



Learning in liminality. Student experiences of learning during a nursing study abroad journey: A hermeneutic phenomenological research study^{☆, ☆, ☆}



Debra A. Morgan

Northumbria University, Health and Life Sciences, Nursing, Midwifery and Health, Coach Lane Campus West, Coach Lane, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE7 7XA, England, UK

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ABSTRACT

Background: Study abroad generates positive learning outcomes for students. However, experiences of learning, and processes of learning during unaccompanied-by-faculty nursing study abroad are unclear. This research therefore investigated student nurse experiences of learning during a study abroad journey in order to explore the phenomenon of learning and the processes of learning throughout this journey.

Methods and participants: An interpretivist hermeneutic phenomenological methodology was applied, and twenty student nurses, from the UK and Europe, participated; two individual semi-structured interviews were conducted per participant (post-return and follow-up).

Findings and conclusions: The 'Phenomenological Hermeneutical Method' of data analysis was employed and revealed the phenomenon of learning comprised four themes: 'experiencing a different reality'; 'active sense-making'; 'being with others' and 'being changed and transformed'. When considered together, these themes identify that study abroad was experienced as the liminal space in which learning occurred. Students experienced liminality in this space and the process of learning was triggered by disjuncture. Students took responsibility for learning and undertook active sense-making activities to gain insight. Students struggled to make sense of troublesome experiences, and remained in a stuck place until resolution of troublesome-ness enabled students to cross a threshold into understanding. Learning was also influenced by others. Students experienced change and transformation as a result of the learning that had occurred, and a postliminal state was attained when troublesome-ness was resolved and students had re-integrated into their usual reality. These findings offer insight into student learning during unaccompanied study abroad journeys, and further development of nurse education and research is recommended.

1. Background

A growing body of evidence suggests nursing study abroad facilitates positive learning outcomes, such as personal and professional growth or attainment of cultural learning outcomes (Keogh and Russel-Roberts, 2009; Maltby et al., 2016). When considering learning processes evidence is more limited. Studies mainly focus upon development of cultural competence and suggest immersion in a culture permits development (Edmonds, 2010; Loretta et al., 2014). Fewer consider processes by which students attain personal and professional growth; these also suggest experiential learning to be important (Greatrex-White, 2008; Murray, 2015). Whilst Ruddock and Turner (2007) discuss development of an awareness of global health, global

graduateness (Diamond et al., 2011) is rarely considered.

The majority of studies focus upon learning in the formal context of clinical placement studies (Koskinen and Tossavainen, 2004; Sandin et al., 2004; Adamson, 2018), whilst a limited number consider learning in other, informal, contexts, and these tend not to provide a depth of detail about the informal setting (St Clair and McKenry, 1999; Green et al., 2008). Review of these studies suggest the informal context is an important yet under-explored aspect of the study abroad experience (Levine, 2009; Morgan, 2012).

As unaccompanied study abroad experiences are remote from the influence of students' home faculty, and as learning opportunities may arise in any context during study abroad, there is an assumption that students have the ability to learn in all contexts. However, without a

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E-mail address: debra.morgan@unn.ac.uk.

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thorough empirical understanding, it is not possible to verify such assumptions. This research therefore sought to investigate student nurse experiences of learning, in all contexts (formal and informal), during unaccompanied-by-faculty study abroad.

The research question ‘what are student nurse experiences of learning during study abroad?’ was set; with the research aim being ‘to gain insight into learning processes, strategies employed, and influences on learning throughout the study abroad journey’.

2. Methods

2.1. Methodology

As learning may occur at any time or place during study abroad (formal or informal contexts) only the student has full access to their learning experiences. A hermeneutic phenomenological methodology (Heidegger, 1962) was therefore employed. This methodology is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, and adopts a relativistic ontological perspective, which acknowledges that multiple constructions of reality are possible. Phenomena, such as learning, are therefore accessed via the subjective ‘lived experience’ of individuals (Creswell, 2009). Hermeneutic phenomenology further suggests, as phenomena do not appear in a direct manner, interpretation of the signs of phenomena is required (Heidegger, 1962). Hence, in this study it was necessary to access, and also interpret, experiences of learning during study abroad. In this way, a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon would emerge inductively.

2.2. Participants and setting

Following university ethical approval, participants were recruited from a UK study abroad programme which offers student nurses the opportunity to undertake a three month European Union (EU) higher education (Erasmus) exchange (European Commission, 2012), comprising a clinical placement; or a one month clinical placement to a developing country. Purposive sampling was utilised. To respect ethical principles, for example, autonomy and justice (Israel, 2015), and to reduce perceived coercion (the researcher was programme lead for study abroad), all student nurses registered onto this programme were sent a group email providing study information and inviting participation. This included students from the UK university and EU students registered to come to the UK university as part of the programme. Twenty student nurses participated (see Table 1). This emerged to be the point at which data saturation occurred.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

To further ensure an ethical approach, written informed consent was obtained. Data collection comprised two audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews per participant: end-of-placement (within four weeks) and follow-up (after three months). End-of-placement interviews lasted approximately 1 h and aimed to identify learning experiences, processes, strategies and influences. Follow-ups lasted approximately 45 min and explored learning subsequent to student return, this included exploration of whether participants had changed as learners. Interviews were conducted on-campus, with the exception of follow-ups

Table 1
Participant profile: numbers per type of study abroad experience.

UK students		EU students	Total number
Erasmus: 3 month	Developing Country: 1 month	Erasmus: 3 Month	
8	6	6	20

with EU participants, which were conducted via Skype. Four participants did not undertake follow-up interviews (2 UK & 2 EU). To ensure trustworthiness, a reflexive approach, framed within quality assurance recommendations, was employed (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). A researcher journal was completed to monitor self-perceptions, and peer de-brief and resonance checking with participants were utilised (Topping, 2010; Mertens, 2012). This process of reflexivity provided a confirmatory audit trail, and provided assurance that understanding had inductively emerged from participants experiences.

The ‘Phenomenological Hermeneutical Method’ of data analysis for transcribed interview text (Lindseth and Norberg, 2004) was applied. This process comprised naïve reading, structural analysis and comprehensive understanding. Naïve reading comprised reading text many times in an open-minded manner to attain a naïve understanding. Structural analysis comprised identification of ‘meaning units’ that captured single meanings. Meaning units were then condensed into shorter items whilst retaining original meaning. These were reflected upon and sub-themes and themes emerged. During the comprehensive understanding stage, themes were reflected upon in relation to the research question, and literature was considered. This resulted in generation of a narrative understanding of the phenomenon.

3. Findings and discussion

Findings will be discussed within the framework of the narrative comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Limitations to the research will be considered, and implications for nurse education and research will be provided.

3.1. Comprehensive understanding

The comprehensive understanding presents the phenomenon themes (‘experiencing a different reality’; ‘active sense-making’; ‘being with others’ & ‘being changed and transformed’ (Fig. 1)). This understanding also interweaves educational and anthropological theories that emerged as pertinent to explain the experience of learning. This is in-keeping with the inductive nature of the research.

This symbiosis of experience, themes and theory, provides a deep understanding of the phenomenon of learning during a study abroad journey. It addresses the research question and reveals the process of learning, strategies employed and influences on learning that emerged.

3.1.1. Experiencing a different reality

Student nurse learning during study abroad was experienced within the context of difference as students anticipated and undertook a journey into, through and returned from a different reality. This journey may be considered a journey of liminality. Specifically, it mirrors the stages of liminality, during which a person, or liminal entity, transitions from one role in society to another (van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969). This process comprises three stages: the preliminal stage, before transition; the liminal stage, an unstable stage, during which the entity is ‘betwixt and between’ societal position (Turner, 1969, p.95), and the postliminal stage, when the person has transitioned into their new role and stability is regained (van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969).

The period prior to study abroad was the preliminal stage as students had not yet entered a state of liminality. During this stage, students were motivated and anticipated they would be going to a different reality. Students wished to,

‘...experience something completely different; something totally radical and completely different to what we’ve got at home.’

(Participant (P) 10, to a developing country (DC))

Such anticipation and motivation, as highlighted by participant 10, reflect a cultural desire (Campinha-Bacote, 2002) to experience a different reality. Motivation is also a central feature of humanistic and

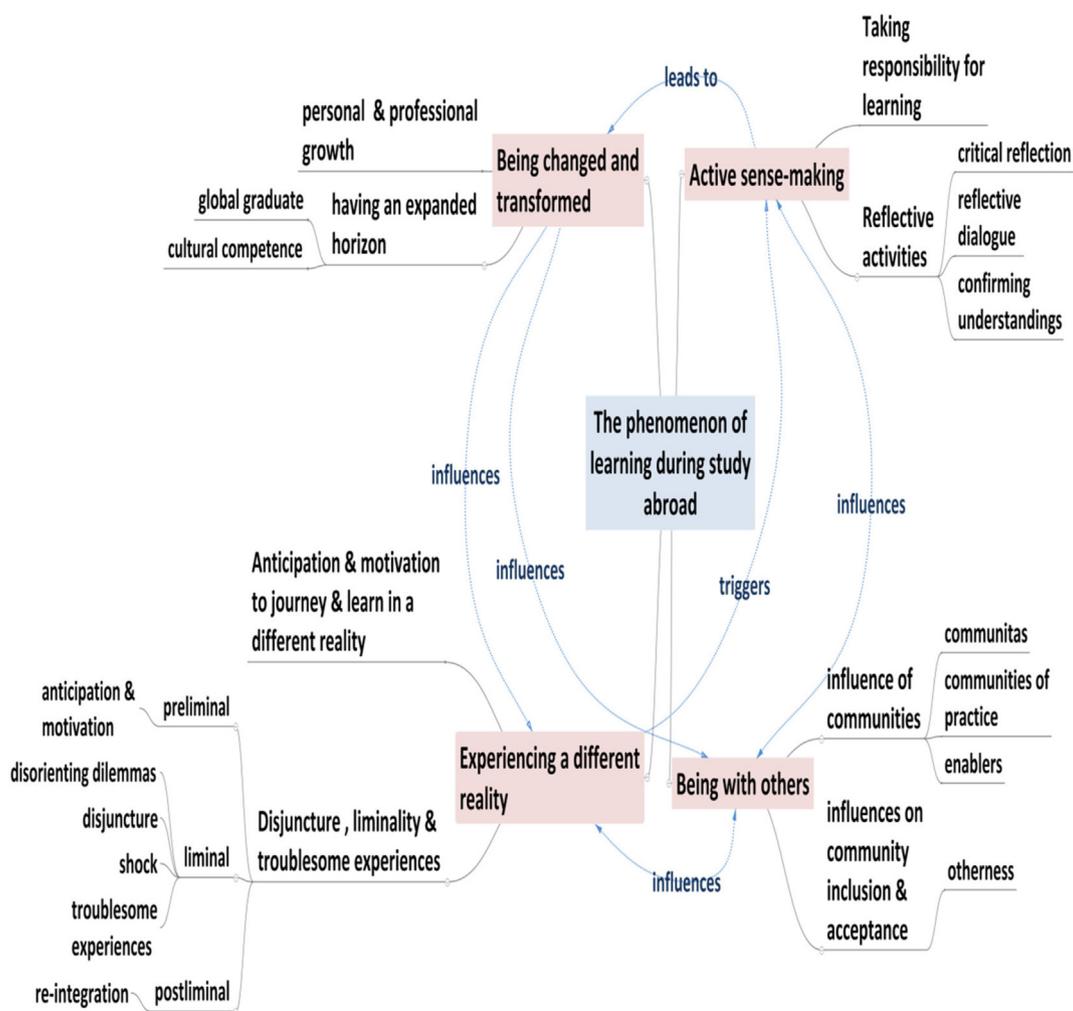


Fig. 1. The phenomenon of learning during study abroad.

adult learning theory (Knowles et al., 2015). Cultural desire and motivation therefore emerged as pre-cursors to learning during study abroad.

During study abroad, students left behind their usual culture, which comprised known parameters of living, learning and nursing practice. Students were also transient during study abroad as they were to return to their own culture. They were therefore ‘betwixt and between’ (ibid) role and culture. This liminal state was manifest in several ways during study abroad. For example, liminality generated experiences of disjuncture, culture shock and troublesome-ness, as the following discussion highlights.

Despite anticipation, students experienced disjuncture when exposed to difference when in the study abroad reality. This disjuncture may be defined as, ‘the gap between what we expect to perceive when we have an experience of the world as a result of our previous learning (and therefore our biography) and what we are actually confronted with’ (Jarvis, 2010, p.83). For example, when first arriving to the different reality, students identified,

‘It was surreal, we had a drive from the airport to the house, me and [name] didn’t really speak to each other we just looked out of the window and were gob-smacked.’

(P19, DC)

The disjuncture experienced by students, such as participant 19, may be further explained when considering transformative learning theory, as students’ frames of reference (‘mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives’ (Mezirow, 2009, p.92)) were insufficient to

explain the reality. Further, greater disjuncture and also culture shock (Pedersen, 1995) were experienced when the degree of difference between realities was significant. The following quote, provides a powerful example of this,

‘On the top shelf ... there was the live babies ... and the second shelf was all the equipment and on the third shelf were all the still births, all the babies that had died, that was really hard, that was something that really shocked me initially when I walked on the ward.’

(P2, DC)

In such circumstances, existing frames of reference became problematic (Mezirow, 2009) as they did not permit immediate understanding. Participant 3, for example, struggled to understand differences in wound care,

‘...wound care, they didn’t do. They didn’t have a sterile technique at all and I’d say “do you know in England we do this sterile, how come you don’t?”. And they were “it doesn’t need to be” so I’d be “can you show me research?” try to find out where they got that idea from, and they were “no it’s just like that”.

(P3, to Northern Europe (NE))

Clinical practices that diverged significantly from existing frames of reference were experienced as disorienting dilemmas, or disturbing events, thrust upon the person calling into question their way of being (Mezirow, 2009). An example of a disorienting dilemma is highlighted by participant 16,

‘...we were giving out medication and [patient] breakfast came and nobody had stopped to help her ... I looked at her and she looked like she was going to cry ... I followed the nurse to give the rest of the medication and I thought: “what am I doing? What have I done? I’ve just walked away from this poor woman” and I turned back and went into the room ... I was ashamed, because I nearly walked off and I was “Oh, my God; I nearly walked away” ... I think it was ‘cos I was too scared and I’m like: “why am I letting my fear stop me from treating a patient? No patient should miss out”.’

(P16, to Southern Europe (SE))

Further, such disorienting dilemmas were troublesome experiences (Perkins, 2006) as they conflicted with participants' existing frame of reference. Students therefore struggled to make sense of these practices, as exemplified by participant 10,

‘you can tell people about it, but until you’re there actually experiencing it, I don’t think it sinks in, what you’re actually physically seeing in front of you ... It’s totally horrifying... you just wouldn’t let anyone treat your patients the way that they would treat their patients.’

(P10, DC)

When measured against threshold concept framework (Land et al., 2008; Meyer et al., 2010), the core of troublesome-ness related to a perceived absence of values that participant's applied in their own culture. For example, participants described experiencing troublesomeness when concepts, such as compassion, did not manifest in a way that they could recognise. However, if students were able to make sense of the manifestation of the concept in the different culture (see ‘active sense-making’), they crossed a threshold of understanding (Meyer and Land, 2003; Entwistle, 2008). Threshold crossing facilitated students to experience transformation of their frame of reference in relation to understanding of either, the culture, the concept, or self. Nursing concepts, such as compassion, have therefore emerged to be cultural threshold concepts during study abroad.

Being ‘betwixt and between’ (ibid) therefore provided students with daily opportunities to learn. For example,

‘I suppose it’s like when you grow up and see everything new for the first time and you have to learn how to work around it, I was doing that every day and I was enjoying it.’

(P3, to NE)

Students were therefore required to learn anew ‘how to learn’ in the liminal space of study abroad.

3.1.2. Active sense-making

The process of learning in the liminal space is complex. It required transformation of experiences of difference into learning events and was triggered when disjuncture forced students to learn. For example,

‘Being put in those circumstances it forces you to learn ... it forces you to think and forces you to, as a student, take more responsibility for yourself ... On an international placement, you have a mentor and they support and teach you, but in that environment where it’s a completely different scenario, it forces you to step up and it was good to.’

(P2, DC)

Once the learning process was triggered, students employed active sense-making strategies to gain insight. Active sense-making comprised taking responsibility for learning and engaging in reflective activities. These included critical reflection, reflective dialogue, and confirming understandings,

‘It was really nice spending time with her [host family daughter] and I was quite surprised ... when she graduated from school, she was off until January ... I remember asking her “so what are you going to be doing with all this time off? Are you going to be spending time with friends?” And she didn’t give much of a response. It was because, I realised quickly, that she had to do a lot of chores around the house. She would have to get

up early in the morning ... and start washing the dishes and preparing the food for the day. ... It wasn’t limited to just seeing [daughter] have that responsibility at 13, we seen it with the other family that we spent quite a lot of time with. I suppose over here, we’re just used to kids just having freedom and play and little responsibility. Over there it was quite different.’

(P17, DC)

Participant 17 had originally formed an impression based on her usual frame of reference. When the participant received an unanticipated response, it triggered disjuncture and reflection. She made sense of the situation and experienced a frame of reference transformation in relation to teenage life in this different reality. Critical reflection and dialogue are also identified as core elements to aid understanding in transformative learning (Mezirow, 2009; Taylor, 2009).

3.1.3. Being with others

Other people also acted as enablers of learning. These enablers advanced students' learning (Vygotsky, 1978) by assisting students to access, and make sense of, learning experiences in the liminal space. Conversely, an absence of enablers perpetuated impression formation,

‘I think in [city] many people that are obese, and salads not so much, they don’t cook I think.’

(P5, to UK)

Participant 5 formed an impression of a local culture based on observations of life when out socially and when eating in a hospital canteen. As this student did not discuss her impression with a local enabler, it is not possible to confirm this understanding is a fair reflection of the culture. Such impression formation may therefore present as mimicry, or inauthentic understanding of a culture (Meyer and Land, 2003; Meyer et al., 2010).

Being with others, and being accepted, therefore played an influential role in learning during study abroad. Acceptance by others was influenced by perceptions of Otherness (Douglas, 1992; Staszak, 2009). When students were perceived to be ‘the other’, they were viewed with suspicion as a ‘risky other’. They were excluded and remained outside of the community (Lupton, 1999: 106), as noted by participant 16,

‘... ‘Cos I felt they were looking at me like: “why is she not doing that?” ... “What are you doing?”’

(P16, to SE)

Being outside resulted in students receiving limited support to learn and make sense, such as participant 8,

‘... I felt like I shouldn’t be there, like I am a distraction, I spend more time with the surgeon and the patients and I didn’t know what the nurses do in this placement.’

(P8, to UK)

Conversely, when students were identified as friendly strangers (Giddens, 1994; Morgan, 2012), or privileged others, they were included and provided with support by enablers to learn, as indicated by participant 7,

‘...they [local students] were asking “oh where are you going?” and I was like “oh now just today I am going to Outreach” and “now I am going to see this”. So they spoiled me a little because I was an international student.’

(P7, to UK)

Students also formed a community with other international students. As these communities comprised fellow liminal entities they are identified here as *communitas* (Turner, 1969). Two types of *communitas* have been differentiated in this study: ‘social *communitas*’ and ‘*communitas of practice*’.

Social *communitas* comprised students studying different subjects; this type of *communitas* provided social support and facilitated learning

about other cultures. For example,

‘There was a lot of talk over meals ... what people do at home, what they do different, even how they go through school ... a lot about traditions.’
(P4, to NE)

Communitas of practice, is reflective of community of practice theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Farnsworth et al., 2016); this term has been devised here to denote the community of practice of liminal entities. This type of communitas provided emotional and sense-making support in the informal setting that, importantly, related to learning about the formal setting of a clinical placement. Participant 18 demonstrates this,

‘You got used to it [experiences on placement] and from the other peoples [students] stories ... when we went to lunch after placement you would all meet up. You would share experiences and it would be “yes, but they do this because they don't have this equipment.”

(P18, DC)

The support offered by communitas during study abroad is therefore identified, in this research, as a vital element in student transformative learning.

3.1.4. Being changed and transformed

As a result of being learners in the liminal space of study abroad, students became different to how they were prior to the experience. For example, students developed toward global gradueness (Diamond et al., 2011),

‘I feel independent and confident to work as a nurse ... I did it in English so I can do it in [language]’

(P9, to UK)

They progressed toward cultural competence (Campinha-Bacote, 2002),

‘... it [spirituality] was a massive aspect for the communities there ... maybe I'd been ignorant to it ... I'm more open and I'm more accepting of it and can see it has a positive role in society.’

(P17,DC)

And they experienced transformation,

‘I am a totally different person...I've grown as a person, I've realised who I am.’

(P16, to SE)

As a result, upon return to their usual reality, students remained in a liminal state. Usual realities were experienced differently and reverse culture shock (Presbitero, 2016) was experienced. This is described by participant 14,

‘To adjust back to England took me ages, I didn't know what was going on, I couldn't function properly ... I got home and sat down and it was like “what's happened? Nothing, everything is the same”, but everything for me had changed.’

(P14, to SE)

Postliminality was attained, and the journey was concluded, when students had re-adjusted and also resolved outstanding troublesome experiences, so permitting threshold crossing to be completed. This process is explained by participant 10,

‘I understand now that it's the culture. The way nurses and doctors treat people out there, it's a totally different culture and we don't understand it It was one of the Sisters on placement, her daughter went to an orphanage and we had a chat about that. She said it's their way of dealing with it, and that made me think maybe it is their way of dealing with the disease and things they come against, they're not cruel people. ... it was a little moment that made me think differently.’

(P10, DC)

However, postliminal students continued to engage with their usual reality differently, as highlighted by participant 4,

‘I've learnt a lot more on my last placement being able to question in an appropriate way, and not just the nurses, and that was something from [country], you know, asking Doctors, ‘cause over there ... they loved to help us out’

(P4, to NE)

Finally, this end-point holds continued potential, as postliminal students envisioned future journeys into difference as a result of transformation. Participant 17 demonstrates this, and provides an apt conclusion to the study abroad journey,

‘It was such a big experience and it opened me up to a world of possibility and I have a wonder lust.’

(P17, DC)

3.2. Implications for nurse education and research

Several recommendations for nurse education may be offered. Specifically, curricula need to be developed that reflect the learning requirements of students at each stage of liminality. For example, preparatory discussions during the preliminal stage should include the need for students to take responsibility and be active learners. These discussions should comprise educators and returned postliminal students, so further extending the network of the communitas of practice. During the liminal stage, students should be supported by a local enabler. This enabler needs to possess cultural knowledge so the student may engage in reflective dialogue and sense-making. The enabler also requires discipline-specific knowledge to support understanding of the different practice reality. In addition, this enabler may assist the student to be a ‘friendly stranger’. Opportunities for students to form both social communitas and communitas of practice should also be facilitated. Following return, meetings with educators and communitas of peer returners may provide opportunities for reflective dialogue, so supporting students to resolve continuing troublesome-ness and attain postliminality. Research is also recommended. For example, as the voices of local people were not heard in this study, investigating study abroad from the perspective of local communities is needed. This may reveal whether, and why, some local communities may perceive students to be a ‘risky other’.

3.3. Limitations

It is important to note, as this research is situated within the interpretivist paradigm, it represents ‘an’ uncovering of the phenomenon of learning during study abroad, therefore future investigations may provide additional insight into this phenomenon.

4. Conclusion

Being a learner during study abroad means to be a liminal entity, actively making sense of difference, disorienting dilemmas and troublesome experiences in the liminal space of the different reality. Active learning is triggered by disjuncture and is influenced by others, and the outcome of the experience of learning is change and transformation. It is hoped appropriation by readers may result in, context appropriate, application of findings to further enhance student experiences of learning during study abroad.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None to declare.

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