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## L2 Journal

### Title

The Transformative Power of the Study Abroad Experience

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/77n4q6rs>

### Journal

L2 Journal, 15(2)

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### Publication Date

2023

### DOI

10.5070/L215260151

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# The Transformative Power of the Study Abroad Experience

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Language-related Study Abroad (SA) experiences can be catalysts for learner transformation in the areas of cognition, socialization, and/or affect by virtue of the location and experience. An Open Architecture Curriculum Design (OACD) framework can support, promote, and enhance such transformation, as evidenced in eight programs for young adults, including language students in government programs, referenced in this article. An educational philosophy that focuses on language learner transformation, Transformative Language Learning and Teaching (TLLT) has as its primary goals personal transformation that leads to multilingual/multicultural competence and learner autonomy; OACD is a fundamental principle of TLLT. Grounded in the work of Mezirow (1978, 1991), who first observed and described Transformative Learning (TL) in adult education, TLLT posits that the personal transformation cited involves cognitive, emotional, and cultural shifts occurring within the individual as s/he develops self-awareness, resolves disorienting dilemmas, identifies cognitive distortions, manages emotions, and ultimately integrates two (or more) cultures—the home culture and the target culture—on their own terms. TLLT in SA can be expressed as in-country study experience, virtual experience, language program with a service component, or in-country work experience with a language component. SA TLLT, in varying formats, has been used successfully in university, service academy, and government learning environments before, during, and after COVID—and continues to evolve with changing times.

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## INTRODUCTION

A new way is found or forced when a rail station closes, a road washes out, a rockslide obliterates a path, or a cross-country hike opens onto a cliff. In 1996, Ehrman proposed a transportation metaphor for understanding how language learners differ in their preferred learning situations, one that would appear to be pertinent for language-related Study Abroad (SA) programs<sup>1</sup> with transformative goals<sup>2</sup>—and, especially so, for programs having to re-design themselves to adapt to the recent health crisis caused by COVID or other restrictive environments. (Although this article focuses primarily on the nature of transformative education and its role in in-person, in-country SA, it does not escape the authors' attention that the past two years of pandemic-imposed challenges have placed special requirements and limitations on SA programs. Similarly, not all learners are able to travel abroad for financial, legal, personal, or employment reasons, including restrictions placed on some categories of U.S. government language learners. For that reason, examples of alternatives to in-country SA

are included here that nonetheless produce the kinds of transformation that leads to multilingualism/multiculturalism.)

In Ehrman's transportation metaphor, to reach their proficiency goals, some learners use railroads, which have a set route with specific stops; the correlation in language learning is a desire for maximum structure and control (textbook, dialogues, and drills). Others prefer a major highway system where the use of one's own car allows on-ramp and exit choices; the language learning correlation incorporates flexible textbook use, teacher-directed exchanges, and teacher-organized communicative activities. Yet other learners like to use a network of trails, with or without a map; in language learning, this equates to authentic materials with or without a textbook, free conversation, and learner choice in subject matter, grammar handling, and perhaps even teaching techniques to be used. A fourth and rather small group prefer cross-country hikes; those language learners insist on setting off on their own and learning through their own devices, including trial and error, with a native speaker or native community as a resource.

SA in and of itself generally creates conditions that force new ways of managing language acquisition activities for learners, teachers, and entire programs, ones that, increasingly, do not reflect the way the language is taught in the classroom at the home institution. Regardless of learning approach, i.e. preferred manner of transportation, nearly all learners encountering a new culture are presented with what Mezirow (1991) has termed a *disorienting dilemma*, a situation which does not meet one's expectations and requires a change in mindset in order to resolve the conflict between expectation and encounter, thus resulting in a perspective transformation.

Given naturally occurring disorienting dilemmas from personal exposure to disparate cultures, the SA experience has been a catalyst for learner transformation in the areas of cognition, socialization, and/or affect since before transformative education was even defined or the results tracked.<sup>3</sup> At one end of the spectrum, where disorienting dilemmas remain unresolved, learners can end up with a yo-yo effect of culture shock in the SA country and reverse culture shock upon return home (Storti, 2001); at the other end of the spectrum, where the disorienting dilemmas have been resolved, SA experiences can enhance the acquisition of bilingualism/biculturalism (Freed, 1995) and deep cross-cultural merging, moving toward a changed life orientation and passion (Kubler, forthcoming).<sup>4</sup>

An educational philosophy that focuses on language learner transformation, Transformative Language Learning and Teaching (TLLT) has as its primary goals personal transformation that leads to bilingual/bicultural competence and learner autonomy (Leaver et al., 2021). Grounded in the work of Mezirow (1978, 1991), who first described Transformative Learning in adult education, TLLT posits that personal transformation involves cognitive, emotional, and cultural shifts occurring within the individual as s/he develops self-awareness, resolves disorienting dilemmas, identifies cognitive distortions, manages emotions, and ultimately integrates two (or more) cultures on their own terms.

This chapter discusses Transformative Learning and its relevance to the SA experience, drawing on both research and practice conducted in a variety of learning contexts. First, it presents an overview of Transformative Learning and its role in this experience. Next, it studies examples of SA in TLLT programs. Then, it examines professional immersion as a form of SA. Finally, it describes a particular curricular design framework that fosters transformation: Open Architecture Curricular Design (OACD), a core principle of TLLT—one that has been used before the appearance of COVID and proved unusually malleable to new requirements created by COVID.

## THE NATURE OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Over the history of teaching world languages, three educational philosophy paradigms, in sequential order, have dominated a growingly robust set of approaches to teaching and learning: Transmission, Transaction, and Transformation (Leaver & Granoien, 2000; Miller & Seller, 1985). Methods, approaches, and curricula associated with the transmission philosophy of education center on passing along information from the knowledgeable teacher to the *tabula rasa* learner; those associated with the transaction philosophy of education focus on learners accomplishing a task, using the language as a tool; and those associated with the transformation philosophy of education reflect a change in the perspectives of the learner. In 1978, Mezirow introduced the concept of Transformative Learning (TL), arising from his study of women who returned to community college to continue their education, later defining it as follows:

Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action (Mezirow, 2012, p. 76).

TL, so described, is a humanistic approach to learning based in part on critical social theory (Cranton & Taylor, 2012), which promotes the critical examination of ideology. Fleming (2021) offers a succinct summary of TL: “Transformative learning is a structural shift in the basic premises of thought and action, and in how we make meaning” (p. xxiii).

### Appearance of Transformative Programs

Outside the field of adult education, Miller and Seller (1985) delineated a transformative approach to curriculum development for K-12 content areas and proposed the paradigmatic shift of transmission to transaction to transformation in general education. Concurrently, in U.S. government language programs, in particular at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), activities were added to textbook-based courses that very much reflected the same attributes as the curricular designs of Miller and Seller and the adult learning theory proposed by Mezirow: extensive real-life scenarios related to the future professional activities of diplomats (Stevick, 1984), community work referred to as an internship program (Leaver, 1989), and cultural activities designed to create disorienting dilemmas. While these activities clearly fell within a transformative philosophy of education, at the time they were considered innovative aspects of communicative language teaching, the dominant language teaching approach of that decade.

### First Emanations of TLLT

In the early 2000s, these parallel applications began to intersect in language education classrooms as faculty became aware of the work of Miller and Sellers and of Mezirow. New practices coalesced into what is now referred to as TLLT (Leaver et al., 2021). Common features of TLLT include most of the following:

- Materials and communications are authentic and unadapted.
- The classroom is immersive.

- In-country immersion/SA reflects the typical life of the native speaker of the same age.
- Personal transformation involves cognitive, affective, and cultural shifts.
- Highly individualized programs are informed by learning preferences and needs.
- Open Architecture Curriculum Design (OACD; see description below) supports increasingly textbook-free classrooms, and teachers modify syllabi corresponding to learners' changing needs.
- The grading system uses formative assessments and feedback, with occasional summative assessments.
- Programs empower learners to take charge of their own learning. (abbreviated from Leaver et al., 2021)

TLLT gave rise to a flexible curricular framework for language programs that allows for the interchangeability of topics and authentic materials in often textbook-free learning environments. This framework, which came to be called open architecture curricular design (OACD)<sup>5</sup> (Campbell, 2021), afforded instructors and learners the opportunity for maximal learner individualization and currency of topics and materials.

### **TLLT in SA**

Although SA programs can reflect any of the three educational philosophies, they frequently have a transformative impact on learners by the very nature of location and coincidental (uncontrolled) interaction with local residents. “There are few experiences that are as transformative to the development of a student as study abroad,” claims North Carolina State University Chancellor Woodson (June 18, 2022). Transformative experiences have been widely reported by learners in SA programs (Bilash, 2019; Dass-Brailsford & Serrano, 2010; Walker, 2016).

During SA, learners generally experience most or all of 10 phases suggested by Mezirow (1991) as essential for the occurrence of transformation (Stone, 2014). These are

1. experiencing a disorienting dilemma
2. undergoing self-examination
3. conducting a deep assessment of personal role assumptions and alienation created by new roles
4. sharing and analyzing personal discontent and similar experiences with others
5. exploring options for new ways of thinking
6. building competence and self-confidence in new roles
7. planning a course of action
8. acquiring knowledge and skills for action
9. trying new roles and assessing feedback
10. reintegrating into society with a new perspective (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011, pp. 716-717)

Encountering a disorienting dilemma (phase 1) in nearly any SA situation would be hard to avoid. The more distant the culture, the more disorienting the dilemma, from “simple” behaviors such as eating with one’s hands in a Middle Eastern culture, using fingers differently when counting, socializing in the nude with friends at a Russian *banya* (similar to a sauna), to what can be baffling mindsets.

Resolving disorienting dilemmas requires engagement in critical reflection, which subsumes phases 2-4 in Mezirow's taxonomy. Typically, objectifying the disorienting aspects of the dilemma through deep assessment of culturally formed personal assumptions leads to identifying one's frame of reference, or internal perspective (Rogers, 1980).

The process of moving from one frame of reference to another frame of reference or a combined frame of reference involves phases 5-9 in Mezirow's taxonomy. First, the learner has to explore options for the new, likely more encompassing frame of reference, and then, once the framework is clear, the learner faces the task of making that frame of reference his or her own: building competence and confidence through constant application, finding opportunities for application (course of action), and improving understanding through more interactions with native speakers. These phases can be iterative and may take some time for the learner to develop a natural proclivity for the new way of thinking. In later descriptions of transformation, Mezirow elaborates on the process:

Transformative learning involves a change in the frames of reference that we use to make sense in our lives. Frames of reference structure the ways that we interpret the meaning of our experiences and therefore guide our action and provide the rationale for our action. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 140)

Perspective has changed when reactions are instinctive and the lens through which actions are decided reflects and refracts both the native culture and the acquired culture, i.e. perspective now relies upon a bicultural mechanism and projects a culturally flexible and appropriate mindset. At this point, complete transformation is a matter of acquiring related skills—language skills, gestures, and body language—and habituating culturally appropriate behavior.

When perspective change has occurred such that the language learner now approaches the language native in intake, interpretation, and output, the learner could be said to be approaching a state of bilingualism and biculturalism. With this new perspective, the learner now must reintegrate into the native and non-native culture as an internally integrated, transformed cultural product. Before COVID, such integration took place physically in the native and non-native cultures; during COVID, the integration has taken place virtually. While perhaps less dramatic from a distance, transformation can occur virtually, as has been the experience of the distance learning programs at the Defense Language Institute, professional home to both authors, since the 1990s.

## **SA IN TLLT PROGRAMS**

SA experiences in language learning programs that focus on or document transformation are unique, but growing in number. These include the Language Flagship Program at 22 U.S. universities, the French immersion program at the French War College in Paris, and Russian and Ukrainian programs at NovaMova in Kyiv.

### **Language Flagship Program**

The Language Flagship Program (LFP),<sup>6</sup> which aims to “create a pool of educated university graduates with demonstrated professional-level language proficiency” (Nugent & Slater, 2017, p. 10), provides a unique amount of researched information on transformation within the SA

experiences (Murphy & Evans-Romaine, 2017). A key component of the LFP is a significant SA commitment in the capstone year abroad.<sup>7</sup>

Core to the capstone year are TLLT tenets of learner agency and engagement (Evans-Romaine & Murphy, 2021). Three elements of the LFP at the University of Wisconsin-Madison reflect TL: (1) the expectation that students be independent, goal-driven learners; (2) opportunities for language and culture learning in formal instruction, individual and group tutorials, and a wide variety of interactions in Russian; and (3) reflection in supportive environments.

In 2021, the LFP piloted a series of scenario-based learning modules delivered online that present students with potentially challenging disorienting dilemmas in diverse settings—classroom, homestay, internship, and public space. The scenarios were developed using an anonymous online survey and focus groups. Learners select from among three possible actions or devise their own. They then compare their choice against that of an individual knowledgeable about the region. Feedback for each action describes possible consequences, and reflection questions ask learners to compare the scenario with similar ones at home and what they might expect of others here and abroad. The ultimate goal of the scenarios is to promote reflection on the underlying values and belief systems of the other culture(s), the learners' culture(s), and the learners' "positioning" vis-à-vis their own and other culture(s) (p. 104).

Pre-pandemic, a four-week virtual cultural exchange paired groups of advanced students with students at Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan, to engage in activities aimed at raising critical cultural awareness and providing a space for cultural exploration. The opportunity to discuss topics such as national identity and symbols, media, and everyday life with learners in another culture can segue to further discussion about cultural stereotyping, tabus, and other sensitive subjects. Serious reflection by some participants may ultimately lead to a perspective-changing disorienting dilemma.

Davidson et al. (2021) have shared some of the best documented transformations and gains in cross-cultural understanding/intercultural competence during SA, finding that TL in the SA context includes five stages: disorienting dilemma, premise reflection, critical reflection, reframing, and revised strategy/action plan (synopsized). They posit that the TL experience in the Russian Capstone Program (RCP) becomes successful when learners reach a stage of "intercultural development" that allows them to shift relatively smoothly between the home-culture perspective to the Russian one so as to be able to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultures" (p. 111). They suggest that a fully developed TL program should provide affordances to help learners anticipate and manage such dilemmas.

Results from a longitudinal study by the American Councils Research Center exploring the relationship between L2 proficiency and intercultural growth in the Russian Capstone Program found that 95% of the 61 subjects, male (44%) and female (56%), age 21 to 32, having finished at least three years of university-level language study (including a minimum of eight weeks of immersion study in a Russian-speaking country before the Capstone year), achieved Level 3/Professional Proficiency by the end of the Flagship Program (Davidson et al., 2021). Performance by the same learner cohort on the *Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)*<sup>8</sup> showed a statistically significant positive shift in "developmental orientation" from "minimization" to the level of "acceptance orientation" by the end of the nine-month program. Both sets of results indicate a statistically significant change within the clusters of *cognitive frame-shifting*. These data provide important empirical evidence of the transformative effect of SA within a TLLT environment.<sup>9</sup>

## French War College

The French Department of the French War College in Paris welcomes officers from other NATO military services. These French-learning officers are immediately immersed in the life of Paris, interacting with their native-speaker counterparts for professional growth and activities.

As Collin (2021) points out, “In theory, this immersive situation enhances active, participative, and transformative pedagogies” (p. 129). The officers are in Paris for military studies, with the goal being to develop the capacity to work constructively with native-speaker counterparts in undertaking joint NATO activities. Language proficiency must be developed as a means for understanding professional lectures and carrying out professional tasks.

Learners in this environment experience two obstacles to personal transformation, however ideal the learning situation or environment may appear to be: pedagogical disengagement and sociolinguistic insecurity. Individual learners may encounter one or both of these challenges. The pedagogical disengagement occurs because the SA officers are not linguists but content specialists acquiring the language secondarily to gain expertise in France-specific content. Some further disengage from an aversion toward French culture, dating from before their arrival and arising from social realities in their home culture. The second challenge, sociolinguistic (or sociocultural) insecurity, refers to emotional reactions to feeling overloaded by the cultural milieu. This feeling of overload is compounded by the nature of the French culture itself:

[T]he officer comes to a country that is very proud of its culture. ... With the language class as an entrée to the culture of the target language, learners engage in a process of cultural impregnation. When the impregnation is limited to the space of the classroom, it can spur curiosity or interest. However, in an immersive situation, the target language culture goes beyond the classroom, invading the entire living space of the learner. (Collin, 2021, p. 131)

When these two challenges are present as barriers, they reflect dysfunctional responses to disorienting dilemmas, creating immense difficulties in resolving the dilemma. The barrier can usually be overcome by a perspective transformation, but in some cases it seems that a perspective transformation is needed in order to engage in resolving the dilemma, a catch-22. The same can be said of the sociolinguistic challenge where the French perspective that saturates the materials creates a catch-22 to being able to understand them. It is as if personal transformation must occur in order to achieve personal transformation!

Such obstacles are not unique to the French War College. In theory, learners caught up in disorienting dilemmas should be working through the Mezirow-positing 10 steps to personal transformation. The capacity to do so, however, is individual specific. The kinds of disabling reactions experienced by the French-learning officers in Paris could be experienced by any learner in any TLLT SA program, even in programs conducted virtually during (and often, since) COVID. The issue is the contrapositioning of two value systems and ways of thinking, not the mechanism used for the learner to confront these disorientations. Whether such internal confrontations occur in a classroom, in a physical context in-country, virtually, or even through extensive self-instruction in reading and listening, the existence of the dilemma does not change although the intensity of the reaction to it experienced in person in-country would clearly be dampened by the learning-environment adaptations imposed by the



pandemic—and hence the depth and speed of transformation could be expected to be lessened (but far from eliminated).

Collin suggests a proven solution: turn everything over to the learner. Using OACD as a design for a professional studies curriculum provides the flexibility to empower individual and small groups of learners in negotiating and making strategic learning choices for language, culture, and content. Learners are the specialists for subject matter; teachers guide them in the use of language for professional tasks. Given these conditions, learners usually willingly engage in learning activities. Deliberately, through what Collin refers to as “pedagogical engineering,” the faculty facilitates the development of the learners’ socio-professional competence by introducing them to French professional institutions, conducting classes in sociocultural awareness, and providing room for learners to express pride in their own culture. Once the two challenges described are overcome, learners can proceed to resolve the disorienting dilemmas they routinely encounter, beginning with their own cultural perspective and, through critical reflection, methodically shift their frames of reference until they achieve perspective transformation—with a sense of comfort, rather than panic, confusion, and hostility.

## **NovaMova**

NovaMova, a private language school in Kyiv, has specialized in highly effective SA programs to meet the specific needs of unique learners, among them the short (two to four weeks) SA organized for the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA),<sup>10</sup> an intermediate course at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC). DTRA enrolls native speakers of English and heritage speakers of Russian who have tested at ILR 2.<sup>11</sup> Due to the vicissitudes of health and politics, the NovaMova SA experience morphed into an online program during the pandemic, halted on February 24, 2022 at the onset of the war in Ukraine and resumed virtual instruction in June 2022 (personal communication, Yulia Akhmedova, June 19, 2022).<sup>12</sup>

With morning lectures by university professors and Russian subject matter experts (SMEs), DTRA students benefit from the same lectures as their Ukrainian counterparts. Beyond the challenging language, delivered at native-speaker level and speed, learners encounter disorienting dilemmas from the content and from the interpretation of the SMEs. Previous lectures have included topics such as The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union, Separatist Conflicts in Ukraine, and Transformation in the Economic Systems of the East European Coastal Nations. In the shadow of the current war, the mix of topics has added (1) The Fall of the Soviet Union and Russia’s Attempt to Re-establish the Old System and (2) The Role of the Church in Creating and Destroying Ukrainian Identity (personal communication, Yulia Akhmedova, June 19, 2022).

As in other DLIFLC SA programs, DTRA learners complete nightly homework reinforcing the morning lecture under the guidance of an accompanying DLIFLC teacher.<sup>13</sup> They also read extensive high-level texts to prepare for the following day’s lecture as any native speaker would for a regular university class.

The in-country program utilized peer coaches as speaking partners. The online program has replaced speaking partners with individualized instruction.

Topics, chosen in consultation with learners and DLIFLC, reflect the professional content needed for future high-level government interpreting work.<sup>14</sup> NovaMova uses an OACD framework that allows for topical changes, inclusion of current authentic materials and

events, and attention to learner cognitive and affective needs, personal interests, and changing job requirements.

A learner's daily report analyzing faux pas, surprises, or discomfort serves as a mechanism for resolving disorienting dilemmas and reveals insights for teachers into learners' cognitive processing and affective responses.<sup>15</sup> Written in Russian, the report is transmitted to the learners' instructors at DLIFLC, who provide immediate feedback. These daily reports resemble the journaling often recommended in TLLT programs in support of critical reflection. Stone (2014) found that such journaling enables transformation. The DLIFLC does not use these formative reports in any summative way.<sup>16</sup>

The NovaMova program has garnered high praise in the end-of-course surveys. DTRA graduates routinely achieve the highest proficiency levels at DLIFLC, with graduation scores ranging from a rare low of 2+ in all three tested skills (reading, listening, and speaking) to ILR 4 in all three skills.<sup>17</sup> Most learners attribute these results to their NovaMova experience, the OACD course structure at DLIFLC, and the professional, cultural, and linguistic growth that came from living and learning in Ukraine. With time, data will become available that will allow comparison of the differing effects of the in-country SA and online SA. That data should be highly informative.

## **PROFESSIONAL IMMERSION AS A FORM OF SA**

Professional immersion abroad has taken at least two forms over the past seven decades: (1) language programs with a work component and (2) work programs with a language component. Language learners in a SA program can add service-learning components, such as internships, to that program; in this case, the language learning is primary and the work secondary. Professionals who are studying a language in order to be posted abroad as part of a work experience such as humanitarian work, missionary work, and international cooperation can experience SA through in-country work training; in this case, the work is primary and the language learning secondary.

### **Language Programs with a Work (Service Learning) Component**

Service learning as part of language SA experiences has been shown not only to increase proficiency dramatically and rapidly but also to put learners in situations requiring them to confront and resolve disorienting dilemmas in order to accomplish their assigned tasks adequately. Such experiences naturally lead to transformation.

An example of a language program with a service-learning component is the immersion (SA) programs at the DLIFLC for intermediate and advanced courses. SA programs exist for Arabic (Jordan and Morocco), Spanish (Spain and some Latin American sites), Russian (Latvia), Korean (Seoul), and Chinese (Nanjing). The programs follow an OACD/TLLT framework as well as incorporate a service-learning component. Three days of morning lectures at the university by professors using the same lectures they used with their own native-speaker students earlier are followed by interviews with native speaker specialists. For example, in the Arabic SA at the University of Jordan,<sup>18</sup> one of the topics studied was comparative law. The evening before each class learners read 10-20 pages of textbooks or other authentic sources about various kinds of law in Jordan, with the accompanying DLIFLC instructor assisting them with extensive reading techniques and managing high level language and specialized law terminology. In the three morning lectures, learners heard about issues in

international law, Jordanian law, and tribal law. For afternoon “excursions,” one day they interviewed a lawyer at a government law office; the next day, they met with the international lawyer son of a tribal chief, who gave examples of the difference between international law, Jordanian law, and tribal law. Other culturally specific topics similarly placed learners in the presence of key leaders, such as a well-known journalist leading a campaign against honor killings. Learners also engaged in organized, unpaid service-learning activities targeted toward community needs, followed by opportunities for reflection on the experiences with the accompanying DLIFLC teacher (Farraj, 2021).

Although the programs are short, the amount of personal transformation and proficiency gained was often immense, far exceeding the impact of classes at the DLIFLC. Graduation goals are Level 2+ and Level 3, respectively, in listening and reading comprehension. A number of surprising gains have been noted upon learners’ return from SA, the most notable being a full point gain (from ILR 2 to ILR 3) by one Arabic learner in a three-week SA program at the University of Jordan (Farraj, 2021).

Learner transformation did not stop with in-country SA but continued upon return. In the case of one group of Arabic learners who landed in Jordan in the middle of a public controversy over a culturally explosive book, learners brought back copies of the book and asked for that book to be the center of instruction for the next couple of months, contracting with teachers to read at least 10 pages a night (not an easy task in Arabic), research the cultural mores, interview other teachers, dive deep between and beyond the lines, and acquire the grammar holding the text together as they both analyzed the author’s style, intent, and manner of influencing the reader and remembered conversations with native speakers in the service learning experience, on the street, and in the media. The point was to understand intellectually what they had experienced emotionally and to elide the two kinds of knowledge.

Service learning of this type can be found in a number of organizations that offer internships abroad as standalone programs or as an SA program component. An example of the former, EF Gap Year<sup>19</sup> has participants collaborate with NGOs to meet community needs. Similarly, American Councils for International Education<sup>20</sup> designs internship opportunities specific to individual learners.

### **Work Programs with a Language Component: In-Country Job Training As Specialized SA**

A second type of service-learning experience comes from in-country job training that affords language and culture acquisition as both integral to and a by-product of the training. An example of a work program with a language component is the Peace Corps.<sup>21</sup> In this case, basic language learning takes place pre-service together with cross-cultural training and specific job-related training, all of which have prescribed competency standards that must be met prior to swearing-in as a volunteer. Language training continues once volunteers are assigned to their sites as supportive education for in-country living and work requirements.

The Peace Corps programs, the role of its language learning programs abroad, and its service-learning nature date from the days of John F. Kennedy as U.S. president. Its volunteers range from young adults to retirees from other lifelong jobs. Although the Peace Corps takes in volunteers beginning at age 18, the median age is 28, around the same as a graduate student; in specific, the Peace Corps orients on recruiting recent college graduates.

While not strictly SA in the traditional sense of a university or high school language education program that offers a short time of study in another country, the Peace Corps’ in-

country pre-service training teaches intensive language classes five days a week in small groups. Outside the classroom, learners complete speaking practice assignments with host families and in the local community (Peace Corps, June 28, 2022).

Although the ultimate development of language proficiency may be a by-product of the actual assignment (agrarian assistance, education assistance, humanitarian assistance, etc.), most Peace Corps volunteers do acquire a degree of bilingualism/biculturalism as well as undergo significant transformation as a result of encountering and resolving disorienting dilemmas on a regular basis over a long period of time (Mahadevan, 2021). Important to note, however, is that becoming bilingual and bicultural, even in these long-term in-country circumstances, is not the same as “going native.” Bicultural individuals retain their own culture while at the same time gaining the ability to operate “as if” a native in the target culture. During COVID, the Peace Corps brought volunteers back to the U.S., where they continued their work with counterparts virtually. The Peace Corps found this variant of support to international partners to be sufficient enough to offer a post-COVID Virtual Service Pilot Program (Peace Corps, November 4, 2022).

While the example provided in this article is the Peace Corps, service learning of this type can be found in a number of other organizations or government agencies, such as in-country non-government organizations, National Aeronautical and Space Administration (more commonly referred to as NASA), and many diplomatic assignments with the U.S. Department of State. However, the learners in these cases are generally mid-career professionals, not young adults, and therefore lie outside the scope of this article and the kinds of cohorts being addressed here.

## **REPLICATING ATTRIBUTES OF SA THROUGH OPEN ARCHITECTURE CURRICULAR DESIGN**

Curricular design that replicates attributes of a well-designed SA experience can recreate within the home course some of the most effective conditions of an immersive SA environment. These attributes include learner autonomy, contact with native speakers in a wide variety of contexts, exposure to an array of authentic materials, opportunities to revise activities and tasks, self-sequenced modularity (see West Point description below), and space for reflection that can contribute to a change in perspectives that can foster transformation. All of the transformative programs described above share these and other attributes and implement, whether specifically referring to the term or not, OACD, a curricular design framework that fosters transformation and is a core principle of TLLT.

Informed by the *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (2019) and impelled by the demand for learner-centeredness, development of multicultural competencies, and overall learning efficiency in world language education, OACD was first defined at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center in 2015 in response to an urgent requirement for enhanced learning outcomes. Many of the practices it encompasses have developed gradually over several decades. The coalescence of these practices into a distinct, unifying framework has occurred most notably not only in U.S. government language institutes and service academy programs but also, and, to an increasing extent, across a range of non-government academic environments. As a curricular design framework, OACD has already shown efficacy in enabling demonstrably improved language proficiency outcomes in some of these programs.

OACD serves as a unifying framework that enables the integrated exploitation of many recent innovations:

- proficiency-oriented learner-centered instructional approaches such as content-, project-, and scenario-based instruction, task-based instruction, community-based learning, service learning, and others
- instructional support constructs such as the scaling and testing of language proficiency and world-readiness standards
- formative (to include diagnostic) and dynamic assessments integrated into the learning process

Exploiting innovations in an integrated manner leads to a fundamental shift in the role of the textbook as the traditional course anchor. OACD is structured around a theme-based syllabus (rather than around a textbook) that integrates interchangeable unadapted authentic texts, tasks, and other activities, often organized into modules. While textbooks provide structure and promote standardization of the learning process and monitoring for accountability, they can also limit creativity—of instructors and learners alike—in responding to learner and cohort needs and exploiting emerging opportunities in the target culture environment. Institutional and course requirements emphasizing traditional summative testing, especially when anchored to a textbook, can further confine creativity, which can result in over-testing and under-teaching—and under-learning. OACD’s flexible framework supports the integration of learning with ongoing formative and dynamic assessments and performance-based summative assessments, all embedded organically into the learning process.

While a theme-based syllabus rather than a textbook is an essential principle of OACD, the role, if any, of a textbook can vary according to the circumstances of the practitioners, who can choose either to

- forego it entirely from Day 1 or
- use it partially as a support through Intermediate Low and Mid/ILR 1 to ensure standardization and meet institutional requirements, which are often imposed in postsecondary multi-section programs and K-12 environments

A second core principle is ongoing learner involvement in the selection and delivery of content and design or directing of activities. A third is continual and systematic (vs. occasional and limited) tailoring to learner and cohort needs. A fourth, especially in transformative programs, is the evolution of the role of the teacher from facilitator to mentor/coach/advisor who provides resources and informed guidance.

Below are some examples of language courses and programs grounded in OACD that replicate attributes of a well-designed SA experience. The learning contexts are service academy, U.S. government, and university.

### ***The Chinese Program at West Point***

Gregory (2022) developed an OACD-based advanced Chinese course at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point to prevent proficiency loss among recent returnees from SA. The course drew upon shared characteristics of OACD and the non-classroom aspects of the SA experience. While created with recent returnees in mind, three features of OACD allow learners who have not studied abroad to simulate many of the unique benefits of the SA experience: learner autonomy, opportunities to revise activities and tasks, and self-sequenced modularity. Gregory (2022) describes the last as the practice of learners, or learners and teachers in collaboration, creating and then using modules such as “Taking Public

Transportation” in which learners develop and apply target language competencies within the target language culture or in home country classrooms. These three features, in combination with the ability to promote the development of learners’ meta-pragmatic awareness through the examination of unadapted current authentic materials, are key to recreating within the home course environment some of the most effective conditions of an immersive SA environment while also enabling a broader, living, real-time, critical engagement with meta-pragmatic knowledge of the language.

### ***The Hebrew Department at DLIFLC***

Oded and Oded (2022) draw on insights from human performance improvement and rapid prototyping design in a 10-year effort to shift an entire Hebrew department from textbook-based curricula to OACD. Administrators and faculty focused on promoting learner autonomy, contact with native speakers in a wide variety of contexts, exposure to a vast array of authentic materials, opportunities to revise activities and tasks, and self-sequenced modularity. The process yielded dramatic and sustained enhancements in learner proficiency outcomes and a program that consistently outperformed most other programs at DLIFLC, including one basic course in which all learners achieved ILR 3 in reading and listening, which the leadership attributed to OACD.

### ***The Less Commonly Taught Languages Partnership across Multiple Universities***

Most less commonly taught language (LCTL) programs face unique curriculum development challenges, especially for advanced levels of learning. In response, Big Ten Academic Alliance, a consortium of midwest universities, launched the LCTL and Indigenous Languages Partnership Project, a collaborative effort to produce proficiency-oriented open educational resources (OER) that ensure learner exposure to an array of authentic materials (Van Gorp et al., 2022). Teams of Swahili and Hindi instructors, working with language pedagogy specialists from Michigan State University, created flexible modular curricula while promoting professional development across the Big Ten Academic Alliance, using an OACD framework and content-based instruction and task-based instruction approaches. The authors posit that OERs aligned with principles of OACD can enable an interinstitutional consortium to respond successfully to unique challenges faced by LCTL programs, such as enrollment vagaries and COVID, among other expected and unexpected challenges.

## **CONCLUSION**

Recent developments such as the paradigmatic shift in educational philosophy associated with TLLT, advances in digital technologies, and the need to overcome obstacles from outside the learning process such as the pandemic (and war) have produced new contexts for transforming experiences, not only in cultural perspectives but also in learning perspectives—how and where learning takes place, with whom, and with what resources. In-country programs have been joined by online programs and in-classroom-replications, adding to the variety already available from service-learning programs and in-country work. The commonality among them all is that what is known and practiced at home in relative cognitive, social, and affective comfort changes when one leaves home. Those used to taking trains, driving cars, or following paths must develop cross-country skills to surmount the challenges posed when dealing with the other culture and the disorienting dilemmas that result. Cross-country hikers by proclivity have a built-in resilience for unexpected challenges and a readiness to embrace the uncharted,

a resilience that TLLT SA promotes in learners who used to prefer other modes of travel through language-learning land. For all, SA experiences generally accelerate the degree of personal transformation that results from meeting the challenges associated with dilemmas of cognitive, emotional, cultural, and linguistic disorientation that, when resolved, lead to markedly greater proficiency and movement toward multilingualism and multiculturalism.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors are grateful to the following individuals for critical assistance with this article: Yulia Akhmedova, Mildred Rivera-Martinez, and Gela Turabelidze.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The term, *Study Abroad*, as used in this article, refers to programs that include some aspect of language-relatedness.

<sup>2</sup> Before the advent of the terminology associated with transformative learning, the frequently found transformative result of the SA experience was often referred to as *internationalization* (Stone, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Some of the earliest and most extensive tracking was done by the American Council of Teachers of Russian in the 1980s and 1990s (Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsburg, 1995) and continues today.

<sup>4</sup> Where an individual learner will fall on that spectrum, i.e. the degree of transformation and developed biculturalism, depends upon many variables, the discussion of which lies outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>5</sup> The term, *open architecture*, reflects computer terminology, which refers to a design in which parts can be swapped out for flexibility and effectiveness.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.thelanguageflagship.org/> for more information on the LFP, a public-private effort.

<sup>7</sup> These open access modules can be found at <https://thelanguageflagship.tech/fci-about-fci/>, along with a 360-degree etim/emic survey conducted by Nadras and Davidson as a baseline needs analysis for the project (personal communication, Dan Davidson, June 28, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> The IDI defines high-level intercultural competence as the “capability to shift cultural perspective and appropriately adapt behavior to cultural differences and commonalities” (IDI Assessment Website, June 25, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Emerging statistics show that virtual SA may effectively produce linguistic gains in receptive skills but, at least so far, does not compete with in-country learning in other important areas (Davidson, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> DTRA linguists provide language proficiency, cultural sensitivity, and technical and operational expertise to detect and deter Weapons of Mass Destruction and emerging threats.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://govtilr.org> for the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) proficiency level descriptions.

<sup>12</sup> NovaMova also offers online courses for the general public: <https://www.novamova.net/capcity-building-courses>.

<sup>13</sup> Every DLIFLC immersion event sends a faculty member with the learners for cross-institutional coordination, assistance with disorienting dilemmas, and security.

<sup>14</sup> Specific needs are not a conjecture. Learners do know where they will be going after graduation.

<sup>15</sup> Decades-long analyses of learner journals from American Council of Teachers of Russian SA programs has produced statistics of utmost value to SA programs. For example, one study revealed that the reason male Russian learners tended to enjoy stronger proficiency gains from SA was related to Russian culture: Russians more willingly and frequently engaged with male learners than with female learners on intellectual topics (Brecht et al., 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Journaling could, however, be used summatively. King (2021), for example, uses journals to provide insight for assessing the amount of perspective shift.

<sup>17</sup> Proficiency scores are summarized here, based on first-hand knowledge. DTRA scores and personal information are not available for public consumption.

<sup>18</sup> The gain was carefully documented because the learner, who had volunteered as a subject for the DLIFLC Testing Unit’s recertification course for testers, was tested both before and after SA by testers being recertified under the supervision of master testers, who confirmed the accuracy of the test score. Analysis showed that he was a cross-country hiker, had learned Russian to ILR 3+ in-country without formal instruction, and once he was released from the confines of an Arabic classroom into a TLLT and service-learning environment, his cross-country hiking preferences allowed him to repeat his Russian success in Arabic. That learner tested at 4/4 after six months of post-graduate work, helping instructors in the classroom, and later became a teacher of Arabic. Although he was unique, what was learned about cross-country learning preferences was indeed pertinent to other learners with this learning style.

<sup>19</sup> Information on this program can be found at <https://efgapyear.com>.

<sup>20</sup> Information on American Councils for International Education programs can be found at <https://american-councils.org>.

<sup>21</sup> The Peace Corps states its mission to be the promotion of world peace and friendship by helping countries meet their need or skilled professionals, promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served, and to promote a better understanding of other peoples on behalf of Americans (Peace Corps, June 29, 2022).

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