús had aged out of the public school system, and his family could not afford further schooling. Jess made connections from two perspectives. As a mother, she said ‘It is sad that Jesús has different educational opportunities based on where he was born, versus the opportunities my daughter has based on where she was born.’ She also wondered if her daughter would be as proactive in self-educating. ‘Natural curiosity,’ she pointed out, ‘will only get you so far without opportunity.’ As a teacher, she shared ‘I know I will go home and teach differently, I don’t know how, but it will be different.’

Following Jess, Zach stated that he had gone to private school, so the fact that school was not free for the youth of Peru did not shock him. Bill described education as a construct that fosters kindness and cultivates caring. He stated, ‘I am who I am because of education. Education has given me the opportunity to travel, to participate in internships, to have learning experiences outside the classroom. There is more to our lives than our hometown. Education helps people help the world.’

Attitude: Day Ten

The plan for Atacama was one full day of service during which we would establish two school libraries using donated books and computers that participants had gathered prior to their trip. The remainder of the day would be spent running a field day for school children. Unfortunately, the donated supplies had been tied up in customs in Lima, and we were not able to deliver the computers or establish the libraries. The group organizers made the decision to travel to Atacama anyway, where we were to spend a full day providing field-day activities in the oppressive heat.

The school did not appear to be prepared for our visit or the change in our plan, and one school official voiced frustration that we brought volunteers who were not fluent in Spanish. During lunch, we spoke with participants individually about their experience and perception of the service for the day. Most expressed frustration and disappointment with how the day unfolded. The reflection prompt for that evening was announced during lunch: attitude.

Attitude.

The participants who expressed frustration with the day’s activities in individual conversation were silent during the group discussion on attitude. Most discussion participants

agreed that attitude can either facilitate or be a barrier to learning. Hunter stated, ‘If you don’t have a good attitude, you can’t learn because you’re too focused on the situation instead of learning.’ Glen stated, ‘Your focus of the moment influences your attitude. Life or happiness isn’t a certain circumstance.’ Glen observed that Peruvian people seem happier than people in the United States, despite their circumstances.

Lynda reflected on attitude saying, ‘You can’t always control your situation, but you can choose your response. Attitude is important because you can’t always change the circumstances.’ Glen agreed with Lynda, saying that ‘attitude is not a reflection of your circumstances, you can change your attitudes quickly and easily, at the snap of a finger.’ Bill quickly jumped in, saying that it is important to have a positive attitude, but it is not as easy to change your attitude as Glen described. ‘Having a good attitude doesn’t mean you’re OK with the circumstances.’

The Water Campaign: Day Eleven

The morning of day 11 we finished the park projects and most of the work at the daycare. Participants at the daycare were not allowed to apply plaster and paint the adobe walls, plant the grass and flowers, or hang the doors on the bathroom. Participants were frustrated that they were not allowed to see the project through to its final state and were not told why they were not allowed to participate in these finishing touches.

In the afternoon we were bused to The Barrio, where we had planned to install a pipeline that would bring water to the neighborhood. We had been told early in the trip that the city officials had not approved the pipeline project, so instead our service was to follow a water truck through the neighborhood and distribute buckets of water to the residents. This was meant to be meaningful service to the residents, who reportedly only received water truck service twice per month.

Upon arrival at The Barrio, we were given stickers for Paulo’s political campaign, told to affix them to the buckets, fill the buckets with water, and give one to each household in the neighborhood. The message seemed to be ‘elect me and I will bring more water.’ The group was divided, with many participants stating that they felt like pawns, and others feeling grateful for the opportunity to participate. The division in the group caused a palpable rift, and heated words were exchanged.

Reflection: What Was the Reaction and Why?

The final reflection centered on the experience of water delivery. The trip organizers established safe-space ground rules and then gave instructions to take apart the experience and find meaning. Similar to the ‘attitude’ reflection, many of the more upset and frustrated participants did not contribute to the discussion. Jess expressed frustration at not being informed exactly what we would be doing that day. She felt deceived because we were told that the truck only delivers to the neighborhood twice per month, but the residents told her that it comes every Friday.

Zach was frustrated because he did not realize how politicized our service had become through Paulo’s campaign. Other participants echoed Zach’s frustration, saying that they would have appreciated more information about the political partnership prior to the service trip. The trip organizers acknowledged the break in communication and stated that they did not realize how closely woven the campaign and the service would be. One of the organizers stated, ‘The best way to do democratic engagement is to ensure the participants are well informed. That didn’t happen.’

Cassie was upset for reasons not tied to the politics of the service. ‘Suddenly we couldn’t even talk to each other. Why can’t we just respect each other? Why can’t we give service in whatever way it comes, together?’ In response to Cassie’s question, Glen said that what happened

earlier that day is a natural part of any relationship or group dynamic. ‘The conversation we are having now is positive.’

The End of the Service

When the two weeks of service concluded, the participants boarded a plane to Southern Peru, where they engaged in tourism and site-seeing. They stayed together as a group, visiting major cultural sites including Cusco and Machu-Picchu, before returning home. There were no reflections held during the tourism component of the trip.

Arts-Based Representation of the Research Findings

After familiarizing myself with the data set, I made multiple sketches and found myself homing in on elements that highlight differences in power and privilege. I used mirror image to represent essentialized identity, a potential negative outcome of ISL (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). The main figure in the image is positioned in the hemispheric north, as indicated by the compass and the white picket fence. Intentionally androgenous, the figure clutches a suitcase jammed with souvenirs and keepsakes, while releasing money to the global south. This is a representation of the traditional, charitable and settler-colonial perspective on service learning. The process went through various iterations, and the final arts-based representation (Figure 1) was created using Prismacolor pencils on paper.

Figure 1

Arts-Based Representation of Research Findings



Discussion

In this research, I set out to observe the process of transformational learning in emerging adults engaged in international service learning in northern Peru. This goal was tempered by the ongoing nature of meaning-making and self-clarification (Sherman, 2021), processes that are unlikely to occur in the short-term. Despite limited observation of transformation, participants did exhibit growth, framed within identity exploration, self-focus, and optimism: salient components of emerging adulthood (Arnett & Mitra, 2020).

International Service Learning and Emerging Adulthood

Most participants shared statements of the emerging adult domains of identity exploration and self-focus, either through reflection statements or in follow-up survey responses. Participants Several participants enrolled in the service trip with the goal of ‘finding themselves,’ many were drawn to the trip for the opportunity for international travel, and several attended because they had one or more friend attending the trip and wanted to spend time with those people. One participant reflected that, while he hadn’t expected the trip to affect him, he was surprised by the impact it was having on his life. These statements are consistent with the tendency for emerging adults to prioritize identity development, and to seek out experiences that support the process of self-clarification (Arnett & Mitra, 2020; Magolda, 2023; Sherman, 2021).

Self-focus, another domain of emerging adulthood, was also evident in reflection and survey responses (Arnett & Mitra, 2020). Participants also talked about the way they felt they were being received and perceived by the community; they talked about the importance of “feeling like” they were making a difference, shifting the focus from the service and onto their own experiences. Statements of self-focus also commonly overlapped with identity exploration in terms of participants stated expectations for their experience with the service.

Optimism, another domain of emerging adulthood (Arnett & Mitra, 2020), was also evident in many of the participants’ reflections and survey responses. Participants expressed optimism through the hope to become “a better person” through their service experience, hope for completing all of the service projects we had originally been slated to perform, optimism around interactions with community members. Some participants also used optimistic framing around frustrating situations, for example stating that the trip organizers were doing their best, and that people may not be able to control a situation but can always choose how to respond.

While several participants expressed growth and a desire for self-clarification through this service (Sherman, 2020), the statements of growth were vague and under-articulated. Lucas indicated he had changed but did not elaborate, and Cassie said that she spent a lot of time thinking about how she was changing because of the experience, but expressed that it is hard to explain, and that you just have to do it to understand it. Other participants shared that the service reminded them what was important, or that it shifted how they think about material possessions. Each of these are examples of growth potential; participants were aware of the potential for change through their experiences, but because the reflections stopped at the descriptive level (Gardner, 2021), and students were not pushed to confront their biases (Kawai, 2021), they were not equipped to articulate that change, making it possible for participants to return to preexisting frames of mind at the end of the service trip (Trigos-Carrillo et al., 2020).

Critical Reflection and Transformational Learning

Most participants shared experiences of high-impact dissonance (Trigos-Carrillo et al., 2020), including the reality of shifting broken glass from playground sand, first encounters with extreme poverty, differences in education and opportunity, and cultural comparisons between the

United States and Peru. While potentially less impactful, several students also expressed dissonance around the level of immaturity and entitlement of some group members, and with thinking the trip would run as a well-oiled machine because it had been planned by university employees. All of these experiences with dissonance held potential for growth through critical reflection, though reflections were not structured in a way to support that growth.

Daily reflections centered on topics that held potential for reflection on high-intensity dissonance: status, people, culture, and education (Trigos-Carrillo et al., 2020). The trip organizers clearly recognized the importance of reflection given the time and intentionality around daily group reflection. However, reflections were ultimately insufficient for cultivating transformative learning for several reasons. First, announcing reflection themes ahead of time may have been useful in structuring group reflection and maximizing the time allotted for reflection. However, announcing the theme for the day may have discouraged participation from students who had experiences of high-intensity dissonance if their contribution did not match the day's reflection topic. Additionally, at times, the trip organizers worked to keep the group positive, even superficially, as illustrated by the 'name one success' reflection following the 'morale' reflection. The prioritization of positivity was perhaps most clearly demonstrated during the 'attitude' reflection, which was introduced by the trip organizers with leading instructions, 'How did your attitude limit your learning; how can you benefit from an attitude of gratitude?' There were discontented participants who would not share during this reflection because their opinion was dismissed before it was voiced, or because they felt guilty for their negative feelings.

Second, the group organizers did not push students to navigate the boundaries of the dissonance in their experiences (Kawai, 2021). For example, students ascribed the slow pace and disorganization of service to the Peruvian culture and to employees at the partner university, and several students spoke about working in a 'third world country,' all shared as statement of fact without being shaped or challenged by the group organizers. Rather than identifying these as teachable moments for critical reflection, the trip organizers allowed participants to share such instances from their day as statements of fact, a practice that is more likely to lead to confirmation of preconceived biases or to dismissing the challenging elements of their experience (Mezirow, 1990, 1997; Trigos-Carrillo et al., 2020).

Third, reflections were a one-and-done part of the daily agenda, with no opportunity to revisit or further explore the experience. This approach may have undermined the importance of reflection. Students shared their experience from the day in a one-and-done statement of fact; a form of catharsis rather than reflection, complete with an aura of resolution. Instead, participants would have greatly benefitted from ongoing reflection support in the weeks and months following the international service-learning trip as they worked to integrate their experiences into their built worlds. Ongoing reflection support after the service has ended is more supportive of transformative learning (Taylor et al., 2018)

Theoretical Orientation of Service

In general, most students on this international service-learning trip adopted a traditional service-learning orientation (Bruce, 2013), though it is apparent that progressive and social-justice-oriented principles were also considered in the planning process. For example, the trip organizers collaborated with local partners to identify needs and to coordinate the service within their own communities and built in time for daily reflection on service experiences. However, the reasons for and importance of this approach were not communicated to participants, and the practice felt misaligned with the traditional service-learning orientation they had adopted. For example, when the participants at the Perrito Moreno daycare were not allowed to help with the finishing touches,

there was no discussion on the value of passing the project on to the community or transitioning the responsibility for beautifying the space to the families and parents of children who attended the school.

Conclusion

This research highlights the importance of reflection in service learning. In this research, the anticipated transformative learning and accompanying identity shifts were only minimally observed. Many participants adopted a social expectation that ‘service changes people,’ without necessarily experiencing or being able to articulate that change. For volunteerism to be service learning and not “voluntourism,” there must be intentional focus on reflexivity; going through the motions will not result in transformational learning. It would be more effective for facilitators to challenge perspectives, engaging participants in concrete, critical reflection of their experiences (Kawai, 2021; Mezirow, 1990; 1997). This practice requires a strong relationship between the educator and the participants, along with an established safe space where participants are comfortable engaging in conversations about the dissonance, discomfort, and biases they may be experiencing.

Limitations to this research include the homogenous sample under study. All participants were white adults or emerging adults, and all were raised with a Judeo-Christian worldview. Another limitation is data collection relying primarily on observational data. This was a strategic data collection decision, as we considered whether and how a recording device might shift participants’ willingness to be open and honest during group reflections, but it may have reduced the strength and generalizability of findings. Throughout the research I worked to mitigate this limitation by comparing my field notes to those of my research assistant, engaging in discussions with participants during and after reflections, and offering participants an opportunity to respond to a follow-up survey about their experience. Unfortunately, this survey had a low response rate.

Transformative learning theory is a useful lens for working with undergraduate college students. While the participants in this study were United States citizens, the larger theoretical framework of transformative learning is not geographically bound. Likewise, while emerging adulthood is a developmental category most distinctly observed in North America, the domains of identity exploration and self-focus remain relevant to many age ranges and cultural contexts (Arnett & Mitra, 2020).

This research offers innovative methodological tools for global practitioners. It offers an example of applying social science portraiture and arts-based analysis to record and interpret the voices, experiences, and context of the topic under study as a model for qualitative assessment for documenting human experience that can be adapted as needed to diverse cultural settings.

Future research could include the impact of targeted training for service-learning educators on critical reflection for transformative learning. Additionally, research could further investigate the influence of different reflection methodologies on transformative learning outcomes. For example, the differences in outcomes between individual versus group reflection, arts-based approaches, or written versus verbal reflection.

Ethical Considerations

In preparation for this research, I completed the required courses for the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) and complied with all requirements of the Weber State University Social Science Institutional Review Board. All participants in this research were fully informed of the research design and purpose before consenting to participate. Participants were also informed that they had the right to withdraw from this research at any time without negative consequence.

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