Transformational learning through study abroad: US students’ reflections on learning about sustainability in the South Pacific

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As leisure studies and higher education more generally embrace the themes of sustainability and global citizenship, it is important to investigate educational initiatives that purport to achieve these goals. Using transformational theory of transformative learning, this study examined the experiences of 150 US university students who participated in three interdisciplinary short-term study abroad programmes that focus on sustainability in Australia, New Zealand and Fiji. The programmes are highly experiential with the curriculum structured around modules targeted at a particular destination, visited on a specific programme. At the conclusion of the programmes, the students were asked to reflect on their experiences in response to four open-ended questions. The data were coded by the research team, and guided by the tenets of sustainability and transformative learning theory. Four themes were identified: a new sociocultural understanding; a new connection with the natural world; economic considerations; and making changes. The findings provide insights into some ways US students have been introduced to the need for, and importance of, sustainable practices in daily life. In turn, support is provided for the supposition that programmes that are highly experiential and involve critical reflection have the potential to shift students’ worldviews.

Keywords: study abroad; transformational learning; sustainability; global citizenship

Introduction

The overall theme for the 2012 Leisure Studies Association conference, Leisure, Living, Learning provided a platform to explore two pressing twenty-first century social issues: developing global citizenship through leisure (tourism, sport and outdoor recreation) education and the need for more education about sustainable development. In US higher education, these two issues describe two directives that have emerged over the past decade, largely in relation to undergraduate education (Stearns, 2009; Tarrant, 2010). A frequent response has been to offer more study abroad programmes and to develop interdisciplinary sustainability studies degrees.

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Indeed, researchers with backgrounds in tourism, natural resources and outdoor recreation that have long had sustainability and experiential education as integral parts of their fields have often taken the lead in curriculum initiatives that try to foster both global citizenry and sustainable lifestyles. This paper focuses on a suite of study abroad programmes operating in three countries of the South Pacific – Australia, Fiji and New Zealand – to educate US university students about sustainability, while fostering global citizenship.

The study abroad programmes offered by US universities offer a range of curricular choices, including learning foreign languages, discipline-specific programmes such as business or fine arts, or programmes that focus on a specific destination attribute, such as the Great Barrier Reef. Short-term study abroad programmes of eight weeks or less are particularly popular, with 56.6% of US study abroad students choosing this format over semester or year-long options (Institute of International Education, 2011). A growing literature exists on the value of study abroad, with attention focused on increased self-esteem and self-efficacy (Kitsantas, 2004), an improved understanding of the world and those who live in it (Dolby, 2007; Hoff, 2005), a reduction in ethnocentricity (Dukes, Lockwood, Oliver, Pezalila, & Wilker, 1994; Saghaﬁ, 2001), development of a committed contingent of globally aware citizens (Coers, Rodriguez, Roberts, Emerson, & Barrick, 2012; Dolby, 2007; Perry et al., 2013; Stearns, 2009; Tarrant et al., 2013) and an increased interest in the welfare of other people (Kuh & Kauffmann, 1985). Most of the existing studies have examined programmes that have a foreign language or cultural focus (Stitsworth, 1988; Wiers-Jenssen, 2003). Limited research exists on newer interdisciplinary programmes, such as those focusing on sustainability (Nyaupane, Paris, & Teye, 2011; Tarrant, 2010; Tarrant et al., 2011, 2013).

Contemporary views conceptualise sustainability as a multidimensional construct comprised of three interdependent dimensions – the social, the economic and the environmental. Using an accounting term developed by Elkington (1999), this tripartite approach to sustainability is referred to as the ‘triple bottom line’. The triple bottom line takes into account the interconnectedness among the three dimensions of social equity, economic prosperity and environmental quality, as opposed to focusing solely on the environmental, which has been the typical approach to sustainability. It is hoped that learning about sustainability from the perspectives of people in different countries in an experiential setting may help students gain a broader understanding of the challenges facing the world. However, recently there has been a growing critique levied at study abroad programmes. For example, Pedersen (2010) argues that there has been a lack of attention given to holistic outcomes of such experiences, and Ritz (2011) suggests that frequently, programme outcomes are ill-defined. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate student experiences from three experiential South Pacific-based, sustainability-focused study abroad programmes, drawing upon Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory (TLT) as a guiding paradigm.

**Background to the study**

During a typical study abroad programme, students engage in a variety of classroom-based lectures and excursions may be included to various sites, but many of them are not experiential and often resemble the classroom experiences from their home institution (Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002). In fact, Aguilar and Gingerich suggest that some international experiences may be ‘mis-educative’ without active
faculty and student engagement in promoting critical and reflective thinking, community engagement and activities that are experiential in nature. Pagano and Roselle (2009) define experiential education as ‘learning by doing’ with direct reflection about these experiences. An active ‘hands-on’ approach to education with reflection is an integral part of the concept of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). While an inductive approach was used in this study, Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest that as data collection and analysis progress, what they call theoretical sensitivity or the researcher’s a priori knowledge of relevant theories and concepts may be invoked to guide the data analysis. Certainly for this project, Mezirow’s (1991) TLT was applied at various stages, both in designing and implementing the curriculum and also in helping to frame and interpret the data.

**TLT and critical reflection**

At the heart of Mezirow’s (1991) TLT is the concept of constructed knowledge based on direct experience, being placed in uncomfortable situations and critical reflection. TLT involves a change in thinking from an emphasis on concrete facts to the abstract: a change from what we know to how we know (Kegan, 2000). Such an epistemological shift requires thinking about general, thematic questions and the political contexts of issues, in order to consider the underlying meanings in the construction of knowledge. Transformational learning is thereby cultivated and nurtured through a process of reflective thinking, and the generation of new frames of reference (Mezirow, 2000) or new worldviews (King, 2003). While knowledge attainment may be transformative in its own right (Mezirow, 1991), it is when knowledge attainment is combined with active, hands-on experiential learning, that more ‘meaningful ways’ may be uncovered.

The basis of TLT is founded on experiential activities or thought-provoking scenarios and the opportunity for new perspectives to be developed through what Mezirow (1991) refers to as disorienting dilemmas. An integral part of this tenet is Mezirow’s assumption that learning can foster change or facilitate a transformation in individuals’ perspectives. Mezirow identified 10 steps that may result in what Taylor (1998) calls a new frame of reference. These are: (1) A disorienting dilemma; (2) Self-examination, with feelings of guilt or shame; (3) A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural or psychic assumptions; (4) Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared, and that others have negotiated a similar change; (5) Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions; (6) Planning of a course of action; (7) Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans; (8) Provisional trying of new roles; (9) Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and (10) A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective.

In addressing Mezirow’s 10 steps, Taylor (2007), in a critical review of work on TLT, confirmed the essentiality of ‘critical reflection, a disorienting dilemma as a catalyst for change, and many of the phases of the transformative process’ (p. 174). Of note, Taylor pointed to Lange’s (2004) study that refers to disorientating dilemmas as ‘pedagogical entry points’ (p. 183). These pedagogical entry points represent students’ purposive engagement in their dilemmas, which may lead to a transformative experience. Furthermore, Peterson (2002) suggests that while experience may be one of the best teachers, it is never as valuable as when combined with and subjected to the critical analysis, reflection and interpretation of a learner.
Related to Mezirow’s (1991) conceptualisation of transformative learning, in the context of study abroad, transformation requires instantaneous and continuous intellectual and moral development, rather than mis-educative or un-educative experiences (Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002). Not all experiences are educative; without proper critical analysis or conceptualisation, experiences can solidify already-held assumptions and more heavily anchor or confirm an already-held belief. If that previously held belief or assumption is indeed a misconception or incorrect perception of reality, it is purported that a critically reflective process, combined with significant emphasis on dialogue and discussion, would serve as the process for reframing or establishing a new perspective.

Findings such as these emphasise the necessity of pedagogies that foster opportunities and environments conducive for the transformation of students’ perspectives. Mezirow (1991) advocates for the use of educative experiences that challenge students to become critically aware of how and why their assumptions have come to constrain the way they perceive, understand and feel about their world. He suggests that by challenging habitual expectations a more inclusive, discriminating and integrative perspective may emerge. Indeed, Perry (2011) emphasises the need for teaching practices that invoke a challenging problem to be solved in a way that may not align with the students’ usual process of doing, thinking or seeing, or through experiences that are outside of their comfort zone as a crucial part of transformative learning. However, as Mezirow (1991) notes, the ultimate challenge is for students to make choices or otherwise act upon these new understandings.

**Study abroad and transformative learning**

The study abroad programmes in this current study are interdisciplinary and adopt a module-based approach that reflects the tenets of experiential education (Tarrant et al., 2011). The curriculum is thematically grounded, incorporates applied fieldwork, is action oriented and issues based and is relevant to the geographical location of the programme at that particular time. The Australia programme is based in the far north of Queensland and lasts 24 days, during which time students and lecturers travel through several ecosystems, including the Daintree Rainforest, the Great Barrier Reef, the Tablelands and the Outback. The New Zealand programme also lasts 24 days and involves a tour of the South Island, visiting such locations as Fox Glacier, Abel Tasmin National Park, Queenstown, Mount Cook and Milford Sound. The Fiji programme is an optional ‘add-on’ to the longer Australia and New Zealand programmes. It lasts eight days and involves a village homestay, visits to Nadi and Suva, and Bounty Island.

In accordance with the tenets of TLT, each of the programmes seek to change how students view themselves, the world and their role in it, by emphasising a global knowledge, connectivity, an understanding of human–environment interactions (from multiple disciplines and geocultural perspectives) and the responsibility of humans to global issues. The academic content reflects a mix of social and environmental sciences and utilises a combination of classroom lectures, fieldwork (including research/monitoring and service-learning projects), informal seminars and field travel (cultural and environmental-oriented activities and trips). The curricula are not centred in leisure studies *per se*, but were initially developed by scholars from a leisure studies background and thus, incorporate material from tourism, conservation natural resources and outdoor recreation.
For each module, students write two to three 250-word essays addressing relatively complex ecological, environmental and social issues related to sustainability. The modules may also include quizzes set by the field guides, such as fish or tree species’ identification. Finally, some modules may necessitate engaging with the scientific method, both working from a natural science paradigm, including hypothesis testing on the Great Barrier Reef, or engaging in an ethnographic study in a Fijian village. For each module, students are presented with a short background narrative about the pertinent issues related to that module, a series of readings and a collection of field-based lectures, seminars and field activities. In Australia, the four module themes are: (1) cultural adaptations to the Australian landscape, (2) managing remnant rainforests, (3) managing marine resources and (4) indigenous relations with the landscape. The four module themes in New Zealand are: (1) colonising and decolonising the environment, (2) the human dimensions of environmental management, (3) preservation and sustainable use and (4) indigenous relations with the landscape. The two module themes in Fiji are: (1) natural resource conservation and the Fijian way of life, and (2) tourism and ecotourism in Fiji. The module questions require students to critically analyse specific issues and to integrate all forms of material they have been exposed to about a particular topic, including field-lectures, talking with local people, readings and any other relevant information sources. The curriculum for each programme includes an initial set classroom-based introductory lectures, the remainder of the time is field based. For instance, students learn about the ecology of the rainforest while standing in the rainforest or climate change and effects on glaciers by standing on Fox Glacier (New Zealand), while the field guide indicates specific landmarks.

Programme participants are primarily students from large US research universities, who are used to a large, lecture-style format and linear learning style. The curricula of these programmes require them to not only rethink ways in which they have traditionally viewed the world, but also to become accustomed to an experiential, participatory style of learning in a short amount of time. We find that the ‘learning curve’ for the students on this programmes is extremely sharp as they are taken out of their comfort zones on various levels, including cultural context (i.e. a strange country, food and style of living), small group experiential learning (instead of non-participatory anonymous lecture style) and essay writing (much of the educational assessment in these large US universities is based on objective testing, i.e. multiple-choice exams). At the end of the programme, the students take a comprehensive-style exam, which is both content-based and also includes a reflective essay that focuses on the central tenets of transformative learning, as it asks students to think about how the programme may have ‘changed them’, (if at all) and how the lessons learned about sustainability will be transferred back into their home lives. The purpose of this study was to explore the learning experiences of students on interdisciplinary experiential short-term study abroad programmes to the South Pacific with a view to exploring their transformative learning potential.

Methods

Data collection

Data were collected at the end of short-term study abroad programmes during summer, 2008. Reflecting on their study abroad experiences, 150 students completed a post-programme fixed-choice questionnaire that included four open-ended questions
(adapted from Dolby, 2007): (1) ‘What did you learn about the country that you visited?’ (2) ‘What did you learn about yourself as an American?’ (3) ‘How have your perspectives on the world changed?’ and (4) ‘Please take the opportunity to add anything further’. This paper reports the findings from the handwritten responses which were typed verbatim from electronic scans of the originals. During this process, the responses were separated from the participant’s demographic characteristics, with no way of re-matching them. The data were initially open-coded and subsequently categorised into emergent themes and labelled according to their content. During this process, each set of responses was read numerous times by members of the research team. Following Kegan (2000), it is assumed that transformation will elicit abstract thinking (as opposed to the generation of facts) and a frame of reference (a way of knowing). In interpreting responses, transformation was associated with descriptions and terms of reference that emphasise ‘what students make of what happens to them’ as opposed to ‘what did happen to them’; i.e. a construction of meaning out of the experience. This analysis reflects the constructivist epistemology that grounded the study rather than a traditional pre-post-test design. Constructivist approaches also incorporate the experiences of the researchers as well as those of the participants (Charmaz, 2006). For this project, we also incorporated insights from the research team who designed the curricula and led some of the programmes in the South Pacific.

Participants

While the open-ended responses were separated from the rest of the questionnaire prior to analysis, it was still possible to report the aggregate demographic characteristics of the sample. Of the 150 respondents who completed the open-ended questions, 84.7% (n = 127) participated in the Australia programme, 69.3% (n = 104) were female and 64.7% (n = 97) were from a city or suburb (versus n = 53 from a town or rural area). Students were from seven US institutions. The majority were in their final year (seniors) (n = 76) or third year (juniors) (n = 55), the remainder were a mix of second years (sophomore) (n = 12), masters students (n = 6) and first years (freshman) (n = 1).

Findings

Four themes were identified from the data: (1) A new sociocultural awareness; (2) A new connection with the natural world; (3) Economic considerations; and (4) Making changes. The first three themes mirror the tenets of sustainability and the fourth encompasses ideas of global citizenship (Tarrant, 2010) and transformative thinking (Mezirow, 1991). Quotations are provided in support of the themes and include the students’ original spelling, use of abbreviations and grammar.

A new sociocultural awareness

While on study abroad, students learned about their host country’s sociocultural context from historical as well as contemporary perspectives. Travelling to a different country provided them with opportunities to interact with local people and learn about customs and norms. Some students felt that the variety of experiences in their study abroad programme afforded the chance to see their host country in a different
light compared to that of a regular tourist. One student wrote, ‘in Fiji I was able to experience more of the traditional and authentic culture rather than just the “resort” island hopping most westerners see’.

Students’ responses were focused on sociocultural dimensions of their host country to varying degrees. While some students demonstrated superficial insights about cultural differences such as, ‘to speak English, they have very different terminology. The food is also very different. I didn’t expect a difference’. A broader reflection was provided by others who said that the experience of Fiji ‘has shown me that family, culture & traditions are paramount to money & material possessions’. A few respondents noted other embedded and subtle cultural differences in concepts such as time and leisure. When comparing Americans’ experience of time with that of Australians’, a student perceived the US as ‘… always being in a hurry’, and one student noted that back home they, ‘… run around on a strict time table instead of enjoying the moment’. Comments highlighting the use of time by locals such as, ‘this country is very relaxed, there seems to be few pressures put on people. Many people take time out to travel’, prompted a few to consider time in a new light, ‘I should concern myself less with time, because in America everything seems to be in a hurry, and it’s very stressful, however the happiest people I’ve seen in Australia have had the slowest pace of life’.

Students noted similarities between countries too, as one student wrote, ‘… many of the problems that Australians face are exactly the same as problems in the US’. Some respondents moved beyond seeing the differences between themselves and their hosts to find a common equality and unity in humanity. One student felt preservation of cultural diversity was universally valuable because, ‘everyone has their own customs and cultures and it is important to protect and preserve them, while moving ahead as one world’. Another commented that, ‘as an individual it doesn’t matter where I’m from. Sitting down with locals made me truly realise my uniqueness, yet that we are all of one blood, and more importantly, one world’.

Being exposed to people and communities with new ways of thinking appeared to open the students’ minds. One student wrote, ‘Learning where everyone has come from and their perspectives has made other opinions and ways of life less foreign’. Another said, ‘this trip was a very eye-opening experience. It allows you to step out of your comfort zone and really learn new things about yourself and the rest of the world’. A number of respondents felt that people living in the US, ‘… are very sheltered – the world outside America has very different views & ways of life’. The US media was blamed by a few students as limiting and shaping Americans’ perspectives of the outside world. The influence of media was seen as very strong, ‘as an American I understand how incredibly influential our media is … The international news is not stressed enough in the US’. It was generally suggested that ‘Americans need to be more globally aware’, and one student shared that interconnectedness between nations is important as their ‘… perspectives have become less focused on America and more on how countries interact with each other’.

As part of the curriculum, students interacted with the indigenous people of their host country. Some students used this experience to make links between the stories of these indigenous peoples and the history of Native American Indians. One student said, ‘I learned about the Aborigines and how they’ve had a very tragic last 200 years and it relates to how the Native Americans were treated in America’, while others focused on more current relationships, ‘I also enjoyed learning about the Maori culture and how the country is making a great effort to incorporate the
culture and knowledge into society, especially in school. It is a great contrast between the US/Native Americans’. Learning about past and current struggles of indigenous people assisted students in contextualising social inequalities between groups in their host country as well as at home.

For some students, this study abroad programme was their first time travelling outside of the US. Being overseas afforded them the chance to learn about how people in their host country perceived Americans. In some cases, students felt generally that ‘many people have a negative connotation about Americans’, and more specifically, one ‘… discovered that Americans are not respected very highly here. Our president is criticised and many Americans are thought to be ignorant’. Encountering negative stereotypes was a surprise to some participants, but several were already wary before their trip of how they would be viewed by others. Study abroad also provided a chance for several students to think about the influences of stereotypes as responses to cultural diversity. Several students described ethnocentric perspectives as part of their study abroad experiences. One person labelled it openly and shared that, ‘I had to get over my ethnocentrism. Once I did, it was awesome! I’m proud to be an American but now I realise that there are other ways of life’. However, another respondent expressed a mild distaste for things that were different which did not appear to be resolved, ‘As an American I learned that I expected everything to be like the way Americans do it. If it did not match, I thought it a bit off’. The use of personal experience when comparing countries was praised by another student though, ‘I am even more convinced that America is NOT the greatest country in the world. The world is a big place with many different cultures and it is naive to think American culture is the best when you haven’t experienced anything different’. Perceiving that their hosts experienced similar levels of happiness and life satisfaction led one participant to conclude, ‘that not everyone is jealous of American culture. People in different countries like and appreciate their lives and seem to except [sic] what they have and don’t have’.

The travel and curriculum components of study abroad enabled respondents to come into contact with people from different backgrounds, and provided the students with opportunities to learn about their host country’s culture, their own culture and how they fit within it. Learning that their hosts were different yet similar helped some students to foster an awareness of issues of diversity, equality and interconnectedness within a social sustainability framework.

A new connection with the natural world

The students participated in a variety of activities in classroom, community and wilderness settings that were, in many cases, quite different from what they were familiar with. This interaction with unique contexts led to statements about a new appreciation of nature in general, ‘I learned to have a greater appreciation for the environment’, as well as for specific ecosystems and host country attributes: ‘… the Great Barrier Reef is just as beautiful as I imagined and that Australia has some of the most amazing landscapes I’ve ever seen’. Fostering a connection between the students and the natural world surrounding them in their host country was integral to further learning about these features and their importance to the region and world. The environment was understood by many students as complex and multifaceted. One related that they ‘learned how everything is extremely interconnected. When one thing is upset, the whole balance is thrown off’.
Besides becoming aware about the landscape, flora and fauna of their host country, students learned of threats to the health of the natural environment. This was a large part of respondents’ experiences, as many of them had never learned about environmental issues prior to their study abroad programme. Participating in a number of academic and field activities, students stated they were ‘… made aware of many environmental problems, including the changing climate, problems with agriculture, and overusing resources’, and that ‘environmental change is everywhere’. While an awareness of challenges to the environment was new for some students, others had heard about issues before, but did not pay heed prior to their study abroad experience, ‘I used to think global warming was just a political issue that didn’t really exist and that it wasn’t my job to repair the environment. Now I do not believe anything I used to as far as that goes’. A few students had prior knowledge and concern about the health of the environment and experiences in their host countries had confirmed their previous views. This is summed up by one student who wrote, ‘my perspective about how the world is running close to its carrying capacity has not changed’.

As students learned about the state of the environment in their host countries, they also saw first-hand the strategies used by local citizens as well as governments to positively affect their environment. Every-day practices carried out by the general public were mentioned, for example, Australians’ perceived tendency to ‘recycle bottles constantly, and also have toilets that use a lower flush for the different uses’, and their efforts to create a ‘more eco-friendly infrastructure’, where ‘toilets waste less water, electrical outlets have on-off switches, [and] shopping facilities are combined’. Government practices were also lauded, such as strategic planning in New Zealand, as one student noted, ‘all of the conservation and protection plans are great’, and public consultation in Australia as noted by another student, ‘When it comes to environmental protection they are good at listening to public interest and managing each area the best way possible’.

Overall, judgements of how the host country’s environmental ethic compared to that in the US were decidedly in favour of the host countries. Respondents sensed a greater level of interest in the environment by their hosts, saying that, ‘Australians know more about the environment in which they live. Also, the people genuinely seem to care about protecting their ecosystems’. Another participant mused about how types of resources are valued in different countries and wrote, ‘I learned that while America is a country w/ more modern technology, we are behind on the ecological movement and appreciate our resources less than Australia’. One respondent summarised students’ impressions of the need for environmental action at home by stating that, ‘we do not place enough importance on reducing the United States’ ecological footprint; Americans are not conscious enough of the consequences of wasteful lifestyles’.

Despite the generally favourable comparison of host country environmental concern and behaviour with the US, several students cautioned that their host country was ‘not a utopia’ and that more could still be done. Students commented on New Zealand’s international image as being environmentally advanced, but mentioned that there are still some unresolved issues, ‘Despite the clean and green image that New Zealand has gone to great lengths to shape, New Zealand is facing several ecological crisis [sic] with native vegetation and resource management’. Indeed, the students noted that different countries had varied challenges. Policy and land use tensions were seen as ongoing concerns in New Zealand, while Fiji was cited as
struggling with environmental awareness issues, as one student wrote, ‘there is an incredible ignorance, especially in more densely populated areas to the importance of proper waste disposal’.

Looking towards the future, a few students held a bleak outlook for the fate of the natural environment, fearing they may ‘… have to end up sadly saying “I told you so” when the planet can’t take our destruction anymore & ecological systems collapse’, however, most respondents appeared to have hope that it was not too late to make positive change. One student expressed this by describing their host country as ‘home to many diverse eco-systems that are being threatened but can be saved and protected’. Despite this sense of powerlessness among some, others appeared to be empowered as they connected environmental knowledge gained in their host country with the situation in their home country and community, looking towards how they could play an active role.

**Economic considerations**

A variety of links were made by students between how economic sustainability is influenced by things like tourism and consumptive lifestyles. Many respondents felt that the US lagged behind their host country in environmental action and attributed this to economic forces involved in setting priorities, as one student wrote, ‘Australia is way more environmentally aware than the USA. America and the world place far too much emphasis on money and power instead of focusing on tradition and preservation’. Another student cited economic benefits from tourism as motivating a higher environmental ethic, ‘they seem to care more for the environment and its resources than we do. This may be because they use their environment habitats for tourism so they want to preserve them’. Some respondents mentioned how important tourism was to the economic health of local communities, ‘I am now much more open-minded and realise that not everyone in the world has the luxury that I am lucky enough to have. I realised first-hand that many parts of Fiji live off the bare minimum and rely on our tourism to survive’. Tourism was seen as a major factor in economic development: ‘Tourism runs Australia’. Students linked tourism to the various ecosystems, both specifically, in that, ‘the rainforest and tourism depend on each other’, and generally, ‘we learned so much about different eco-systems and their importance to the economy’.

Respondents mentioned a variety of tensions that reflected the challenges governments faced in balancing tourism and resource development with local economic and political realities. One student blamed government turmoil as impeding sustainable tourism development and wrote, ‘the country is in political turmoil. I see this turmoil as being the number one reason for ethnic, economic and development issues. If government here [Fiji] was stronger, I don’t think it would be a problem establishing true ecotourism’. Another student spoke about balancing a marketing image with visitor loads with regards to New Zealand, citing carrying capacity in parks: ‘… being a “clean green” country is not as easy as it seems. The image is hard to balance with the increased amount of tourists. New Zealand is at a constant battle with setting limits but also allowing visitors to enjoy the parks’. Tension was identified between different industry sectors as well, ‘I learned that New Zealand depends a lot on agriculture and tourism. Sometimes these two are at war with each other because when one is benefiting the other is usually suffering’.
One student wrote about their recognition of how basic aspects of the study abroad experience such as accommodation, were deliberately planned to support the learning goals of the programme itself, in this case, an awareness of community economic effects of tourism. Many students reflected and saw their own consumptive practices from a new viewpoint. One wrote, ‘I am too focused on money and possessions’, while another quantified this personal materialism, ‘I learned that I single-handedly own more things than an entire Fijian village and that most of these things are completely useless to my survival and well-being’. Materialism on a national level was also identified, ‘from this experience I have learned to respect the unnecessary extras amenities that we have in the states’.

A number of students mentioned how they recognised that desire for money impacted behaviour. Economic benefits were seen as a main motivation for action in the US, as one student wrote, ‘I learned that our country does a lot of things for the economic benefit’. A similar notion was expressed referring to the global context, ‘I realised that the world is full of money-hungry people that will destroy every last resource if only to get a dollar’. Money was seen as a way to short-term gain which ignored long-term consequences, ‘people do whatever they can to make money with no regard for the environment’. A few students felt that the environment would continue to deteriorate, and in the end, it would take an economic disaster to motivate change for sustainability, ‘… in the face of such vast global wastefulness and ignorance I feel we will not change until we are dying en masse and losing massive amounts of money from environmental irresponsibility’.

How materialism, consumption practices, tourism and other industries affect decision-making and behaviour of governments and individuals, as well as how economies and ecosystems are intertwined was part of how student’s experiences informed their learning about economic sustainability.

### Making changes

Making changes was identified as the fourth theme. Beyond their new awareness of different types of contemporary sustainability issues, many students were looking ahead to make change. Making changes was primarily linked to how student learning in the areas of social, environmental and economic sustainability would transfer to the student’s future thoughts and actions, especially after returning to their home context. Primarily, the students’ focus on making changes was centred in the areas of social and environmental sustainability.

Learning that Americans were sometimes regarded poorly by host country residents influenced a few students to reflect on their status as Americans abroad, ‘I learned that I am an American who cares – who wants to learn about other cultures and global problems. I want to share with others and change people’s opinion of Americans’. Several students commented that they had already been conscious of their behaviour while still on the study abroad trip, including one student who related that, ‘there are also several unflattering stereotypes regarding Americans. While some unfortunately fit these, I have tried to be a good ambassador and show not everyone from the States are as bad and obnoxious as we are often perceived’.

Education was seen as a plausible route to encourage sustainable action. Having just participated in an educational programme, education was top-of-the-mind for students, ‘through talking with tour guides and locals, I have learned that it all starts with education’. In addition, several students were inspired by what they learned
while studying abroad, and had decided to alter their educational and career paths to reflect this change. One was touched broadly, sharing that, ‘my passion has completely changed. I have found a love of studying the environment and plan to pursue a career in that field’. Learning about available opportunities in the environmental field helped another student set a specific goal, ‘I have gained insight regarding modern environmental science research and potential for direct involvement in such research. I plan to pursue a PhD in marine sciences (coral reef ecology) at least partially as a result of these programmes (Australia & Fiji)’. As well as using environmental education as a means to a personal career goal, a number of respondents stated that it was important for other people to also learn. They felt a need to reach out to others and share what they had gained via study abroad, ‘I learned that it is my responsibility to protect the environment. It is important for me to become educated & help inform others’. One remarked that this transfer of learning should occur on a long-term basis because humans ‘have a lot to learn. Education should never stop. It really is the best defence in many ways. I can have an impact by educating others’. Education was seen as a pathway to real understanding of sustainability, and the benefits of the experiential focus of the study abroad programme design was praised. The programme’s use of field activities was seen as meaningful, ‘I can’t put into words how my perspectives have already changed. It is incredibly important to have an open mind and see different cultures first-hand. One cannot truly learn about the importance of environments from inside a classroom. It’s important to physically see different places and people; and the way you interact with that is what you’ll learn’. Though many students mentioned education as a possible way to counteract environmental destruction, a few expressed scepticism in viewing it as an ‘easy fix’. One potential challenge involved environmental messages fighting against competing priorities, ‘I think people are not going to respond to environmental issues unless they are educated about them. It is hard to educate people who have so many other things to worry about in their lives, such as finding their next meal. It will take a lot of work to fix these problems’. A few students acknowledged the complexity involved in planning to promote sustainability, with one stating that the effort was important, ‘there is way more than just meets the eye and it is well worth the time & investment to delve deeper into everything’. Another constraint to the success of environmental education as a form of change making might be overcoming the inertia of disinterest in the topic. One student admitted they were initially drawn solely to the travel aspect of study abroad, but that the sustainability focus shifted their interest, ‘this experience was amazing. At first, I just wanted to travel and did not think I would truly gain anything from the class and speakers. I have taken so much away from all of the lecturers and class work’. For this student, study abroad appeared to spark an interest in the natural environment that was not initially present. Critical reflection fostered through the study abroad curriculum and leisure experiences in the host country may have helped to stimulate further critical thinking on sustainability in the students’ home country and their responsibility towards it. Learning about threats to environmental health and being introduced to strategies to mitigate environmental issues caused many students to reflect on their own actions and lifestyles and critique whether they had contributed to environmental problems or not. Most of the students felt that they personally could take some form of action to make positive change. Some cited specific sustainable behaviour changes they
had already engaged in, ‘I thought I was doing a good job on being conservative for the protection of the environment. I don’t drive my vehicle hardly at all, I recycle, I conserve electricity by using fluorescent light bulbs. I can do much more by buying products that are better for the environment and sacrificing some things to be a better consumer’. Some vaguely vowed to take general action, ‘I need to change. I need to be more environmentally conscious’, and ‘… finding out where my stuff comes from can help a lot’. Many made more specific pledges to change their personal habits as a result of an awareness of the effects of their actions, such as, ‘I will change a lot of my wasteful ways, such as excessive driving and long showers’, or listed areas where improvement could be made: ‘my disconnect from nature. My over-consumption of food products and waste of food. My excessive use of automobiles’. In a few cases, however, change making appeared to involve choosing not to do something that the student perceived was expected of them. Study abroad provided a space for one participant to think critically about previously accepted ideas about what a person’s life should include, ‘That American culture has a lot of standards through all ages that stops a lot of people from getting away and seeing the world. I learned that conformity is expected – going to school, working, having kids … I’m glad I had this experience so I can create my own path in life & not conform’. Resisting external pressure from one’s social context and choosing personally fulfilling life goals was one possible way to put learning about social sustainability into action.

**Discussion**

The goal of these experiential module-based study abroad programmes was to encourage transformational learning among the participants by encouraging them to change the way in which they understand themselves, their worldview and the relationship between the two; in essence, to behave as global citizens rather than consumers (Tarrant et al., 2013). The design of the programmes was such that students were frequently exposed to new situations that ‘took them outside of their comfort zones’ or as Mezirow (1991) would articulate, provide them with opportunities to experience disorienting dilemmas. In line with our constructivist perspective (Charmaz, 2006), we draw upon our own experiences, including directing these programmes, as well as the responses of the students in our interpretation of our findings.

In terms of disorienting dilemmas, for some students, these programmes were the first time they had left the US, for others it was their first time flying. Certainly for many, this was the first time they had been separated from their families for an extended period of time, their daily routines as students were upset with long days starting early in the morning, (no time for naps or television), and especially for the female students, no time spent in extensive grooming rituals. They were then faced with communal living, new activities providing both physical and mental challenges, and for many, a new style of learning and assessment. In the initial days of each programme, the level of discomfort was generally high, but it was mediated with the excitement of being in a new country and forming friendships with other programme participants. In the students’ written responses, there is evidence of this gradual acceptance of a new comfort level with their ‘strange new surroundings’ (Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 2007). Mezirow suggests that part of this adjustment phase is a realisation that the discomfort is shared by others. In this study abroad environment, this sharing and adaptation and acceptance of change may have been intensified by the
nature of the programme, both in the 24 h a day sharing of living space for students and instructors and the condensed programme length of a short-term programme compared to a regular semester length course (Ritz, 2011). Indeed, Ritz suggests that pedagogically well-designed short-term programmes can effect as much potential change in students as their longer term (semester length) counterparts.

As the students were encouraged to reflect critically on the experiences they encountered throughout the programme, both in their written assignments and also in their interactions with various field guides and other locals, the students were challenged to think about what they had accepted as ‘the norm’. Whether this was in terms of the components of everyday life or in reaction to academic knowledge that the students were exposed to gradually, as Mezirow (1991) suggests, students’ assumptions began to change and they also recognised these changes in others. For some students, this was not as dramatic, but for others, there is evidence that the programmes were quite life changing. Moreover, there is evidence that students, perhaps for the very first time, were beginning to understand their country and their role in that country vis-à-vis other nations (Dolby, 2007). By forming new values, beliefs and meanings, students essentially create a new identity for themselves that does not necessarily lead them to reject their former sense of national pride or patriotism (as suggested by Calhoun, 2002), but one that stimulates questions about their relationship to nation and of what it means to be an American (Dolby, 2007), as well as seeing their own nation from another’s viewpoint (Hoff, 2005). Such reflection therefore becomes not only an important goal of study abroad, but a critical step in creating a new identity of national belonging and ultimately, a sense of global citizenship (Tarrant, 2010; Perry, Stoner, & Tarrant, 2012).

Making change is integral to moving study abroad learning about sustainability to the home country context and relates to Mezirow’s (1991) later steps, whereby he suggests students formulate new plans of action and provisionally develop new habits. In different social and economic environments, sustainable practices that might have seemed relatively easy while on study abroad might take on new complexity at home. Step number 10, in particular, whereby new habits and assumptions are fully integrated into life at home, is probably the hardest to achieve. The comments expressed by the students on their learning of sustainability are encouraging and match related studies using quantitative environmental attitude change scales with a larger sample (e.g. Tarrant et al., 2011). However, as Day (2002) argues that an increase in awareness alone does not solve environmental problems, but that it is behaviour that must change. In conversations with the students in the months following the programmes, we do know that some did achieve this step as they reported joining campus organisations related to sustainability or changed their career direction to incorporate environmental conservation or social justice. Whereas, for others, small behaviours such as water conservation, driving their cars less or educating others about resource conservation were reported in these later interactions. However, in terms of the data from this study, the full attainment of transformational learning is not possible to assess without some form of baseline measure and a follow-up study, and as such is a limitation of this current research.

Other limitations include the short amount of time the students had to reflect fully on their experiences, in that they completed the questionnaire prior to leaving the South Pacific and not after they had been home. Also, demographic details were not available to provide a contextual background in which to frame the individual students’ responses, although aggregate demographic data shows that as with most
study abroad participants in the US, the sample is quite homogenous, primarily white and middle class (Institute of International Education, 2011), which certainly raises access issues if the movement towards incorporating mandatory study abroad into US degree programmes moves forward (Tarrant, 2010). However, this study moves towards filling a gap in the literature around the nature of short-term study abroad programmes that focus specifically on broad issues of social, environmental and economic sustainability and the transformational learning potential of such programmes. Certainly for future research directions, it is suggested that a longitudinal research design is adopted whereby students are tracked prior to departure, immediately after the programme and throughout the year or longer after they return. We also recommend examining different types of programmes, in terms of academic content, the degree of experiential learning and the host country in terms of cultural distance in relation to the country of origin of the students (Strange, 2012).

Conclusion
This study provides insights into some ways US university students experience short-term, highly experiential study abroad programmes. For many, these programmes may be analogous to a pilgrimage, in which students are venturing overseas on an extended journey, without their immediate family and often for the first time. According to Daloz, Keen, Keen, and Parks (1996), the transformational learning associated with such travel occurs as a result of the opportunity for reflection and elaboration, however, they caution, ‘A good pilgrimage leads to discovery and transformation, but it isn’t complete until you have returned home and told your story. Home is where someone hears and cares about the story, helps you sort out what you have seen, heard, and done’ (p. 38). Transformational learning can occur as a result of short-term study abroad programmes, when academic content is carefully paired with the geographic dimension of study abroad. Just showing up in another country is not sufficient; purposefully designed curriculum and field experiences are important ingredients in creating the greatest impact in sustainability education and fostering global citizenship (Tarrant & Lyons, 2012).

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