

Old Dominion University

ODU Digital Commons

Educational Foundations & Leadership Faculty
Publications

Educational Foundations & Leadership

11-2020

Transforming Study Abroad: A Handbook [Book Review]

Heidi Fischer

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/efl_fac_pubs



Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad

© 2020 Heidi Fischer

The work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Volume 32, Issue 3, pp. 212-215

DOI 10.36366/frontiers.v32i3.586

THE
FORUM
ON EDUCATION
ABROAD

Doerr, Neriko Musha. (2019). *Transforming study abroad: A handbook*.
Berghahn. 221 pages.

Heidi Fischer¹

Abstract

In her new handbook, *Transforming Study Abroad: A Handbook* (2019), Doerr takes the discourse surrounding several education abroad concepts in a new direction. She emphasizes the need for a rigorous theoretical framework throughout the education abroad experience for students to successfully process their experiences while studying abroad. *Transforming Study Abroad* is a well-researched and practical handbook that includes sample questions for students to consider that can be used in various settings, such as in one-on-one meetings with administrators, in small group discussions, or during orientation sessions. Additionally, the book could lend itself as a textbook for a reflection-based education abroad course.

Abstract in German

In ihrem neuen Handbuch *Transforming Study Abroad: A Handbook* (2019) nimmt Doerr den Diskurs über verschiedene Konzepte des Auslandsstudium in eine neue Richtung. Sie betont die Notwendigkeit der Nutzung eines theoretischen Rahmens rund um das Auslandsstudium, damit die StudentInnen ihre Erfahrungen während des Studiums erfolgreich verarbeiten können. *Transforming Study Abroad* ist ein gut recherchiertes und praktisches Handbuch, das Beispielfragen enthält, die die StudentInnen berücksichtigen können und die in verschiedenen Situationen verwendet werden können, z. B. in Einzelgesprächen mit BeraterInnen, in Diskussionen in kleinen Gruppen oder während Orientierungssitzungen. Darüber hinaus eignete sich das Buch als Lehrbuch für einen reflexionsbasierten Kurs während des Auslandsstudiums.

¹ OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY, NORFOLK, VA, USA

Keywords:

Intercultural competency; study abroad discourse; handbook

In *Transforming Study Abroad: A Handbook* (2019), Neriko Musha Doerr investigates commonly-used terms in the education abroad discourse in a new, critical light. She takes such concepts as culture, “native speakers,” or host-society, and explores how their usage in education abroad discourse implies certain values and assumptions. Using theory from various academic fields, ranging from political science to critical literacy pedagogy, Doerr makes the case that the current discourse surrounding education abroad characterizes cultures, languages, and people as static, homogenous units. To combat this tendency, she uses theoretical frameworks that help students and practitioners to see that culture, language, and host society members are influenced by the “results of historical and current social, economic, and political institutions, arrangements, and interactions” (p. 10). Building this awareness before, during, and after a program abroad can lead to an understanding that can transform the education abroad experience. *Transforming Study Abroad* is geared toward education abroad practitioners and U.S. students participating in credit-bearing education abroad programs where the purpose is, in part, to learn the culture of the host society. Doerr, a trained cultural anthropologist, makes the case that concepts such as host-family or nation-state are fluid, heterogeneous, and constantly in flux, even as the education abroad student interacts with them. She encourages readers to maintain awareness of this fluidity, since the terms we use to describe the process and goals of an education abroad program can serve to shape expectations and the lived experience. The book comprises seven chapters that revisit nine key terms and explores how they relate to social structures, both at home and abroad. Each chapter includes a list of critical questions intended to facilitate open-ended self-reflection and to encourage students to process their education abroad experience. Each chapter concludes with an annotated bibliography of suggested further readings. Chapters 1 through 5 explore the concepts of the global and national (Chapter 1), the notion of culture (Chapter 2), “native speakers” and language learning (Chapter 3), immersion and living like a local (Chapter 4), and host society and host family (Chapter 5). Throughout her discussion of these concepts, Doerr challenges the historical discourse of homogeneity, which assumes forced assimilation of different ethnic groups by the dominant culture. In education abroad discourse, cultural or linguistic differences typically assume a binary view of us vs. them, and as such perpetuate the idea of a homogenous nation-state. Doerr strongly rejects this notion, and by applying a critical theory framework she suggests ways to change this discourse. It is part of the responsibility of education abroad professionals to present cultures, societies, and languages not just in opposition to one another but also to show how they are interconnected through power relations.

Throughout the book, the author challenges us to think critically and to

encourage students to view their experience abroad as something that is co-constructed by a variety of actors, including immigrants, other education abroad students, and the students themselves. In this regard, Doerr argues against the assumption that living with a host family is the best way to learn another culture; that the host family is representative of a homogenous host society; that the experience is ‘authentic;’ and that the student and the host society are fundamentally different. The author stresses the importance of encouraging students to think critically about their assumptions of life in another culture.

In light of her critical view of contemporary education abroad discourse, in Chapter 6 Doerr also asks the question, “...are we not actually *constructing* borders by expecting something new and different beyond that border before even getting there?” (p. 145, emphasis in original). Conceptions of education abroad as an adventure, as immersion into a “different” culture, or as an experience in cognitive dissonance encourages students to frame their experience in a way that seeks out differences over similarities. Doerr asks practitioners to help students recognize when they are constructing borders where none may exist.

The concluding chapter considers the concept of self-transformation. The chapter begins with a discussion on learning outcomes assessment in the education abroad context. Doerr points out that we only assess “what we value” (p. 168, emphasis in original), which may not necessarily fully encompass what students learn during their experience abroad. Narratives, such as testimonials, about education abroad are socially constructed and influenced by coaxers (program providers or college education abroad practitioners). The author reiterates that self-transformation is not unique to the education abroad context; it can take place via daily new activities at home as well.

Chapters 1, 4 and 7 offer exercises that practitioners can employ at their institutions. One activity demonstrates the heterogeneity in one’s home society by pitting education abroad alumni against students with a minority background who did not study abroad to show that both can demonstrate global competencies. Another activity has students use education abroad promotional words and phrases to describe a new experience that they have had at home and to examine the difference it makes in their perception and understanding of the experience. Doerr also suggests two activities that explore transformation in students’ daily lives to encourage their development of “social competence.”

The questions provided in the book can be used in various settings, such as in one-on-one meetings with administrators, in small group discussions, or in orientation sessions. Additionally, the book could be used as a textbook for a reflection-based education abroad course. However, although the plethora of questions are a valuable tool for faculty and useful in meaningful one-on-one

conversations with students, pursuing deep discussions may perhaps be beyond the scope of a busy education abroad advisor. Meetings with students throughout the education abroad process are often limited to nuts-and-bolts questions or crisis situations. Nevertheless, the list of questions and suggested further readings are well organized by topic and often by when the questions are best asked in students' education abroad programs. Many questions would be particularly useful to stimulate discussion during predeparture orientations.

Transforming Study Abroad: A Handbook is a well-researched critique of some common assumptions in education abroad literature that provides practical exercises and hundreds of sample questions for conversation or reflection prior to departure, while abroad, and post-return. The book is an invaluable contribution to the existing education abroad literature and promotes a deeper conversation around our understanding of the "other," both at home and abroad. During this time of the global pandemic and political uncertainty, it is important for education abroad practitioners to pause and reflect on ways that can enhance and inform intra- and intercultural understanding for their students. Doerr's book is a useful tool to facilitate this process.

Author Biography

Ms. Heidi Fischer is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Higher Education at Old Dominion University. Previously, she worked in education abroad at both public and private universities in North Carolina. For two years, she served as the course coordinator for the education abroad reflection-based courses for students studying abroad and those returning from education abroad. Her research interests are campus internationalization, education abroad, and community college students. She serves as the 2021 chair of NAFSA Region VIII.