

Book Review: NERIKO MUSHA DOERR. Transforming Study Abroad: A Handbook. (2019).

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NERIKO MUSHA DOERR. *Transforming Study Abroad: A Handbook*. New York, NY: Berghahn Books. (2019). 232 pp. \$120.00 (eBook). (ISBN 978-1-78920-115-4)

In *Transforming Study Abroad: A Handbook*, Neriko Musha Doerr guides her readers through an intellectual journey of critical reflection on the rationale and impact of study abroad, a practice that has been gaining popularity over the past few decades.

In the book's introduction, the author begins with a recapitulation of three different study abroad experiences she had when she was a student. By comparing and reflecting on these three experiences, the author then draws readers' attention to a number of clichés flooding the study abroad promotional materials and testimonies but rarely been put under critical examination. For instance, study abroad programs are often advertised under the banner of "fostering global citizens" and "developing intercultural competence," while neither educators nor students participating in these programs might bother to ask what "global" and "cultural" imply. In the introduction, Doerr identifies "study abroad practitioners and students" (p. 12) as her target audience. Her intention to reach out to these readers is further manifested in the book's well-organized and easy-to-follow structure.

From Chapter 1 to Chapter 7, the book is structured around various study abroad clichés. Each chapter focuses on debunking one cliché opening with a question that makes the reader rethink the term before digging into the chapter to search for answers. Chapter 1, for example, challenges the notion of "global" learning by asking: "Does the global need the national, and if it does, what's wrong with that?" In a similar way, other chapters deal with misconceptions, whether about "culture" (Chapter 2), "native speakers" (Chapter 3), "immersion" (Chapter 4), "host society and host family" (Chapter 5), "border crossing" (Chapter 6) or "self-transformation" (Chapter 7). In reality, each study abroad program usually has its own focus, such as learning a foreign language or working on a community development project. The structure of the book allows readers to jump directly into the discussion most relevant to

their specific program focus. For instance, a coordinator of a study abroad program that mainly aims at foreign language learning may want to read chapters 3 and 4, because the terms “native speaker” and “immersion” most often appear in advertisements for this kind of program. As readers dig into a chapter concerning the term(s) they are most familiar with, they are likely to be surprised because the apparently familiar, unproblematized terms in fact prove quite problematic.

The book offers practical advice for its target audience of practitioners and students. Doerr first addresses the question of why a term is problematic, drawing on theories from linguistics, cultural anthropology, and other social sciences. She then moves on to address the more practical question of how to understand these terms differently and use them in a more socially conscientious way. For instance, after debunking the misconception of the “host society” as a homogenous and static object, she suggests study abroad participants move away from the aim of “living *like* a local” and focus instead on “living *with* locals” (Chapter 5; emphasis added). After having their long-held assumptions shattered, practitioners and students are in need of solutions that can lead to better practice. The author addresses this need at the end of each chapter by suggesting various pedagogical tools. These include a reading list, classroom exercises and a list of questions to ask study abroad participants before, during, and after their trips. In the final chapter (“Conclusion and Departure”), she summarizes the suggestions from previous chapters and offers a set of new frameworks to view study abroad. These frameworks include factors often overlooked in the dominant study abroad discourse, including one’s positionality in relations of power and one’s (inevitable) participation in a process of ongoing change.

Study abroad practitioners and participants are not the only ones who may draw inspiration from this book. Scholars in international education, service learning, and second language learning who have a research interest in the phenomenon of study abroad may also find this book valuable to their research work. More often than not, study abroad scholars are also practitioners, directly or indirectly. Many, if not most, have also had personal experiences studying abroad. Therefore, the book may as well transform their understanding of the phenomenon they study.

The book is situated in an intellectual trend that challenges the dominant study abroad discourse. It carries forward the effort made by previous scholars to question the value of popular notions such as “global citizenship” (Abdi, 2015) and “self-transformation” through experiences abroad (Tarc, 2013). Largely built on previously published critical literature, Doerr’s work makes a unique contribution to the international education scholarship by grouping together the key terms supporting the dominant discourse and putting them under the spotlight for a closer examination. For easy practical reference, the

author chooses to focus on one term in each chapter. While using theories to expose the study abroad clichés, the author manages to keep her language simple and easy to understand. Terms that are unfamiliar to readers, such as “hierarchy of experience,” are accompanied with clear definitions and concrete examples that help satisfy the book’s purpose as a practical handbook. Meanwhile, the author manages to also repeatedly remind her readers of the connections between these terms. Running through the book’s critical analysis are a few themes common to the critical literature on this subject. These themes include avoiding homogeneity and fixed boundaries; paying attention to fluidity, diversity, and change; and focusing on social contexts and power relations.

As a researcher in international education, I share Doerr’s belief in the Freirean concept of “[p]raxis – the cycle of reflection and action” (p. 199) as the essence of education. While the pedagogical tools provided in this book remain to be further tested by researchers and practitioners in order to (as per the book’s title) continue the transformation of study abroad, the handbook does much to contribute to a Freirean cycle by initiating critical reflection on the practice of study abroad.

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