Spring 5-3-2024

# A Global Journey Inward: Contemplative Education Abroad on a Short-Term Program in Finland

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Date 3 May 2024

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education at
SIT Graduate Institute

2024

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## Abstract

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This study investigated the transformative potential of integrating subjective and intersubjective contemplative practices within a short-term, faculty-led education abroad program in Finland. Focused on addressing tensions arising from neoliberal and objective approaches to conventional Western higher education, the research explored how critical contemplative education abroad fostered deeper connections with Self, Others, and Place among students. Data collection involved analyzing course documents, facilitating two focus groups, conducting participant observations, and documenting researcher reflections. Employing the heuristic approach within a qualitative and spiritual research paradigm, the study identified three main findings: Experience of Place, Experiential Coherence, and Individual Perspectives within a Collective Experience. The Experience of Place appeared enriched by subjective contemplative practices, facilitating students' ability to be present and engaged. Contemplative practices in a novel environment facilitated experiential coherence, enabling students to establish a shared resonance beyond the Self to encompass Others and Place in harmony. Individual perspectives within the collective experience highlighted how the students uniquely interpreted their experiences while aligning with the collective one. The findings underscored the transformative potential of integrating contemplative practices into education abroad programs. By intertwining contemplative practices with lived experiences, the research indicated that students forged a profound relationship between the external world and their inner thoughts, senses, and emotions. These insights nurtured students' awareness, understanding, and compassion, encouraging the incorporation of contemplative practices in education abroad programs to help heal the separation and Othering among individuals, societies, and the natural world.



Keywords: contemplative pedagogy, critical pedagogy, pedagogy of place, study abroad, experiential learning, higher education

## Table of Contents

Page

## Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| AAC&U | American Association of Colleges and Universities |
| HHH | Head, Heart, and Hands Model |
| HSR | Human Subjects Review |
| IP | Individual Perspective |
| NDSU | North Dakota State University |
| SIT | SIT Graduate Institute |

## List of Tables

## List of Figures

## Acknowledgments

I want to express my deepest gratitude to my primary advisor, Dr. Deepa Srikantaiah, for her unwavering support and invaluable mentorship throughout this dissertation journey. Deepa's expertise, heartfelt dedication, and profound insight have been instrumental in shaping this research endeavor into its final form. Her thoughtful feedback and unwavering encouragement have been a continuous source of inspiration and motivation that nurtured my growth as a researcher.

I also appreciate my dissertation committee members for their expertise, feedback, and support throughout this process. Their unique perceptions, thoughtful questions, and productive suggestions have immeasurably enriched the quality of this work.

Special thanks to Tasha Cary-Waselk for her generous permission to conduct research on the *Growing Green* program. I could not imagine a more perfect alignment for this research and collaboration with our joint passions for experiential learning. Her open, caring friendship and support as a colleague and friend throughout this process have been invaluable.

To my children, Aia and Aven, I owe a debt of gratitude beyond words. I sincerely thank them for their unwavering love, encouragement, and understanding during this challenging yet rewarding journey. Your patience and willingness to entertain one another so I could work weekends and evenings to complete my doctorate over the past three years has been a testament to your maturity and compassion. I am immensely grateful for your love and support, and I know how proud you both are of my accomplishment.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to my family and friends for their unwavering love, encouragement, and understanding during this challenging yet rewarding journey. Eric Hager

provided invaluable support, dedicating countless hours to thoughtful discussions, offering deep listening, and providing intuitive contributions that significantly enriched this endeavor.

Finally, I would like to thank all those who have contributed in ways large and small to this dissertation. This dissertation would not have been possible without the collective efforts and support of these individuals, and for that, I am deeply grateful.

# Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

## Introduction

In the field of global education, research indicates that internationalization, emphasizing learning beyond one's local community, prepares students for life and work in a global society and economy (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Drake Gobbo & Hoff, 2020). Consequently, numerous colleges and universities actively pursue internationalization to enhance their global rankings and simultaneously address tensions stemming from neoliberal approaches to comprehensive internationalization (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; de Wit, 2023). The potential consequences of these tensions, as highlighted by de Wit and Altbach (2021), may include the erosion of "traditional values such as cooperation, peace and mutual understanding, human capital development, and solidarity" (p. 35). Huckle (2017) affirms that recent internationalization efforts often align with learning and values that "reinforce or sustain the prevailing neo-liberal hegemony" (p. 69).

Neoliberalism, originating in the 1930s as an economic theory, perceives "human beings as rational individuals capable of making decisions to enhance their own well-being" (Khoja-Moolji, 2014, p. 106). In education, neoliberalism equips students with the skills necessary for success in the global economy (Khoja-Moolji, 2014). In international education, neoliberalism favors privatization and free market principles, representing a "shift away from a public good academic knowledge/learning regime to an academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime" (Slaughter, 2014, p. 26). The market-oriented perspective introduces competition for resources rather than prioritizing education and the public good (Slaughter, 2014).

The neoliberal ideology, emphasizing individual rationality and global economic success, not only shapes education within the United States but also significantly influences the focus and objectives of education abroad programs. Brewer and Ogden (2019) describe neoliberalism's

prevailing imperative as emphasizing students' acquisition of specific hard and soft skills crucial for effective job performance in diverse global workplaces. Consequently, this orientation has led to a marked increase in the participation of internships abroad, a higher representation of STEM and business majors, and a decline in the number of social science and humanities majors in education abroad programs (Brewer & Ogden, 2019). In the United States, education abroad concentrates on individual improvement, assuming that returnees will contribute to their society upon return through increased economic competitiveness, cultural understanding, and enhanced national security (Adkins & Messerly, 2019; Brewer & Ogden, 2019). The drive for individuals to strengthen themselves for their professional and economic futures culminates in becoming successful consumers in the global market. Mirabai Bush, founder of the Center on Contemplative Mind in Society, notes that our culture excels at cultivating consumer-oriented individuals, neglecting the recognition of communal responsibilities and interconnectedness (Bush & Gunnlaugson, 2018).

In higher education, positivists and post-positivists emphasize cognitive learning *about* objective truths, such as historical facts, discovered by previous experts (Lamb, 2016). This approach, known as objective, third-person learning, has influenced conventional Western education (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017). The paradigm in global education prioritizes generalized, objective truths, often neglecting the nuanced, subjective knowledge within each culture (Steger, 2018). Traditionally based on neoliberal ideologies, much of Western education tends to overlook the idea of an inner world, providing limited opportunities for students to understand themselves or their intrinsic contribution to society (De Souza, 2017). Palmer (1993) argues that conventional Western education severs the connection between the inner Self and the world, resulting in disconnected individuals and widespread suffering.

The critical theorist Freire (1970) has consistently contended that the prevailing educational system also advantages those in power while constraining others. Initially conceptualizing critical pedagogy as a radical educational approach, Freire (1970) posited that genuine learning occurs when teachers and students collaborate to bring about a societal transformation of oppressive structures (Kaufman, 2017). From early education through college, students pursue a series of learning outcomes without developing an awareness of their inner Selves or questioning societal prescriptions. The absence of self-reflection can lead to a sense of detachment in adulthood, as individuals remain unaware of their internal intuition. Consequently, they often follow paths determined by extrinsic forces related to the global economy rather than pursuing their intrinsic purpose. Students not taught to engage in deep inquiry tend to "proceed along paths already laid down for them" (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 5).

U.S. higher education students have various avenues to acquire skills and knowledge on international subjects, with participation in an education abroad experience being one of the most prevalent. The Forum on Education Abroad defines education abroad as:

> Education, including, but not limited to, enrollment in courses, experiential learning, internships, service learning, and other learning activities, which occurs outside the participant's home country, the country in which they are enrolled as a student, or the country in which they are employed as personnel. (*Glossary*, 2021)

Brewer and Ogden (2019) assert that there is an assumption that education abroad "can be strategically leveraged to support the development of global-ready graduates who are able to work effectively in international and intercultural settings" (p. 25). While this assumption may be accurate, the multifaceted learning outcomes required for effective education abroad necessitate many interwoven learning opportunities (Twombly et al., 2012). Vandermaas-Peeler

et al. (2020) add that global engagement encompasses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes gained through learning, along with intercultural communication and global citizenship.

Integrating contemplative pedagogy into education abroad can enhance global engagement by facilitating students' awareness and aligning their external experiences with their internal Selves. The term “contemplative pedagogy” primarily originated from U.S. scholars and sympathizers of Eastern religions and philosophies, notably Buddhism, as an effort to align with American education across various levels (Komjathy, 2017). Contemplative pedagogy encompasses teaching and learning “informed by and perhaps expressed as contemplative practice… an emerging experiential and experimental methodology” (Komjathy, 2017, p. 159). Hall et al. (2018) elucidate that contemplative practices “integrate mind and body toward an awareness of the present moment and help cultivate wisdom, thus creating openness to new information” (p. 4). While fostering a connection with a student’s internal Self through contemplative pedagogy is emerging as a practice in education abroad (Clancy, 2020), its roots are related to American education in the 1900s (Hall et al., 2018). In the 1960s and 1970s, three integral contemplative higher education institutions were founded: the California Institute for Integral Studies, Naropa University, and the Maharishi University of Management (Hall et al., 2018). Each institution offers a distinctive educational experience centered around holistic wellbeing, personal growth, and transformative learning, with unique features such as interdisciplinary studies, contemplative practices, and a focus on consciousness and spirituality (Hall et al., 2018). Established in 2008, the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education is a community of contemplative educators, scholars, and administrators (*A History of ACMHE*, n.d.). The increasing development of contemplative practices across various disciplines gave rise to Contemplative Studies, an interdisciplinary field (Komjathy, 2017).

This study explores the relationship between contemplative pedagogy and global engagement, specifically within education abroad. Examining the internal Self through a combination of contemplative pedagogy and critical pedagogy within education abroad can encourage students to consider how their inner Selves relate to the world from their own perspectives. Kauffman (2017) suggests an intersection between the two pedagogies, noting that "contemplative pedagogy is often posited as an inner-directed practice of helping students find balance and wholeness in their lives, whereas critical pedagogy is generally seen as a form of education that is outer-directed and attempts to foster radical social change" (p. 2). Both critical and contemplative pedagogies contribute to liberatory, transformative education, with their combination offering valuable insights into difference and unity (Mah y Busch, 2014).

The outcome of critical contemplative pedagogy for learners is that "self-interest is readily replaced with social interest" (Kaufman, 2017, p. 15), driven not just by a sense of goodness but by a more profound compassion for others. Additionally, while contemplative pedagogy opens one to one's sense of Self and compassion for Others, critical pedagogy guides action for creating social change with Others (Kaufman, 2017). In this study, critical contemplative pedagogy is the way "the personal grounds the political" (Kaufman, 2017, p. 15), elucidating how one understands Self in their local context and how that understanding evolves globally. With the growing trend of integrating contemplative practice into higher education, exploring the impact of such practices on education abroad programs is imperative.

This research aimed to uncover student perspectives on including contemplative practices in a short-term, faculty-led education abroad program. I collected data during my participation in the program in Finland, which was chosen for its integration of mindfulness practices into the curriculum and alignment with the research timeline. Throughout the course, students were

prompted to explore their internal Selves to raise awareness of who they are and their purpose in the world, using that as a basis for understanding Others. Integrating contemplative practices allows students to comprehend themselves at a deeper, more engaged, and more holistic level. Education abroad, incorporating contemplative practices alongside critical pedagogy, may nurture empowered and engaged learners who inherently resist the dominant neoliberal hegemony.

This chapter begins with an overview of global engagement, setting the context for exploring how contemplative pedagogy can enhance students' learning about themselves and others during an education abroad program. Subsequently, critical pedagogy is applied to education abroad to provide the framework for this study. Then, contemplative pedagogy is proposed to facilitate students' growth and learning, surpassing current practices in education abroad. Finally, the chapter concludes with an explanation of the methodology and the researcher's positionality.

**Education Abroad**

Over the past 30 years, internationalization efforts in U.S. higher education have primarily focused on promoting mobility through education abroad rather than implementing initiatives to globalize the curriculum domestically (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Higher education institutions and international educators advocate for education abroad as an investment in participants' economic futures, promising a return on investment by boosting their resumes for global competitiveness (Haas, 2018). The expectation is that education abroad participants will acquire cultural and labor market advantages while learning to effectively engage with people outside their home culture (Haas, 2018). Although neoliberal ideologies have advantages, limiting education abroad to the conventional objectivity of higher education learning is

detrimental to students (de Wit, 1991; Lamb, 2016; Palmer, 1993). Brewer and Ogden (2019) concur, noting, “Students have often been conditioned to think of education as solely a cognitive activity” (p. 2). Particularly in education abroad, this emphasis on objective and intellectual learning tends to overshadow a deeper understanding of the Self. Unfortunately, this path is often only accessible to students with the financial means or cultural capital to appreciate its value (Netz et al., 2020; Salisbury et al., 2009, 2011; Simon & Ainsworth, 2012). This highlights Freire's (1970) assertion that the existing educational system favors those in power and simultaneously restricts others.

This study sought to explore how education abroad intertwines external, objective learning with internal Self-exploration in relation to Others. Objective learning is an educational approach that prioritizes the acquisition of generalized, empirical truths through observable, verifiable facts and principles while potentially overlooking subjective perspectives and individual interpretations (Lamb, 2016). While traditional objective learning remains fundamental, successful programs prioritize immersive and meaningful experiences that engage with the local context. Reflection has emerged as a crucial element of subjective learning in education abroad, with both short- and long-term programs recognizing its significance in enhancing intercultural learning (Chiocca, 2021; Paige & Vande Berg, 2012; Passarelli & Kolb, 2012; Savicki & Priestley, 2019). According to Chiocca (2021) and Savicki and Priestley (2019), engaging in reflective practices encompassing cognitive understanding and emotional awareness is vital for developing intercultural competence.

Education abroad curricula have increasingly incorporated elements such as reflection, mentoring, and dialogue, even within short-term programs, aiming to deepen students’ cultural understanding (Chiocca, 2021). This form of self-reflective, transformative learning necessitates

engaged students who are invested in their learning experiences, even when challenging or uncomfortable, rather than "thinking of education as something to be purchased and consumed" (Brewer & Ogden, 2019, p. 6). Research indicates that when a program's curriculum incorporates local interactions, including purely social experiences, it increases cultural awareness compared to programs presenting solely theoretical concepts (Chiocca, 2021). Regarding its influence on cultural awareness, objective learning only goes so far and does not include an understanding of the Self in a global context.

From a neoliberal standpoint, education is a means to acquire skills for competing in the global economy. In the twentieth century, the political and social motivations for supporting education abroad to promote peace were more compelling (de Wit, 2023). However, with the rise of the global knowledge economy, the priority has shifted to determining who can thrive the most in the global market. de Wit (2023) argues for a shift "from short-term neoliberal approaches to long-term societal interests, from international education as a benefit for a small elite towards global learning for all, and from a Western paradigm to a global and equal concept" (2023, p. 207). This project suggests that a meaningful way to support this shift toward deeper cultural understanding is to include reflective learning and purposeful engagement with others.

### *Global Engagement*

The intent of education abroad is to provide an opportunity for students to engage in the development of global learning. A widely accepted definition of global learning, proposed by Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning, describes it as "a lifelong developmental process in which the learner engages with difference and similarity and develops capabilities to interact equitably in a complex world" (Sobania & Vande Berg, 2020, p. xii). The literature views global learning as fundamentally developmental and holistic, intricately connected to the

ongoing process of meaning construction and reconstruction by humans (Namaste et al., 2020; Vande Berg et al., 2012). The discourse on global learning indicates that global *knowledge* alone is insufficient and requires developing global *skills* and *attitudes* to fully achieve the desired learning outcomes (Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2020). Vandermaas-Peeler et al. (2020) suggest that the term "global engagement" is more comprehensive as it moves beyond strictly gaining cognitive knowledge and skills to include attitudes and behaviors. Although global learning and global engagement are related concepts, this study employs the term global engagement to encompass aspects beyond knowledge acquisition. The study acknowledges that developing global engagement is a continuous process that does not occur solely through one experience abroad but is cultivated throughout a lifetime.

Global engagement comprises knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs primarily developed externally. The learner's focus is directed outward toward becoming someone who is "attentive to diversity across the spectrum of differences," who understands how their "actions affect both local and global communities," and who can "address the world's most pressing and enduring issues collaboratively and equitably" (*Global Learning VALUE Rubric*, 2009). The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) developed global learning outcomes that were adopted across U.S. higher education curricula. Within the AAC&U VALUE rubrics, there is one reference about internal growth related to enhancing a learner's sense of identity, but the rest are external (*Global Learning VALUE Rubric*, 2009). The significant focus on outer knowing indicates that internal understanding is less valued. In contrast, the field of education abroad has incorporated theories utilizing reflection that bolsters inner knowing. Chapter 2 explores these theories in greater detail.

To develop caring relationships and interact with others in the best way possible, knowing and connecting with one's Self is essential (De Souza, 2017). The Self refers to the inner consciousness that extends beyond physical or mental dimensions (Lamb, 2016). Investigating the present moment rather than following habitual thinking patterns can lead to new insights and empower individuals to gain a fresh, critical perspective (Simmer-Brown, 2017). The relationship between the Self and Others shapes one's identity, perceptions, and actions, providing a sense of purpose and meaning (De Souza, 2017). Inner awareness is a holistic concept that includes understanding one's consciousness while being in a relationship with all that exists, human and non-human (Lamb, 2016). Neoliberal motivations within higher education tend to prioritize acquiring skills for future employment over internal knowledge in education abroad programs, potentially resulting in less emphasis on the latter. Chapter 2 offers a detailed examination of internationalization literature, which often reflects the neoliberal paradigm, alongside literature that presents a balanced perspective beyond neoliberal ideals.

**Critical Pedagogy**

In recent years, the literature on global engagement has emphasized the importance of integrating critical theories into the curriculum to foster holistic learning. Steger (2018) notes that this integration challenges the positivist and objectivist approaches, acknowledging the socially constructed power dynamics and interests that underlie dominant Westernized perspectives. By infusing critical theories into global engagement, it has the potential to eradicate tendencies toward “one-sided, ethnocentric, touristic, uncritical, oversimplifying of cultural complexity, and operating within the savior complex” (Adkins & Messerly, 2019, p. 75).

Trifonas and Balomenos (2012) propose that critical pedagogy asserts a transformative potential for a student's subjectivity through ongoing learning, where experiences evolve over

time and across different geographical spaces. Guiding students into open and challenging dialogue enables them to comprehend differences, making them more likely to adapt their internal meaning-making to incorporate perspectives beyond their worldview (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2012). Critical approaches in education abroad advocate for practices that are "respectful, reciprocal, critically self-reflexive, involve building long-term relationships, and seek to understand and interact holistically with local institutions and cultures and individual hosts – in all their profound complexities" (Adkins & Messerly, 2019, p. 75).

As previously mentioned, critical pedagogy is both a "philosophy of education and a social movement that combines education with critical theory," aiding students in "develop[ing] critical consciousness" (Khoja-Moolji, 2014, p. 161). This research investigates the nexus between developing critical consciousness and incorporating critical pedagogy within global engagement, specifically in education abroad. Students gain awareness that "interconnectivity does not merely happen in the world 'out there' but also operates through our consciousness 'in here'" (Steger, 2018, p. 3). In education abroad, guided reflections enable students to explore their Selves in relation to their encounters abroad, facilitating learning and increasing cultural awareness (Chiocca, 2021). This study examined whether including contemplative practices further deepened the exploration of students' internal understanding of the Self, Others, and the world during their participation in a short-term education abroad program.

**Contemplative Practices and Pedagogy**

The preceding section delved into how critical pedagogy fortifies education abroad, and this section contends that contemplative pedagogy can achieve a similar effect. Critical and contemplative pedagogies foster liberatory transformative education and produce a new space illuminating differentiation and connection (Mah y Busch, 2014). In critical pedagogy, this space

arises from the "contradictions revealed by word-based reflection and action" (Mah y Busch, 2014, p. 127). From a critical perspective, the interconnected systems of oppression are fundamentally referred to as intersectionality, which is derived from examining the impact of intersections between various identities (Crenshaw, 1991). In other words, liberatory spaces result from critical dialogue uncovering interlinked systems of oppression that arise worldwide (Mah y Busch, 2014).

On the other hand, contemplative pedagogies integrate differences based on relational and multidimensional wordlessness to form a space of harmony and wholeness (Mah y Busch, 2014). The wordless nature of contemplative pedagogies encourages awareness of the somatic experience, often extending beyond description (Mah y Busch, 2014). Incorporating a focus on the physical aspect adds another dimension of awareness to the subjective experience. Contemplative practices support the acknowledgment that we are not separate and can collaborate with others rather than for them (Kaufman, 2017). Both modes of bridging differences, the contemplative and critical, contribute to creating balance and supporting the integration of the various parts of the individual.

Critical contemplative pedagogy, as detailed in Chapter 2, encompasses five dimensions intending to "not just be the change we wish to see in the world but to work to bring about that change as well" (Kaufman, 2017, p. 16). Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, this quote encapsulates the considerable overlap between contemplative and critical pedagogy's emphasis on subjective awareness of power for social action. However, contemplative pedagogy takes the learning process further by internalizing it (Komjathy, 2017). This research delved into contemplative and critical pedagogy within education abroad to assess whether students better understand themselves and their purpose in the world while cultivating compassion for others.

According to Barbezat and Bush (2014), contemplative practices place the learner at the center, rebalancing power dynamics and enabling students to connect with their inner meaning and purpose, thereby promoting agency. Contemplative pedagogy permits critical subjectivity and exploration of a topic through personal and lived experiences, engaging the whole person beyond the mere transfer of facts and theories (Komjathy, 2017, p. 167). In contrast to an objective approach to learning, which creates distance between the learner and the topic, contemplative pedagogy integrates them. Gunnlaugson et al. (2017) describe the subjective position of contemplative learning as being *inside* the learner, while the intersubjective seeks to learn *between* one another in dialogue and shared experiences. This contrasts with conventional Western education's objective position, which examines from the *outside*, lacking internal reflection and contemplation (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017). This language illustrates how conventional Western education emphasizes external, objective learning, whereas contemplative pedagogy prioritizes internal reflection and personal growth.

O'Reilley (1998) explains that contemplative practices focus the mind and body on bringing awareness to the present moment to cultivate wisdom and openness to new information. Augustine (2018) argues that the skills and behaviors that global education intends to develop align with what contemplative practices foster: "openness to new information/open-mindedness, awareness of more than one perspective/perspective consciousness, development of critical-thinking skills, and understanding of interconnectedness and multiple perspectives" (p. 47). At their core, contemplative practices are reflective practices, which Barbezat and Bush (2014) deem essential for students' learning and growth.

Contemplative pedagogy also intersects with spirituality in education. Spirituality in education focuses on whole-person transformational learning, combining meaning and purpose

to help individuals reach their deeper aspirations (Komjathy, 2017). Both spirituality in education and critical pedagogy encourage students to reflect on the purpose of their education (Komjathy, 2017). Palmer (1993) indicates that spiritual learning reactivates knowledge of the connection between the Self and Others, creating a union of separated individuals. The formation of connection and characteristics that contemplative pedagogy develops, namely, "attentiveness, awareness, interiority, presence, silence, transformation, and a deepened sense of meaning and purpose" (Komjathy, 2017, p. 167), are essential for gaining knowledge of one's internal Self. Western academia, based on Euro Normative models, has influenced conventional Western education today, emphasizing "outer knowing (intellectual reasoning, rationality, and objectivity)" that comes at the cost of "inner knowing (deep wisdom, wonder, sense of the sacred, intuition, and emotions)" (Rendón & Nepo, 2014, p. 27). The latter explains how spirituality is critical to contemplative pedagogy and the understanding of the Self.

Methods to uncover the inner Self include utilizing established and scientifically validated contemplative practices such as meditation, yoga, dream analysis, rituals, and "reflecting on one's purpose and the meaning of life" (Rendón & Nepo, 2014, p. 27). Contemplative pedagogy in the West adapted older philosophies to the current U.S. context to form a newly expanding field (Komjathy, 2017). Having established a foundation for contemplative pedagogy and practice, two contemplative approaches, namely subjective and intersubjective, are juxtaposed with objective methods in the upcoming section.

### *Subjective and Intersubjective Contemplative Approaches*

Contemplative pedagogy offers three approaches to learning: first-person, second-person, and third-person, each with unique benefits (Komjathy, 2017). Until recently, the focus has been on first-person or subjective approaches that prioritize internalization practices such as

meditation and contemplation (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017). "Personal experience, whether psychological or somatic, in the context of one's own actual practice" (Komjathy, 2017, p. 15) is the focus of these practices. When learners examine their subjective points of view, they notice their cultural conditioning and influences, such as their biases and behavior patterns (Komjathy, 2017). Students who gain awareness of their cultural conditioning begin to develop critical subjectivity.

The subjective approach arose in response to criticisms of conventional Western education approaches and the desire for critical subjectivity. Like the objective approach, critical subjectivity allows learners to contextualize others and their communities while simultaneously having the ability to self-contextualize one's position within external factors (Komjathy, 2017). Rendón & Nepo (2014) note the importance of understanding the internal Self with its direct connection to wholeness, well-being, multiculturalism, and social justice. Individuals are socialized to conform to cultural and subcultural expectations, which can lead them to lose touch with their authentic Selves and act in ways that align with these expectations (De Souza, 2017). Subjective contemplative approaches allow students to investigate their internal thoughts, feelings, and experiences to form meaningful connections with their learning (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Specific knowledge systems view education as an inward journey for students rather than a path out of ignorance through external experiences (Rendón & Nepo, 2014).

The connection a student has with Self helps them understand their current values, identity, and culture within which their context is situated and moves them towards a state of openness for taking in another perspective, culture, and its values (Augustine, 2018; Clancy, 2020; De Souza, 2017; Komjathy, 2017). When individuals begin to recognize themselves in Others and within the natural world, connections and relationships thrive. Individuals can

enhance their global engagement by developing an understanding of the Self (Augustine, 2018; Clancy, 2020).

Education abroad recognizes reflections as a fundamental approach to integrating understanding and emotions for deeper student learning (Chiocca, 2021; Savicki & Price, 2018; Savicki & Priestley, 2019). Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory is at the heart of many education abroad programs. While these programs incorporate reflective practices, existing literature has not linked these reflections to contemplative and critical pedagogies, which help individuals comprehend the Self deeply in relation to the global context. Effectively written reflections can enhance the integration of aspects of the Self with observations and experiences in international contexts (Savicki & Price, 2017). Contemplative approaches leverage introspection and reflection to focus inward and unravel more about a student's internal Self, elevating education abroad experiences to a more profound level (Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

While Self-understanding is crucial, contemplation also involves interactions with Others since humans are social and relational beings (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017). The second-person or intersubjective contemplative approach builds on subjective practices by incorporating social and relational aspects and exploring interactions between individuals (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017). The following elucidates two aspects of intersubjective thought.

Forbes (2017) discusses two facets of intersubjective thought; the first is internal, where individuals experience being an "accepted and connected member of a family, culture, or group in which we participate through dialogue about meanings, feelings, values, and relationships" (p. 51). Within this aspect is the "conscious, mindful creation of connected, caring, healthy groups that employ honest, respectful dialogue" (Forbes, 2017, p. 51). Simmer-Brown (2017) found that intersubjective learning allowed students to uncover otherwise unknown or out-of-awareness

subjective perspectives. Education abroad programs are conducive to group connections and engaged dialogues that extract deeper meaning from experiences (Pasquarelli, 2018). Group connections between the participants and leaders may happen during discussions about the shared learning experiences and on-site dialogues with local community members.

The second intersubjective aspect, the external, takes more of a critical approach where individuals examine and act on the "unacknowledged problematic norms, values, and assumptions hiding in our interpersonal relations and within broader cultures themselves" (Forbes, 2017, p. 51). Interactions with others during education abroad can take various forms, such as guided contemplative discussions, internships, or service learning. Regardless of the interaction, students must reflect purposefully. Gunnlaugson et al. (2017) agree that intersubjective approaches "can play a significant role in helping us create deeper, more meaningful, and sustainable relationships with others and with the various ecologies that surround us" (p. x). Therefore, the first and second intersubjective aspects can offer valuable contributions to education abroad programs.

This study explored whether combining all three approaches – objective, subjective, and intersubjective – can provide an integrated framework for a holistic education abroad experience. The integral approach aims to guide students away from a feeling of separateness from themselves and Others, fostering relational students who have developed a sense of compassion for Self and Others. The synergy of all three approaches is where wisdom emerges, making separation and unity complementary to the core (Gozawa, 2017).

Moreover, this study employs Gozawa's (2017) explanation of wisdom as an integral consciousness, shifting the "fragmenting duality that perceives a gap between subject-object, between body-mind, between Self and Other, between interior-focused and exterior-focused

consciousness" (p. 61). Various philosophical traditions discuss the idea of wisdom, all of which value deep levels of contemplative practices (Hanson & Mendius, 2009). From this perspective, wisdom allows for the contradictions of separateness with unity, differentiation with integration, and subjective, intersubjective, and objective to occur concurrently (Gozawa, 2017).

Incorporating additional approaches into education abroad promotes holistic learning and addresses the limitations of a predominantly externalized approach. While this external approach prioritizes developing outward-directed knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors, it often neglects the importance of internal growth and understanding. This undervalues the significance of self-awareness, introspection, and interpersonal connections, which are crucial for meaningful global engagement. By integrating critical and contemplative pedagogies, education abroad programs could offer students opportunities to deepen their understanding of Self, their relationships with Others, and their role in the world. Given the prevailing emphasis on externalization in higher education global engagement, this study investigates cultivating self-knowledge through contemplative pedagogy in education abroad.

**Research Purpose**

This research investigated how students perceived their awareness and understanding of their inner Selves while engaging with the world and Others during an education abroad program that integrated contemplative practices. The aim was to comprehend the intersections between the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs acquired by students through the education abroad experience and whether they developed an understanding of Self through contemplative practices. The underlying premise was that students could not truly understand another way of being unless they first, or concurrently, learned about who they were. Subjective learning can build on the reflective practice in many education abroad programs (Savicki & Price, 2017,

2018; Savicki & Priestley, 2019). To further facilitate students' understanding of themselves in an education abroad program, Rendón & Nepo (2014) emphasize the importance of integrating contemplative practices, involving both subjective and intersubjective experiences in global engagement, to help students recognize their authentic inner Selves rather than just the aspects they portray to the world.

It is within this space of understanding and connection between the subjective, intersubjective, and objective learning in the context of global engagement where the research questions resided:

1. What are students' perspectives on their learning when participating in a short-term education abroad program that incorporates contemplative practices?
2. How do students perceive and describe their subjective and intersubjective experiences in a short-term education abroad program that incorporates contemplative practices?

This study addressed these questions using spiritual and qualitative methodologies, employing the heuristic approach during a short-term education abroad program implemented by North Dakota State University (NDSU) called *Growing Green: Finland's Sustainable Culture*[1]. NDSU and Finland are located in the Global North, and this geographical context offered a unique perspective for participants to explore their Selves. The participants' backgrounds, characterized by shared cultural settings, weather conditions, and common ancestry, particularly Scandinavian lineage among numerous people from the Midwest, impacted their interest in global involvement in Finland. As a result, this North-North exchange contributed to ongoing

[1] The *Growing Green: Finland's Sustainable Culture* program will be referred to as *Growing Green* throughout the remainder of the document.

research in the field by gathering participant perspectives on experiences in a similar cultural context, utilizing a spiritual research paradigm.

**Methodological Approaches**

The *Growing Green* program was selected because the course instructor had designed the curriculum to include contemplative practices. According to Clancy's (2020) study on contemplative education abroad, incorporating meditative practices throughout the program is crucial to assist learners who may be less familiar with these practices during their education abroad experience. Students in the *Growing Green* program experienced a variety of contemplative practices in class and while abroad. Additionally, the instructor encouraged students to practice their preferred contemplative methods independently. Given the need to research a program with contemplative practices and the study's timeline, *Growing Green* was an ideal program to observe.

This study employed three methods: document analysis, focus groups, and observations. Course documents, including the syllabus and participant coursework, were analyzed using discourse analysis (Cohen et al., 2018). In addition, the instructor wrote reflections to contribute her insights for data collection. Two focus groups were conducted with participants, once in Finland and once upon return. The first segment of each focus group guided participants through a Power of Eight (McTaggart, 2017) meditative group intention to gather data on the intersubjective contemplative experience. The latter portion of the focus group aimed to gain awareness of student learning, perspectives, and experiences from their participation in the course and program abroad (Cohen et al., 2018). Group-level observations were conducted throughout the official public program activities in Finland. Finally, researcher reflections were noted throughout the experience in Finland, as they were fundamental to the heuristic approach

(Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019). Combining the aforementioned methods yielded rich data for deriving meaning from the multi-layered aspects of subjective, intersubjective, and objective learning and their intersections.

### *Spiritual Methodology*

Lamb (2016) states that, historically, researchers rooted their work in positivist and post-positivist approaches to develop an objective understanding of the material world and associated truths. Qualitative and spiritual research methodologies, as highlighted by Lamb (2016), diverge from positivist approaches. Spiritual approaches involve a "conscious awareness of oneself as a unique individual, but also as a being in relationship with all other forms of existence" (Lamb, 2016, p. 57). The spiritual paradigm encourages journaling to track the researcher's development beyond cognitive means, incorporating intuition and contemplative insights (Brantmeier & Brantmeier, 2016, p. 235). Journaling is a cognitive tool for reflection, facilitating insights through creativity and internal processes. For this study, the researcher, participants, and the course instructor engaged in journaling. In qualitative research, the researcher, the research process, and the participants are intrinsically connected and mutually influence each other (Lamb, 2016). Qualitative methods are situated in “the world of lived experience” and yield data related to personal experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p. 4). Spiritual research complements traditional qualitative studies by incorporating practices that "foster self-awareness and aid in comprehending our shortcomings, aspirations, anxieties, and biases" (Lamb, 2016, p. 63) into the process.

Furthermore, the spiritual paradigm integrates contemplative inquiry and practices to explore the intersubjectivity among the participants and between the researcher and participants (Brantmeier & Brantmeier, 2016). "Intersubjectivity takes a very different ontological and

epistemological position in research, one that is based on interdependence and connection" (Brantmeier & Brantmeier, 2016, p. 234). This stands in contrast to positivist research, which is rooted in the research-subject duality, positing two separate realities. As an observer during the students' education abroad experiences, my position facilitated the exploration of intersubjectivity, a crucial element for the emergence of blended understanding. This integrated understanding, which addressed the separation between the researcher and subjects, occurred because my interactions and insights were recorded simultaneously with the participants. Additionally, being a researcher in the spiritual paradigm entailed engaging in contemplative practices throughout the study.

### *Heuristic Approach*

Clark Moustakas (1990) formulated the heuristic approach as a method of discovery involving "self-inquiry and dialogue with others aimed at finding the underlying meanings of important human experiences" (p. 15). This study explored how contemplative practices might enrich global engagement, utilizing heuristic inquiry and emphasizing connectedness and relationship-building rather than disconnection. The heuristic approach achieves this by delving into the "living experience" (Sultan, 2019, p. 9) through Self-exploration and exploration of Others, fostering shared understanding to comprehend the "essential nature of the core phenomena, how it is sensed and experienced, and its significance to oneself, to others, and to the world" (Sultan, 2019, p. 9).

Acknowledging the power imbalance that arose from my roles as a researcher and staff member at NDSU, my age, and my educational experience. I approached interactions with participants through respectful dialogue and open curiosity to mitigate this imbalance. Additionally, it was imperative to engage in continual reflexivity. Reflexivity, a central tenet of

the heuristic approach, was crucial throughout the study, especially in interactions with students during their education abroad experience in Finland (Cohen et al., 2018). Reflective dialogue, as a social process centered on the relationship between individuals and their social environment, particularly when learning about oneself, is emphasized by Cohen et al. (2018). The written reflections of both the instructor and the researcher contributed to achieving reflexivity. Additionally, while the instructor guided students through reflective discussions, I, as a researcher, observed.

Course-related documents, such as the syllabus, instructor reflections, and assignments, were gathered for a comprehensive analysis. The syllabus offered valuable insights into the coursework structure, readings, assignments, and class content. Written reflections obtained with informed consent from participants were crucial for analysis, providing valuable insights into their perceptions of the phenomena. The assignments provided insight into the students' comprehension of the course material.

Cohen et al. (2018) recommend using focus groups and observations to explore participants' experiences, giving them a voice and uncovering underlying topics that may not be immediately apparent. The focus groups captured data during a specific, more structured time frame to allow the synergy of the group to generate insights using dialogue. The goal of the focus group was to gather data on the intersubjective dynamic between the participants and to yield a "collective rather than individual view" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 532). The focus group protocol led participants through group contemplative practice and semi-structured questions. Member checking consisted of each participant reviewing the focus group transcripts and the written individual depiction I created as part of data analysis following the heuristic method.

Unstructured participant observations generated insight into the evolving perceptions, personalities, context of the phenomena, and overall experiences to gain a holistic view of the "interrelationship of factors" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 552). Informal interactions were recorded during participant observations to offer valuable insights into how the participants engaged with one another and the Finnish context. The observations also collected data during instructor-led contemplative practices abroad. The document analysis, focus groups, and observations explored how contemplative practices contribute to understanding Self and Others within global engagement.

**Rationale and Significance**

This study explored the relationship between contemplative pedagogy and education abroad, a topic that has been minimally explored in current research (Clancy, 2020; Conboy & Clancy, 2022). In education abroad, understanding the Self is viewed through the lens of understanding Others through global engagement. This involves understanding Others and reflecting on how the experiences and learning relate to the Self. Research in this area is valuable given the trajectory toward all knowledge becoming essentially global as our world becomes more interconnected over time (Namaste et al., 2020). Sobania and Vande Berg (2020) emphasize this trend, "At some point, … it will no longer make sense to talk about global learning – all learning will necessarily be global, will necessarily frame any educational activity through a multiplicity of diverse, and often competing, lenses" (p. xi).

Understanding the Self as a foundation for connecting to the external world and Others could enhance engagement and compassion. Integrating contemplative practices and critical pedagogy could empower learners to deepen their global engagement, positively influencing their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors. At the student level, this underscores the

importance of learners exploring their internal Selves as a critical function of how they come to understand and relate to Others.

On a broader scale, the findings of this research suggest that contemplative practices may be appropriate for inclusion in education abroad programs. The practical implementation of contemplative education abroad has the potential to enrich students' lives, allowing them to develop a deeper, more engaged, and holistic understanding of themselves. Global engagement that includes knowledge of the Self might contribute to fostering learners who naturally challenge dominant neoliberal hegemony through their empowerment and agency.

**Researcher Assumptions**

As an international educator specializing in education abroad, I recognize that the predominant emphasis in program curricula and experiences in the field of education abroad is on learning outside the classroom. Many faculty-led programs aim to "expose" students to the culture they are visiting, with students often perceiving the goal as gaining unique experiences and knowledge unattainable at home, geared towards acquiring skills for the future. While education abroad marketing rightly highlights its value for students' resumes, emphasizing external experiences tends to overshadow the internal benefits of connection, relationships, and self-discovery in conjunction with outer exploration.

Despite my current focus on working with faculty and staff at NDSU, in my extensive background in advising education abroad students, I observed a recurring pattern. Graduating students frequently express uncertainty about how their major aligns with a fulfilling career, and the transition from college to career can become a source of mental health challenges (Golden et al., 2018). To address this, it is recommended that higher education institutions assist students in identity formation and meaning-making, aiding them in understanding who they are and what

they value (Golden et al., 2018). Students I advised often found inspiration in their international experiences, raising questions within them about aligning their passions with their chosen future professions. Exploring the Self as integrated with their global experience could amplify the effect, guiding students to align with their inner purpose for a more fulfilling academic and professional path.

Drawing from my experience with contemplative practices and reflections on internal perspectives, I can see how it may benefit students. As I deepened my understanding of my Self through contemplative practices, I felt a stronger sense of purpose and connection with Others. Consequently, I believe incorporating contemplative practices into education abroad programs could positively impact students' Self-discovery and understanding of Others.

As a practitioner with regular opportunities to engage directly with students during short-term education abroad programs, my perspective is student-centered. Exploring the possible link between contemplative practices and global engagement arose because of my passion for international education, nurtured through my involvement in co-leading short-term education abroad programs. Recognizing global education's personal, academic, and professional impact on students, I advocate for prioritizing students' personal growth and enrichment in the context of global engagement.

My concern is that prioritizing the growth of knowledge and skills without nurturing internal growth within education abroad may lead to a lack of connection and deep understanding of others, with an inability to accommodate diverse perspectives. I believe it is essential for learners to understand themselves, their values, beliefs, intrinsic motivation, and life purpose. This foundation of inner awareness establishes a groundwork for more profound connections with Others (De Souza, 2017; Komjathy, 2017) while enriching and deepening

global engagement (Augustine, 2018; Clancy, 2020; Conboy & Clancy, 2022). In my view, global engagement entails a profound acknowledgment of a diverse cultural perspective gained through experiences that integrate awareness and understanding of another way of being. This awareness centers on a profound recognition that individuals in every culture live their lives the best way they know how.

In the context of globalization, I ardently support the thoughtful integration of global education into higher education for all students. Acknowledging concerns raised by Brewer and Ogden (2019) and Moreno (2021) about the neoliberal priorities influencing international education, I emphasize the necessity for a critical comprehension of power and agency and the essential role of human connection in steering our engagement with the world. The prevailing focus on external experiences in education abroad programs has obscured the internal benefits of self-discovery, connection, and relationships. As an international education practitioner, I advocate for integrating contemplative practices into global engagement, envisioning a more meaningful and fulfilling student experience.

**Researcher Positionality**

Approaching this study from the perspectives of a researcher, an education abroad practitioner, and a former study abroad student, I have gained insights into the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and actions associated with global engagement. The values that emerged from my experiences are central to this research. Having a foundation in my professional role in education abroad, where I collaborated with faculty for over fifteen years to structure their programs, I have also co-led a short-term program to the United Arab Emirates seven times. I bring a multifaceted understanding to this research.

As a first-generation Pell Grant college student, I grew up in a rural area near NDSU in Minnesota. My academic journey included studying abroad in Morocco and Spain while pursuing my bachelor's degree in international studies and Spanish from NDSU. While working in education abroad, I obtained my master's degree in international education, mainly focusing on enhancing faculty-led programs aligned with theories such as experiential learning (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012), transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000), and self-authorship theory (King & Baxter Magolda, 2011). Self-authorship theory has always interested me because meaning-making helps students connect what they learn about themselves with the actions they take in the world. Self-authorship theory, the learning partnership model, and the framework for student development are discussed extensively throughout King and Baxter Magolda's (2011) work. I have also been influenced by the constructivist paradigm, particularly in student-centered learning (Hoidn & Klemenčič, 2020). These theoretical frameworks, emphasizing constructivist-based learning, are the foundation for my current study on contemplative practices and global engagement.

My journey with contemplative practices emerged organically when the world came to a standstill during the COVID-19 pandemic. I developed an interest in learning more about contemplative practices, which persisted throughout the beginning of my doctoral studies. The basis of this study originated from my exploration of myself and my interactions with Others through meditative practices. As explained in Chapter 3, the idea for this topic sprung forth in a burst of insight. I then began to formally explore contemplative pedagogy because I felt it had an essential role in education abroad.

While earning my master's degree in international education, I developed my background as a researcher. Now pursuing a doctoral degree in Global Education at the SIT Graduate

Institute, I align with SIT's values of community, intercultural understanding, social inclusion and justice, and sustainability (*Mission and Values*, 2021). During my doctoral studies, I became aware of my alignment with critical theory perspectives, which aim to raise students' consciousness about their personal and social identities, positionality, and social activism.

Informed by critical theory perspectives and guided by the belief that combining subjective, intersubjective, and objective learning fosters compassion for Self and Others, I seek to uncover connections between internal awareness and the global Other. I aim to contribute to an educational approach that nurtures critical action, empowerment, and agency, fostering wisdom in students as they navigate a collaborative future. These assumptions and beliefs are the basis for exploring the topic of this study.

I recognized the power dynamics inherent in my role and was mindful of the potential influence since "researchers may occupy different social and power positions than participants" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 136). I am embedded in various aspects of the cultural and demographic context at NDSU. Identifying as a White woman with Scandinavian and German heritage, my background aligns with the 71.3% of Americans who identify as White (US Census Bureau, 2023). As a first-generation college student, I grew up on a farm in the region, a circumstance shared by many attendees at NDSU. Due to my family's socio-economic background, I depended on federal aid, grants, and scholarships for my higher education and participation in education abroad. Unlike many in my childhood environment, I harbored a strong desire to travel internationally and learn about other cultures and languages from a young age. Enthusiastically seizing the opportunity, I studied the first year of Arabic at NDSU and continued my studies in Morocco, becoming the inaugural NDSU student to do so. I am older than the students in the *Growing Green* program, have an advanced degree, and work professionally at the university.

Throughout the study, I engaged in self-reflection, solicited feedback from the course instructor, and upheld a respectful and open dialogue with participants. Once HSR approval was obtained, I electronically sent the invitation to participate, copying the instructor to ensure transparency. The participant invitation explicitly stated that participation was voluntary and not mandatory for the course. Additionally, the professor was unaware of who chose to participate until the course concluded. On the initial day in Finland, I verbally presented the invitation to join the study and addressed any student questions.

## Conclusion

This chapter has contextualized education abroad in higher education, highlighting influences from neoliberalism, positivism, and objective learning. The introduction of contemplative pedagogy as an alternative learning approach, incorporating subjective and intersubjective perspectives, offered a contrast. Critical pedagogy and spirituality in education, particularly in global engagement, aligned with contemplative methods. Chapter 2 will delve into the conceptual framework and literature review, providing further insights into these themes.

As the chapter progressed, a review of the research purpose and questions accompanied a synopsis of the methodology. The study involved participants in a short-term education abroad program in Finland, which integrated contemplative practices into the course. Employing qualitative and spiritual methodologies, the study utilized the heuristic approach through document analysis, focus groups, and participant observation. Chapter 3 provides a more in-depth exploration of the research site, participants, methods, and methodology.

# Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

## Introduction

Chapter 1 introduced the study, which investigates student perspectives on their learning and experiences in a short-term education abroad program that incorporates contemplative practices. The study posits that when global engagement nurtures knowledge of the Self, learners can challenge the prevailing neoliberal hegemony through empowerment and agency. To counteract neoliberal aims, this study explores the integration of contemplative subject reflective practices and intersubjective critical dialogue alongside conventional objective learning in education abroad, fostering inner awareness and compassion for Others. Beginning with an overview of the conceptual framework, the chapter lays the groundwork for subsequent discussions, integrating literature to support the framework.

Following the conceptual framework, the chapter delves into the objective nature of conventional Western learning in education abroad. This exploration provides insights into how critical and contemplative pedagogies enhance students' learning experiences. The chapter then elaborates on the link between contemplative pedagogy and spirituality in education, emphasizing an introspective examination of the subjective Self and participatory, shared learning within groups (the intersubjective We).

The chapter further explores contemplative pedagogy by examining the literature on subjective learning and practices, drawing parallels with approaches in education abroad. Experiential and transformational learning theories substantiate education abroad practices. It then delves into intersubjective contemplative learning, exploring its relationship with critical pedagogy and current use in education abroad. The concluding section presents an integrated vision, referred to as wisdom, combining the diverse aspects of learning discussed in this study.

## Conceptual Framework Overview

The conceptual framework comprises four main components: objective learning, subjective learning, intersubjective learning, and the overarching concept of wisdom. To facilitate comprehension, the chapter begins with a summary of the four areas, followed by a visual representation of the conceptual model. Subsequently, each area is thoroughly explored with relevant literature to expound upon the keywords depicted in the model. By the conclusion of the chapter, readers will have a comprehensive understanding of the components of the conceptual model and how the framework supports the research objectives.

Learning is a multifaceted and continuous process in which various learning approaches occur throughout one's life. A contemplative perspective reveals three overarching approaches: objective, subjective, and intersubjective (Forbes, 2017; Gunnlaugson et al., 2017). Objective learning is the most common educational approach (Palmer, 2014). Higher education has positivist and post-positivist influences for learning *about* generalized, objective truths (Lamb, 2016) and less of a concern for specialized, subjective perspectives (Steger, 2018). The objective learning approach associated with education abroad is practiced by learning *about* the culture and includes experiences such as observational site visits that are indistinguishable from tourism (Pasquarelli, 2018). Objective learning has many positive aspects; however, adding the subjective approach enhances educational experiences.

From a contemplative standpoint, subjective learning emerged to differentiate from objective learning in that it considers the learner's internal world as crucial to comprehending and investigating the external world (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017). Engaging in contemplative practices allows students to adopt a subjective perspective, gaining insight into how external conditioning and influences have shaped their identity and the identities of others and communities

(Komjathy, 2017). Subjective contemplative practices have increased compassion and connection with themselves, Others, and the natural world (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). In education abroad, students need to engage in reflective practices to help them make more meaningful sense of their experiences (Savicki & Price, 2017, 2018; Savicki & Priestley, 2019). These practices are inherently subjective and complement the educational process.

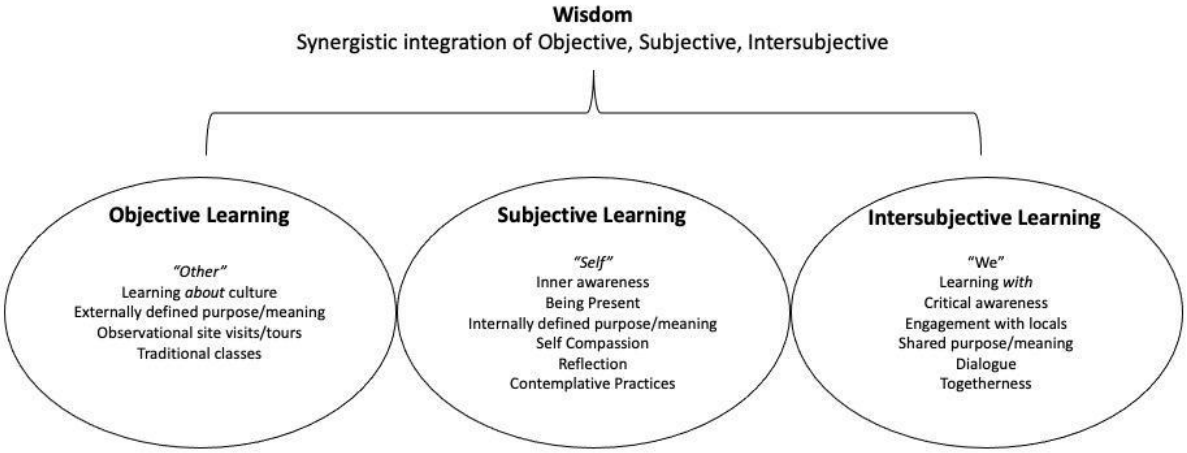
Intersubjective contemplative learning adds relational experiences and dialogue *between* people to build upon subjective approaches (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017). The intersubjective approach to learning entails a sense of shared meaning, a feeling of togetherness within a group, and a critical awareness acquired through uncovering assumptions via interpersonal interactions (Forbes, 2017). Education abroad offers a vital learning opportunity for group connection and dialogue (Pasquarelli, 2018); furthermore, interacting with local community members can give students a more profound sense of place, which promotes transformative learning (Chiocca, 2021). Incorporating intersubjective contemplative learning into the education abroad experience allows students to enrich their subjective understanding of themselves and others, fostering a sense of togetherness and critical awareness through dialogue and relational experiences.

In the integral framework, Forbes (2017) describes a synergistic integration of all three approaches to encourage wisdom. Wisdom offers a holistic vision for learning that unites objective knowledge with truths about others, subjective knowledge that arises from inner awareness, and intersubjective knowledge that occurs from interactions with others (Palmer, 2014). This study recognizes that one contemplative experience abroad does not necessarily lead to acquiring full wisdom. However, it can be viewed as one step in a lifelong pursuit of wisdom.

I designed the Conceptual Model of Learning in Contemplative Education Abroad (Figure 2.1) to illustrate the conceptual framework.

**Figure 2.1**

*Conceptual Model of Learning in Contemplative Education Abroad*




The Conceptual Model of Learning in Contemplative Education Abroad presents an overview of the interconnected contemplative learning approaches that culminate in attaining wisdom. The following sections of this chapter provide an in-depth analysis of each model element, supplemented with relevant literature and concepts interwoven into each core theme.

## Objective Learning

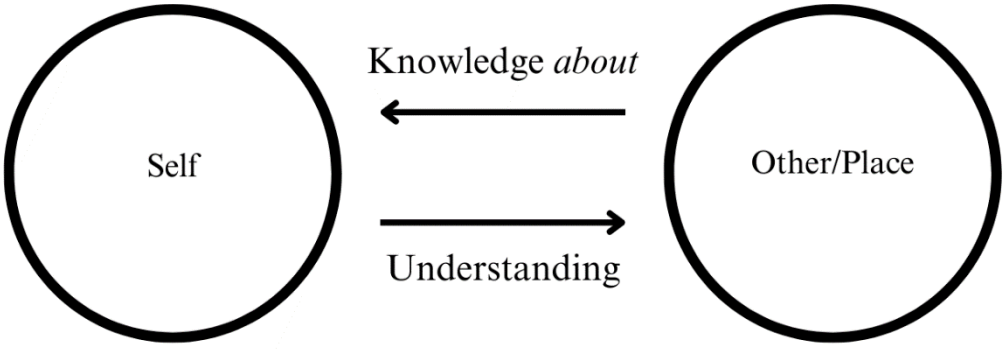
Figure 2.1 depicts objective learning on the left, with accompanying keywords expounded upon in greater detail within this section. The subsequent section will link objective learning to education abroad. In higher education, the focus on positivist and post-positivist approaches in cognitive learning emphasizes objective truths that previous experts have uncovered (Lamb, 2016). The objective approach, also called third-person learning, involves using other people as the object of learning (de Wit, 1991). The term "objective" has a Latin origin that denotes "to put against" or "to oppose" (Palmer, 1993, p. 23) and is frequently used in conjunction with other words to convey a sense of purity, free from subjective influence, such as

"objective facts, objective theories, objective reality" (Palmer, 1993, p. 23). Palmer (2014) identifies the model of objective learning as the culprit for developing individuals who have expert knowledge but lack a sense of ethics, communal responsibility, or compassion.

Understanding objectively entails maintaining a separation between the knower and the external information being known (Palmer, 1993). Palmer (1993) further describes the classrooms that focus solely on objectivity as being outward facing “on nature, on history, on someone else’s vision of reality” (p. 34). I created Figure 2.2 to illustrate objective learning in which the mind of the Self is primarily engaged in gaining knowledge *about* Others and Place.

**Figure 2.2**

*Objective Learning*



Furthermore, objective learning aligns with the understanding that only "faculty [have] the ultimate authority and disseminator of truth, which requires students to act as receivers of objectified knowledge" (Krikorian, 2020, p. 263). In this situation, students often do not have the opportunity to conduct their observations but rather listen to educators who may also be reporting on others' observations (Palmer, 1993).

Within the objective learning construct, the Self does not have an opportunity to be known, as it expects the student to act as a blank slate with neglected inner realities (Palmer, 1993). The scientific method and critical thinking are essential for exploring solutions, forming a basis of understanding, and changing the physical world and ideas about the earth. Still, it lacks acknowledgment and examination of personal motives, connection, and compassion (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Conventional Western classrooms ignore the communal aspect of learning, intending to teach from a primary source, the teacher, rather than supporting an interactive learning environment filled with "mutually responsible participants and co-creators" (Palmer, 1993). In the literature, the terms "conventional education" and "objective learning" are associated with the neoliberal, success-based mindset. Consequently, this paper will use the terms interchangeably. There has been a movement towards whole-person development, not just the transmission of information, but often, there remains a focus on goals and outcomes rather than the process with which they are achieved (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Students within this paradigm cannot inquire deeply and instead follow preset paths, such as in education and careers, influenced by neoliberal policies and paradigms (Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

As discussed in Chapter 1, most education offered in the United States focuses on positivist influences founded on rationality (Palmer, 1993). Neoliberalism and human capital theories have significantly impacted education, resulting in a shift towards free market principles

(Slaughter, 2014). This shift can be observed through an economic lens, which is commonly used by both theories. Slaughter (2014) conceptualized the change as a "shift away from a public good academic knowledge/learning regime to an academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime" (p. 26).

In the market context, students, institutions, and education compete for resources. As a result, pursuing knowledge for its own sake and the betterment of society is frequently overshadowed by the need to prioritize financial gain and return on investment for the individuals involved. There is ongoing discussion about the economic benefits of participating in study abroad programs for students (Petzold & Peter, 2015). Viewing it from this perspective, students may acquire both "cultural and labor market advantages" (Simon & Ainsworth, 2012, p.2), which can prove beneficial in both domestic and international job markets (Simon & Ainsworth, 2012).

Likewise, according to human capital theory (HCT), education can benefit the individual in terms of financial gain and the society and nation-state where they are situated (Tonini, 2021). Coleman (1988) describes how human capital theory draws parallels between physical and human capital, "Just as physical capital is created by changes in materials to form tools that facilitate production, human capital is created by changes in persons that bring about skills and capabilities that make them able to act in new ways" (p. 100). Thus, the individual's education becomes a tool for economic growth for all levels of society. Human capital theory has historically emphasized primary and secondary education, as reflected in domestic and international policies (Tonini, 2021). However, in recent times, HCT has recognized the significance of higher education, noting that graduates are more likely to achieve upward economic mobility (Tonini, 2021). Research shows that, on average, individuals who earn

college degrees receive higher salaries than those who only completed high school (Paulsen & Smart, 2001). Despite the period of reduced earnings and financial cost of pursuing higher education, individuals still consider the return on investment valuable (Paulsen & Smart, 2001).

Education abroad is typically viewed as an optional and value-added component of a student's higher education rather than a mandatory one. Less than two percent of U.S. students chose to participate in education abroad in the 2018/19 academic year, the last year of data before the pandemic, compared to the overall number of students enrolled in higher education (*Open Doors Fast Facts*, 2020). Participating in education abroad is usually optional and comes with an additional cost, resulting in fewer students choosing to take part. Applying human capital theory (HCT) to education abroad suggests that students can enhance their skills and knowledge beyond what they can learn in their home country and institution, which can increase their potential earnings (Sisavath, 2021).

Students have a variety of personal motivations for participating in education abroad, one of which is the potential value for their future employability. As Coleman (1988) indicates, "the person who invests the time and resources in building up this capital reaps its benefits in the form of a higher-paying job, more satisfying or higher-status work, or even the pleasure of greater understanding of the surrounding world" (p. S116). Workers, or in this case students, "have become aware that their knowledge and skills command an economic value in the employment marketplace" (Tonini, 2021, p. 74). Furthermore, education abroad can benefit the nation by producing workers who are more aware of international affairs and can contribute to local and global economic growth and prosperity.

### *Education Abroad Objective Learning*

Conventional objective learning serves as the foundation for higher education, and its influence can also be observed in the context of education abroad. Initially, U.S. education abroad in its earliest form resembled the seventeenth and eighteenth-century European Grand Tours, where networking between important families abroad intended to prepare them for leadership roles (Brewer & Ogden, 2019). Education abroad has undergone transformation and expansion of the modes of mobility, the proposed value, and the variety of program experiences since its formal inception in the 1870s (Brewer & Ogden, 2019).

The learning outcomes associated with education abroad encompass language acquisition, cultural knowledge, intercultural competency, global citizenship, and discipline-specific content (Brewer & Ogden, 2019). The shift to having global citizenship as an outcome in recent years "has become predominant, irreducibly bound up with the neoliberal logic of higher education as a commodified form of cultural capital offering personalized self-actualization" (Gristwood & Kelly, 2019, p. 109). The undercurrent of U.S. higher education is driven by economic motives that prioritize career readiness and employability, and this is also evident in education abroad marketing, which emphasizes how it can enhance career prospects (Brewer & Ogden, 2019).

Conventional objective-based courses and coursework are part of the experience abroad, even within short-term programs. Learning objectives often prioritize skills and career development for individual benefit (Brewer & Ogden, 2019), frequently overlooking the importance of local connections and community engagement. Before departure, students learn *about* the location they will visit. While on-site, students participate in tours while listening to experts as they observe their surroundings, the epitome of objective learning. Not all education

abroad programs are alike, as many incorporate subjective and intersubjective aspects to enhance understanding beyond the objective paradigm.

A successful study abroad program involves immersive learning that actively engages with the social environment and comprehends the socio-cultural background, rather than a program where students remain passive observers that "dehumanize their encounters with people and place" (Gristwood & Kelly, 2019, p. 115). Singleton (2015) describes the dualistic separation between the mind and bodily experience of the world as one that "allows people to rationalize the objectification and alienation of what is perceived as not rational" (p. 8). One way to move beyond separation is to foster relational knowing or awareness of personal relationships with the community and the natural world (Singleton, 2015).

Quality education abroad aims to go beyond mere tourism by developing programs that offer meaningful learning experiences. However, Pasquarelli (2018) discovered that some short-term, faculty-led education abroad curricula are like tourism, lacking in academic and cultural learning despite their intention to create effective programs. The neoliberal mindset results in a focus on tourism where "every spare minute must be filled with excursions and learning activities to maximize return on investment and ensure no moment is wasted" (Gristwood & Kelly, 2019, p. 118). A strategic approach would incorporate reflective practices and critical dialogue to counteract neoliberal aims, allowing for intervals between activities that provide students with opportunities for genuine interactions within local contexts (Gristwood & Kelly, 2019).

Most learning in a short-term, faculty-led program occurs outside a typical classroom setting, so the learning outcomes connect to the on-site experiences (Pasquarelli, 2018). Education abroad professionals generally agree that faculty-led programs should prioritize

academic knowledge construction within the chosen study area and the "relevant historical, philosophical, political, and sociological aspects of the intended sites" (Pasquarelli, 2018, p. 39). By situating knowledge in this way, students can better understand the sites they visit (Pasquarelli, 2018). Place-based learning fosters a connection with the local community and nature and promotes critical and transformative learning (Singleton, 2015).

Short-term programs should aim for a balanced distribution of learning activities throughout the course. This may include content delivery before, during, and after the study abroad experience, incorporating a mix of formal, informal, and self-guided learning (Cole, 2018). Cole (2018) emphasizes the need for students to have the "intellectual tools to analyze and synthesize what they are seeing and touching, smelling and hearing, and perhaps tasting" (p. 22). The aspects above highlight the importance of promoting guided reflection while avoiding passive instruction.

Later in this chapter's section on subjective learning, there is a comprehensive examination of reflection in education abroad. Additional sections cover the aspects of subjective and intersubjective learning in education abroad. First, contemplative pedagogy is presented as a contrasting learning paradigm to the objective approach, providing an overarching perspective.

**Contemplative Pedagogy**

Contemplative pedagogy is a broad concept that lays the foundation for comprehending subjective and intersubjective practices. Contemplation utilizes a variety of approaches to develop attentiveness, interiority, awareness, presence, compassion, wisdom, and a deep sense of meaning and purpose (Komjathy, 2017). The multifaceted, holistic methods utilized, of which meditation is one, are referred to as contemplative practice (Komjathy, 2017). Contemplative experience occurs with contemplative practice and is complex, involving "a somatic and

sometimes a kinesthetic dimension" (Komjathy, 2017, p. 90). As discussed in the first chapter, contemplative pedagogy is an emerging area of education informed by contemplative practice and contemplative experience (Komjathy, 2017).

Contemplative pedagogy departs from the third-person, objective model of education, as it employs "critical first-person discourse in academic inquiry … and allows space for critical subjectivity and the exploration of a given topic through direct, personal, and lived experience" (Komjathy, 2017, p. 167). The objective approach to learning separates the learner and the topic, while contemplative pedagogy integrates the two. The subjective or first-person approach pertained to the individual learner's inner world or Self and emerged in response to the prevalence of objective learning that emphasizes the external world or Others (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017). Through contemplative practices and experiences, a learner cultivates characteristics such as: "attentiveness, awareness, interiority, presence, silence, transformation, and a deepened sense of meaning and purpose" (Komjathy, 2017, p. 167).

The exploration of the first-person perspective initiates the formation of critical subjectivity, a recognition of one's conditioning and influences, including biases and patterns of behaviors shaped by the surrounding cultures and subcultures (Komjathy, 2017). Critical subjectivity enables self-contextualization, which establishes a foundation for comprehending one's position and connection with the external world and contextualizing other individuals and communities (Komjathy, 2017). According to Komjathy (2017), how people interpret their experiences is influenced by their worldview and social location, while contextualizing those experiences entails paying attention to environmental factors that shape how they are perceived and understood. Komjathy (2017) continues by stating that "regardless of one's understanding of consciousness, there is a complex interplay between context, experience, and interpretation" (p.

203) that links directly to the history of our subjective consciousness. The following explains how our subjective consciousness develops throughout our lives.

Sentipensante pedagogy is a subset of contemplative pedagogy that understands the importance of internal awareness concerning wholeness, well-being, multiculturalism, and social justice (Rendón & Nepo, 2014). Sentipensante originates from combining two Spanish words (Rendón & Nepo, 2014). Within this pedagogy, there is a balance between the internal sensing processes, or *sentir,* and the thinking processes, *pensar* (Rendón & Nepo, 2014). The model for sentipensante pedagogy is one that "focuses on the delicate balance between our inner life of intuition, emotion, and sense of meaning and purpose, and the outer world of action and service" and that "speaks to our humanity, compassion, and care for our self-worth and the external world we inhabit" (Rendón & Nepo, 2014, p. 4). Sentipensante pedagogy promotes balance by addressing the potential neglect of intellectual learning resulting from the inward-focused nature of contemplative pedagogy (Rendón & Kanagala, 2014).

According to Rendón and Nepo (2014), humans conform to social constructs, or agreements, that are established by a set of rules, values, and beliefs in various aspects of our lives. These agreements are initiated at birth when our parents give us our names and continue to influence us throughout our lives. The system of agreements may not be something most people recognize, but it is "powerful, entrenched, validated, and constantly rewarded by the social structure that created it" (Rendón & Nepo, 2014, p. 24). Trying to conform to these external agreements often leads to losing authenticity as individuals try to comply and adjust to fit those expectations. As humans, we are socially developed in our families, schools, and societies, with expectations of how we should be and act (De Souza, 2017). The enculturation of individuals

often goes unrecognized, but the way to become aware of it is to develop critical subjectivity (Komjathy, 2017).

Critical subjectivity is an awareness of one's conditioning and influences, including biases and tendencies (Komjathy, 2017). Internal aspects of the Self, beneficial for successfully growing up in one's respective context are projected outward while others are suppressed subconsciously (De Souza, 2017). Unfortunately, the suppression leads individuals to lack identification with those unrecognized parts and, when continually ignored, "can lead to outbursts of irrationality, anger, and hostility which, at a national level, can result in war, terrorism, and violence" (De Souza, 2017, p. 88). De Souza (2017) describes these parts as the unconscious or shadow elements of our inner Selves. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the internal Self, it is equally crucial to delve into the unconscious and the projected aspects (De Souza, 2017). Generally speaking, an open exploration of one's internal awareness facilitates a deeper comprehension of the Self in relation to external circumstances (De Souza, 2017).

Another aspect of contemplative learning is described as the second-person perspective, or intersubjective, as Gunnlaugson et al. (2017) notes. Intersubjective learning occurs between individuals and involves a shared or co-emergent understanding, also referred to as We in this study (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017). Previously, contemplative learning focused on the internal nature of awareness using subjective approaches, but researchers recognized a gap where an additional awareness was emerging (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017). Intersubjectivity is achieved by combining self-awareness, which tends to be solitary, with Other-awareness, which introduces the relational dimension (Komjathy, 2017). This combination leads to a greater understanding and connection between individuals (Komjathy, 2017).

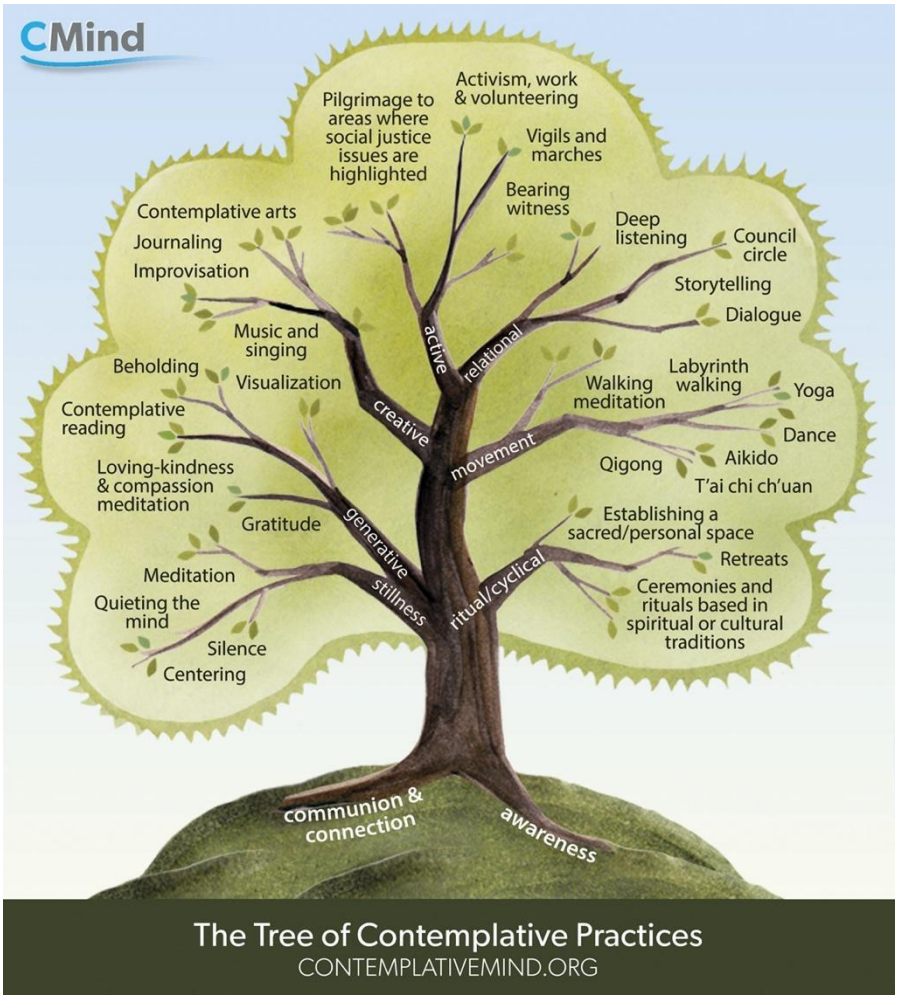
Incorporating intersubjective contemplation in education promotes a shift towards a more relational approach to being and understanding (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017). This means that individuals become more attuned to the perspectives and experiences of others, leading to a deeper level of connection and comprehension (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017). Creating intentional dialogue allows individuals to communicate the personal experiences in which they are "*listening and being listened to*" (Komjathy, 2017, p. 296). Within contemplative classrooms, "collaborative inquiry, experiential learning, and embodied presence become central" (Komjathy, 2017, p. 168). Intersubjectivity appreciates that each person has their viewpoint on reality while developing a shared understanding and interpersonal harmony (Komjathy, 2017).

Intersubjectivity encompasses not only one's identity but also how it relates to various "affinity groups and outsider communities, including concerning ethnocultural and sociopolitical dimensions" (Komjathy, 2017, p. 296). Contemplative scholars suggest that incorporating intersubjective contemplative practices enables individuals to have "deeper, more meaningful, and sustainable relationships" (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017, p. x) with both Others and the natural world (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017, p. x).

Lastly, the expression of individual or group contemplative practice by the students and instructors is fundamental to contemplative pedagogy (Komjathy, 2017). Komjathy (2017) explains that, for this type of inquiry to be successful, direct experience is required, as it is how "one critically investigates one's personal experience, whether psychological or somatic" (p. 15). This pedagogy incorporates many contemplative practices, as depicted in Figure 2.3 of The Tree of Contemplative Practices (CMind, 2021). While this diagram provides an overview of various categories and practices, it is not exhaustive.

**Figure 2.3**

*Tree of Contemplative Practices*




*Note.* From *The Tree of Contemplative Practices* [Illustration], by CMind, 2021, The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (https://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree). CC BY 4.0.

By adopting a holistic approach, contemplative practices can be combined in numerous ways (Komjathy, 2017). At the most basic level, meditation is "one of the simplest and most profound activities" (Komjathy, 2017, p. 52). Exploring these internal practices can lead to contemplative experiences with somatic and sometimes kinesthetic aspects, also called

embodiment (Komjathy, 2017). Classroom contemplative practices and introspection have the following four broad objectives as outlined by Barbazet and Bush (2014):

1. Focus and attention building, mainly through focusing meditation and exercises that support mental stability
2. Contemplation and introspection into the content of the course, in which students discover the material in themselves and thus deepen their understanding of the material
3. Compassion, connection to others, and a deepening sense of the moral and spiritual aspects of education
4. Inquiry into the nature of their minds, personal meaning, creativity, and insight (p. 11)

While all four objectives are significant, the last two, which involve cultivating compassion, fostering connections with others, and exploring personal meaning, are relevant in education abroad. The generative branch of Figure 2.2 comprises practices that encourage compassion, while the relational refers to practices that promote connections with others (CMind, 2021). Practices centered on inquiry into the Self are found on the stillness branch (CMind, 2021).

Integrating practices that cultivate compassion and foster connections with others aligns with the intercultural competency, sensitivity, and knowledge outcomes highlighted earlier in this chapter, particularly in education abroad. For example, the Dalai Lama (2012) has identified the importance of compassion and fostering connections with others through internal focus as fundamental elements in how education addresses critical global issues. According to the Dalai Lama (2012), the world issues we face today stem from an excessive focus on the external and material world at the expense of internal awareness. Compassion offers care for the suffering of

others and ourselves without judgment and includes aspirations for alleviating suffering (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Compassion comprises essential elements such as empathy, which involves replicating the actions, feelings, and thoughts of others, and the capacity to feel at ease with closeness to others (Hanson & Mendius, 2009). When individuals cultivate compassion, they strengthen the associated regions of the brain, which increases their natural capacity for empathy and helps dissolve the Self and Other dichotomies (Hanson & Mendius, 2009). The dichotomy between the Self and Other, rooted in separation, hinders the capacity to accept Others as an extension of the Self. Compassion fosters the acknowledgment of the Self within Others, creating a bond of alignment.

Effective emotional regulation, as well as intrapersonal and interpersonal connections, are developed as a result of contemplative practices (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Contemplative practitioners seek to "reduce pain and suffering in the world through inner transformation" (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 176). In Figure 2.2, the Tree of Contemplative Practices illustrates one of the roots as communication and connection. This root is particularly relevant to the current study, which partially aims to investigate the impact of contemplative practices on developing caring relationships with others. Barbezat and Bush (2014) argue that of all the qualities contemplative pedagogy fosters, compassion and connection are the most important "as we collectively face the global problems of poverty, gross inequality, racism and other forms of prejudice and intolerance, environmental degradation, and climate change" (p. 188).

Awareness is the second root of the Tree of Contemplative Practices (Figure 2.2). Awareness and being present are cultivated through mediation practices, such as mindfulness, that allow students to live in the moment and have embodied understanding (Barbezat & Bush,

2014). Later in this chapter, the section on intersubjective contemplation explains how awareness corresponds with critical pedagogy.

Contemplative techniques, such as the ones highlighted on the Tree, can be practiced in the classroom first and then replicated independently (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Practicing contemplative practices beyond the classroom fosters compassionate, fulfilled individuals who contribute positively to their communities (Hanson & Mendius, 2009). The purpose of introspection and meditation in the classroom is to "help students become aware of their emotions and reactions while clarifying what is personally most important" (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 17). In today's educational landscape, students need to explore personal meaning. Studies indicate that students desire higher education to help them better understand their purpose and establish significant connections (Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

As education abroad falls under the umbrella of higher education, it ought to encourage practices that aid students in exploring their sense of purpose. Education abroad incorporates Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984) and Mezirow's transformational learning theory (1991), which focus on experiential meaning-making (Savicki & Price, 2018). Later in this chapter, the section on subjective contemplation outlines these two theories. Contemplative pedagogy is inherently linked to spirituality in education since it allows learners to explore beyond the physical realm of experiences. The subsequent section will further explain this connection.

### *Spirituality in Education*

Spirituality in education is a distinct branch of contemplative pedagogy that concentrates on transformative teaching and learning that pertains to an individual's sense of meaning and purpose (Komjathy, 2017). This concept is pertinent to the topic, as it relates to how students can

be motivated to explore their own internally established meaning and purpose as part of their education abroad experience. Spirituality in education is all-encompassing and unified, as it feeds the human spirit through techniques, like reflection, that facilitate deeper inner exploration (Komjathy, 2017). Spirituality is not a religion or belief but rather a means to better understand and deal with the ups and downs of life. This study utilizes the following definition of spirituality in education: "the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to Self, to others in nature, and the significant or sacred" (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 40). Komjathy (2017) notes that secular and non-secular students strongly desire to delve into their spirituality, discovering their life's meaning and purpose, particularly through the practice of Sentipensante.

De Souza (2017) offers an inclusive view of spirituality that encompasses compassion with our relational nature when she describes it as an "innate human trait which pertains to the relational dimensions of life and may be observed and experienced through expressions of connectedness between the Self and the Other" (p. 33). The growth of inner awareness occurs within this spiritual domain, enabling individuals to attain a deeper understanding of themselves and enhancing their connection with and comprehension of Others (De Souza, 2017). This progress exists on a continuum, where inner and Other awareness have a positive correlation that expands simultaneously (De Souza, 2017). Augustine (2018) rightfully notes that there is a "clear alignment of the skills and dispositions critical global education seeks to develop and what contemplative practices offer" (p. 47).

Through exploration of the internal Self, one's perspectives become more open and attuned to their internal compass rather than being solely guided by outer knowing (Rendón & Nepo, 2014). Achieving inner knowing and well-being enables one to lead a well-balanced life

and pursue a career filled with personal meaning. In contrast, external knowing and well-being focus on fostering positive relationships with Others and the natural world. When one's focus is more externally focused, "it can be very lonely and impoverishing only to be *doing* and not *being* [emphasis added]" (Rendón & Nepo, 2014, p. 47). Found within the space of internal awareness is an understanding of one's authentic Self that allows for greater insight when interacting with Others. Spirituality in education promotes inner and external knowledge, facilitating a more profound examination of how individuals perceive and experience their role and responsibility in the world (Augustine, 2018). Furthermore, this paradigm encompasses the ontology that relationships and a sense of belonging are fundamental to being human (Rendón, 2018).

Having introduced the broader topic of contemplative pedagogy and spirituality in education, the subsequent section will delve into subjective learning, providing valuable insights into developing self-awareness. Situated in the middle of the conceptual model depicted in Figure 2.1, subjective learning pertains to how students gain knowledge about themselves via contemplative practices and existing theories and practices in education abroad.

**Subjective Learning**

Barbezat and Bush (2014) state that subjective learning is a teaching approach that empowers students to be the driving force in their education. This method motivates students to connect their internal thoughts and emotions with the external world and then analyze their reactions. As Komjathy (2017) labels it, critical subjectivity or first-person discourse emphasizes the importance of personal experience in the learning process. By exploring their inner selves, students can establish meaningful connections with the subject matter and relate it to their experiences.

Palmer (1993) additionally notes that the relationship between the knower and what is known is personal. This relationship necessitates an interaction wherein students realize the interconnectedness of their understanding of the world and themselves. Palmer (1993) suggests that truth goes beyond being a mere statement about reality, i.e., objective. Instead, it is a dynamic and living connection that stems from one's subjectivity. By fostering this connection between the Self and knowledge, individuals can expand their consciousness and establish an interdependent relationship with nature, society, and themselves.

Komjathy (2017) highlights the benefits of subjective contemplative practices, which encourage individuals to take action toward promoting care, peace, and social justice for both humanity and the natural world. The following aims to enhance understanding of subjective learning by exploring how practices like meditation and mindfulness foster internal awareness. To illustrate the effectiveness of these practices in promoting inner awareness, compassion, and cultural understanding, an example of an education abroad program that integrates subjective methods is provided.

### *Subjective Practices*

Contemplative pedagogy promotes introspection and reflection to facilitate the investigation of the Self and create a connection with the learning process (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). As summarized earlier in Figure 2.2 in the Tree of Contemplative Practices, various practices can be expressed to foster subjective awareness (Komjathy, 2017). Contemplative techniques prioritize personal awareness and can be combined in numerous ways to facilitate insightful learning (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Although the methods may vary, there are common attributes, including “attentiveness, awareness, interiority, presence, silence, transformation, and a more profound sense of meaning and purpose” (Komjathy, 2017, p. 55). Komjathy (2017)

identifies 24 crucial types of practice that focus on psychological, conceptual, physiological, and social dimensions.

Meditation, one of those practices, often brings a specific technique to mind; however, there are variations across terminology and practices. Komjathy (2017) explains that the term "meditation" is a vaguely defined comparative category with diverse forms, purposes, and goals that "alter consciousness in identifiable ways" (p. 315). Meditative practices are commonly linked with Buddhism but can also be found in other religions, spiritual practices, and secular customs (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Despite the many traditions and techniques, meditation has two standard features: to develop deep focus and cultivate insight (Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

Regular meditation in an educational setting has been shown to produce significant results, even after a short period, including a more profound understanding of course content, increased concentration and attention, improved mental health and psychological well-being, heightened connection, generosity, and compassion, and amplified creativity and insight (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Neurologically, meditative experiences are associated with the brain structures related to meaning, purpose, empathy, and compassion, which improves inner well-being and relationships with others (Newberg & Waldman, 2017). According to Hanson and Mendius (2009), focused attention functions "like a spotlight, and what it illuminates streams into your mind and shapes your brain" (p. 177). Practicing attention is a powerful method of reshaping the brain and mind (Hanson & Mendius, 2009). Additionally, the effects of these practices cause long-term changes in the cognitive and emotional centers of the brain (Newberg & Waldman, 2017).

A specific set of mediation practices, called loving-kindness meditation, is intended to develop empathy and compassion (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Hanson and Mendius (2009)

distinguish compassion as “the wish that beings not suffer” (p. 157), while kindness is “the wish that they be happy” (Hanson & Mendius, 2009, p. 157). Loving-kindness meditation deepens the awareness of one’s connections with others through practices of well-wishing towards oneself and others (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Loving-kindness meditation changes the brain's reward and motivation system to support compassion for Self and Others (Mascaro et al., 2015). Research shows that these practices improve feelings of social connection toward friends and family, and individuals form a more positive mindset toward strangers (Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

Compassion practices strengthen the circuits in one’s brain to help generate long-lasting changes and assist in alleviating self-suffering (Hanson & Mendius, 2009). The HeartMath Institute has found that sustaining positive emotions in meditative states brings the heart and brain into coherence (*The Science of HeartMath*, 2023). This coherence is characterized by a measurable condition of harmony and coherence in the mental, emotional, and physical processes (*The Science of HeartMath*, 2023). Barbezat and Bush (2014) describe this practice of compassion as beginning with love for ourselves, moving toward those unique to us, then moving toward all living and nonliving things, and as being conducted with a sense of reverence and without conditions. This expansion of connection toward others is related to the recognition that everything is connected and that “the entire planet is your home and the people on it are your extended family” (Hanson & Mendius, 2009, p. 169).

Cultivating self-compassion builds “kindness and understanding towards oneself rather than self-criticism and judgment, holding oneself as connected rather than separate and isolated, and sustaining balance with thoughts and feelings and not overidentifying with negative thoughts” (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 31). Self-compassion is crucial because one cannot give another what they do not have, and by looking inward, one gains insight into what needs to be

changed (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Additionally, students gain insight into the "power of their cultivated relationships with others" (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 176) and recognize how those relationships can transform and grow. Loving-kindness practices have a kinship with mindfulness, which also has been shown to increase self-compassion (Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

Within the Buddhist tradition, mindfulness has historically been called insight meditation (Komjathy, 2017). However, according to Komjathy (2017), the term mindfulness has become so widely used in popular discourse that it has lost much of its specificity and can now refer to almost anything. Mindfulness techniques are the most commonly used meditation practice in higher education (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Mindfulness is described as "both a process (mindfulness practice) and an outcome (mindful awareness)" (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 95).

When one practices mindfulness, one intends to be highly aware of both what is inside themselves and outside in the environment in the present moment, while accepting and acknowledging current thoughts and emotions without judgment (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Mindful awareness "allows us to observe our mental states without overidentifying with them, creating an attitude of acceptance" (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 96), often leading to increased curiosity and open-mindedness (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Regardless of the specific terminology used, meditative practices that foster compassion lead to improved relationships with Others by transforming one's worldview and how they identify with themselves (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Meditation practices have a variety of forms, purposes, and goals, but all share the standard features of developing deep focus and cultivating insight. Regular meditation has been shown to produce significant results, including improved mental health, heightened connection, and amplified creativity (Kabat-Zinn, 2013).

Barbezat and Bush (2014) indicate the importance of mindfulness to education abroad when they state, “Drawing on latent and often buried senses of connection and love for this world, these practices, and others like them, allow us to reconnect with our experience of being intimately connected to this planet and all its residents” (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 178). For example, an education abroad program in Vietnam involved short-term service-learning, requiring students to engage in compassion and mindfulness meditations (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). The students felt the practices alleviated their sense of separation and feeling different while increasing their compassion and empathy (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Additionally, the students indicated that their ability to practice being present helped them overcome anxiety and had a transformative effect (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). This example illustrates how contemplative practices can facilitate compassion, connection, and self-awareness while fostering cultural understanding within education abroad. The following will explore current subjective learning practices and theories within education abroad.

### *Education Abroad Subjective Learning*

Reflection has become a crucial component of subjective learning in education abroad programs, and increasingly, both short- and long-term education abroad programs recognize reflection as a means of enhancing intercultural learning (Chiocca, 2021; Paige & Vande Berg, 2012; Passarelli & Kolb, 2012; Savicki & Priestley, 2019). This section discusses how, why, and when reflection can occur in education abroad programs and the key elements to maximize the benefits of reflection.

To increase internal awareness, it is crucial to teach students how to reflect and provide them with opportunities to reflect before, during, and after the education abroad experience (Chiocca, 2021; Savicki & Price, 2018; Savicki & Priestley, 2019). Homan (2006) defines

reflection as the "process by which an individual builds meaning by analyzing an experience, evaluating its worth, and conceptualizing its relevance through the synthesis of additional viewpoints and information" (p. 9). According to Chiocca (2021), Savicki and Price (2018), and Savicki and Priestley (2019), a crucial aspect of developing intercultural competence is engaging in reflections that encompass both cognitive (understanding) and affective (emotions).

Savicki and Price (2017) describe an effectively written reflection as "describing in detail distinctions observed and in terms of integrating all aspects of the Self" (p. 53). Savicki and Price (2018) argue that to achieve deeper learning, the objective of reflection, experiences must be given meaning and encompass all aspects of the Self to shape our perceptions of the world. However, a reflection with superficial, externally directed content is less likely to support meaning-making (Savicki & Price, 2018). In contrast, reflection that includes self-awareness, emotional context, and insightful analysis is more likely to result in a meaningful and transformative learning experience (Savicki & Price, 2018). Reflections that include the meaningful factors previously mentioned encourage students to conceptualize the insights and knowledge gained through new experiences abroad and apply it in a different context or their home culture. (Savicki & Priestley, 2019).

The Head, Heart, and Hands model (HHH model) for Transformative Learning (Sipos et al., 2008) combines the intellectual knowledge of the mind with the sensory experiences of the body. The heart is the final element of the HHH model that pertains to how one's passion, values, and attitudes manifest in actions and behaviors (Sipos et al., 2008). According to the HHH model, transformation is a complex process that involves multiple dimensions (Singleton, 2015). To facilitate such transformation, one must undergo experiences, reflect, heighten their awareness, and demonstrate a sense of care (Singleton, 2015).

Education abroad has evolved into focusing more on developing global citizenship and enhancing career prospects. While conventional, objective learning remains a foundational aspect of education abroad, successful programs prioritize immersive and meaningful learning experiences that engage with the local context. Short-term, faculty-led programs should prioritize academic knowledge construction and balance formal, informal, and self-guided learning while promoting guided reflection. The HHH model for transformative learning emphasizes the importance of engaging the heart to facilitate transformation.

Choicca (2021) noted that students who displayed the most understanding and emotions during their reflections and participant interviews had more significant intercultural growth. Savicki and Price (2017) concur with Chiocca's findings that students who reflected deeply with emotion increased their intercultural competence. Chiocca (2021) also found that complex interactions were necessary to initiate both transformational and intercultural learning, as "participants' perspective transformation emerged from a momentous conversation, crystallized through reflections and strong emotions, which occurred cumulatively" (p. 47). Processing emotions through self-reflection and reflective discussions leads students to have "cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes" (Chiocca, 2021, p. 47). Deardorff (2018) notes that intercultural competence development in a short-term program is "more about the process of learning interculturally about oneself and the world than about achieving results" (p. 83). According to Deardorff (2018), starting with learning about one's cultural identity is a crucial step in understanding oneself in the world, recognizing how cultural programming shapes interactions with others, identifying one's worldviews, and eventually leading to improved interpersonal relationships.

Through a contemplative lens, reflection involves contextualization or identifying "people, texts, movements, and other phenomena in their corresponding historical, cultural, social and political circumstances" (Komjathy, 2017, p. 202). Contextualization can be of Self or other individuals and communities, with the former primarily subjective and the latter objective (Komjathy, 2017). Komjathy (2017) explains that from a contemplative perspective, there is a "complex interplay between context, experience, and interpretation" (p. 203) that relates to the "history of our consciousness" (Komjathy, 2017, p. 203). Contemplative pedagogy incorporates practices of introspection and reflection to encourage students to focus inward and discover more of themselves in their learning (Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

This study investigated subjective and intersubjective contemplative learning in education abroad programs. The objective is to determine how students perceive their learning experience in terms of developing their internal awareness and gaining knowledge about others. The following two sections provide an overview of experiential and transformational learning theories. They are crucial in comprehending how students reflect on their experiences and make sense of their learning during their time abroad. These theories are extensively utilized in education abroad curricula.

### *Experiential Learning Theory*

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory is fundamental to many education abroad programs. Experiential learning theory is based on a four-stage learning cycle that includes concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012). In the concrete experience stage, learners engage in direct experiences, such as immersing themselves in a new culture during education abroad. Reflective observation involves reflecting on those experiences and considering their

significance and implications. For example, a student might reflect on their interactions with local residents and how that helped to shape their understanding of cultural norms. In the abstract conceptualization stage, learners make sense of their experiences by forming concepts and theories. This could involve analyzing cultural differences and similarities observed during their program abroad. Finally, in the active experimentation stage, students apply what they have learned in new situations, such as using newly acquired skills to navigate encounters with diverse populations in their home country.

Passarelli and Kolb (2012) argue that deeper learning occurs when students engage with all four aspects of the cycle, enriching concrete experience with reflection, giving it meaning by thinking, and transforming it through action. However, students often struggle to progress through the cycles independently, so education abroad programs should be designed to facilitate experiential learning, enabling students to go beyond conventional objective learning (Vande Berg et al., 2012). Notably, theorists such as John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Paulo Freire, and David Kolb have all included experiential components in their work, with Kolb and Dewey emphasizing the connection between reflection and experience (Barbazet & Bush, 2014).

Passarelli and Kolb (2012) developed the philosophy of experiential education, proposing that a dynamic connection between the learner and the educator goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills to include emotional and social dimensions. Experiential education is also learning-oriented, emphasizing how students determine the answers, and learner-centered, incorporating a student's innate knowledge and beliefs to become self-directed.

According to Barbezat and Bush (2014), scholars have suggested that personal reflective activities can aid in improving student learning, promoting holistic student development, and cultivating self-awareness and emotional regulation. As mentioned earlier, reflection has become

integral to education abroad programs. While experiential learning theory partly accounts for this trend, reflection is also viewed as a fundamental tool for facilitating transformational learning. Transformative learning is discussed in the following section.

### *Transformative Learning Theory*

Both contemplative pedagogy and education abroad aim to facilitate transformational learning. King and Baxter Magolda (2011) explain that a transformative learning environment not only provides the chance for students to learn new skills but also intentionally incorporates opportunities for students to "make object" learning and experiences for which they are "subject." This concept is related to Mezirow's (2001) transformative learning theory, in which students use reflection to update the meaning they have assigned to an experience.

Education abroad brings "exposure to new places, cultures, and learning environments where a student's preconceived and established notions and beliefs are tested, and which may act as the catalyst or impetus to bring forth a transformative experience" (Perry et al., 2012, p. 682). During an experience abroad, students often experience uncertainty, disorientation, dissonance, and questioning of their assumptions due to encounters with a different reality (Gillespie, 2019). The transformation occurs when students update their meaning framework (Savicki & Priestley, 2019). Several researchers have explored the connection between transformative learning and education abroad (Chiocca, 2021; Strange & Gibson, 2017; Tonkin & Bourgault du Coudray, 2016; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). Transformative learning, like contemplative learning, encourages learners to explore their "inner emotional states and values [to] become object, making it possible to reflect on them and make intentional choices about them that are separate from others' emotions" (King & Baxter Magolda, 2011, p. 210).

In education abroad, experiential learning theory and transformative learning theory are essential, as they both involve the subjective process of reflection. However, contemplative pedagogy offers another path to awareness where "the experience is focused on students' introspection and their cultivation of awareness of themselves and their relationship to others" (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 5). Contemplative reflection is distinguished by the idea that exploring the inner and outer landscapes are interconnected, harmonious, and mutually supportive. Reflection on the inner Self considers "who we are, what we hold most dear, and our sense of purpose and meaning" (Rendón & Nepo, 2014, p. 7). Contemplative reflection emerges through internal awareness, where students form increased empathy towards Others and a more profound connection with the world (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Contemplative practices "support and sustain the types of self-monitoring activities that research has found crucial for student development and learning" (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 8).

In summary, this section defined subjective contemplative learning with an overview of the literature related to its various aspects. Figure 2.1, situated at the right of the conceptual model, represents intersubjective learning. The following delves into intersubjective learning in the context of contemplative pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and education abroad.

**Intersubjective Learning**

Intersubjective learning builds upon the fundamental subjective perspectives and practices that allow individuals to explore the nature of their internal worlds, including what can be found *between* us as social beings (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017). Contemplative education initially focused on subjective perspectives, but the shared meaning formed between people was missing (Forbes, 2017). As social creatures, humans inherently derive meaning from within themselves and their relationships with others. Dialogue with others bridges cultural patterns to

formulate shared meaning that "includes uncovering, evaluating, and challenging the often problematic, implicit cultural contexts of moral values and meanings that people share and assume" (Forbes, 2017, p. 39). Participatory-based, contemplative learning within classrooms, groups, and teams fosters the emergence of shared knowledge and collective wisdom, in contrast with individual-based learning (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017).

Apart from dialogue, the Power of Eight (McTaggart, 2017) intention group is another example of an intersubjective contemplative practice. Typically comprising six to fourteen individuals, the group begins by collectively creating a positive intention statement for one of the members (McTaggart, 2017). The intention assists the individual with an issue, such as success with a challenging exam, healing an ailment, or locating the perfect career (McTaggart, 2017). Then, the group focuses on the positive intention during a ten-minute meditation (McTaggart, 2017). Subjective meditation has been found to enhance brain activity in areas associated with the Self (McTaggart, 2017). In contrast, the Power of Eight groups exhibit different brain activity, with the boundaries between the Self and Others dissolving (McTaggart, 2017). According to McTaggart (2017), the brain waves of inexperienced individuals who participate in group intentions are like the Enlightenment experiences of monks, nuns, mediums, and Sufi masters.

Newberg and Waldman (2017) describe two types of enlightenment. The first is little "e" enlightenment or the "mini-experience that provides us with new insights about ourselves and the world" (Newberg & Waldman, 2017, p. 4). The large "E" Enlightenment is "feeling a sense of unity and surrender coupled with a feeling of profound clarity that some deeper insight or truth or wisdom has been reached" (Newberg & Waldman, 2017, p. 14). According to McTaggart (2017), not only did the Power of Eight groups seem to attain a state like

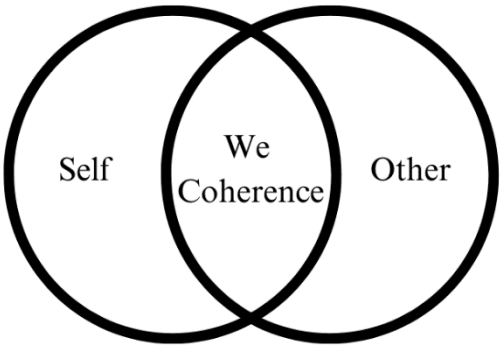
Enlightenment, but their brains also seemed to function as a unified entity. Specifically, she notes that the brains of group members "appeared to be operating as a greater whole" (McTaggart, 2017, p. 221). McTaggert (2017) describes group intention as altering individual consciousness by "removing a sense of separation and individuality and placing members of the group in what can only be described as ecstatic unity" (p. xviii).

The outcome of intersubjective contemplative learning is that it cultivates "collaborative discernment, inspire[s] deeper shared and co-emerging states of knowing, and generally move[s] learners and educators toward a more collective focus in their learning engagement" (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017, p. vii). The Tree of Contemplative Practices in Figure 2.3 has two branches dedicated to aspects of intersubjective practice: the relational and the ritual/cyclical branches (Bush & Gunnlaugson, 2018). Intersubjective learning equips individuals with the necessary tools to attain deep understanding. It presents a viable approach for education to cultivate relational individuals, which is essential in our complex and rapidly changing world (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017).

Forbes (2017) distinguishes between two forms of intersubjective thought: internal and external. Inner intersubjective thought is achieved through honest, respectful dialogue with individuals who share a connection, in which the discussion includes meaning, emotions, values, and relationships. The external intersubjective thought aligns with critical pedagogy in examining and acting on the "unacknowledged problematic norms, values, and assumptions hiding in our interpersonal relations and within broader cultures themselves" (Forbes, 2017, p. 51). Exploring both internal and external aspects is crucial to fully engaging in intersubjective learning. In Figure 2.4, I suggest a model for intersubjective learning that encompasses the minds, bodies, and hearts of Self and Others in coherence to form We.

**Figure 2.4**

*Intersubjective Learning*




Within the shared coherence, We contains a sense of bodily togetherness, minds coming together in shared understanding and compassion for each other. The following will delve deeper into the connection between intersubjective learning and critical pedagogy.

***Intersubjective Critical Pedagogy***

According to Barbezat and Bush (2014), incorporating contemplative practices into education can build upon the work of past scholars who emphasized the importance of meaningful and engaged student learning while promoting a shift in power dynamics within the classroom and nurturing informed citizens. Notably, educational and social scholars like Freire (1970) and Dewey (1938) sought to empower learners by helping them comprehend the hegemonic structures of power and act with agency (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Critical pedagogy – a "philosophy of education and social movement that combines education with critical theory" (Komjathy, 2017, p. 161) – arose to protect people from the oppression of social truths based on inequality (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2012).

Critical pedagogy enables individuals to consciously rethink and reconstruct societal structures to better align with their subjectivity (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2012). By shedding light on power dynamics, critical pedagogy helps learners distance themselves from dominant

ideologies and move toward resistance and understanding of what truly matters to them (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2012). Critical pedagogy cultivates critical consciousness about the relationship between knowledge, power, and freedom while empowering learners to take productive action (Giroux, 2010). There are two co-aligned aspects within critical pedagogy. The first is education geared toward increasing awareness (Komjathy, 2017). The second is expressed through social engagement or political action (Komjathy, 2017).

As individuals engage in critical learning, their awareness grows, enhancing their sense of critical literacy. This awareness promotes self-liberation through sharing personal experiences in dialogue (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2012). Freire (1970) felt that critical discourse was meaningful for learners to become aware of the conscious and unconscious dynamics within their perspectives, as it challenges both their assumptions and others' (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2012).

Trifonas and Balomenos (2012) contend that critical pedagogy upholds the values and ethos of intersubjectivity within diverse communities. This perspective is in line with the principles of contemplative pedagogy, particularly regarding intersubjective learning. Critical pedagogy promotes open and challenging discourse that acknowledges differences, leading to a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2012). Each student has a unique background, aspirations, and challenges, and critical pedagogy encourages educators to explore these differences to empower students to become active and independent learners (Komjathy, 2017). Henry Giroux (2010) has built upon Freire's work and advocated for experiential frameworks that encourage introspection and reflexivity, which can be valuable in shaping subjective experiences (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2012, p. 225). Critical discourse creates

space for marginalized voices to be heard, provides opportunities for diverse perspectives to be shared, and promotes open-mindedness (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2012).

Critical pedagogy promotes the idea of students situating themselves in the world and reflecting on their relationships with others on a broad spectrum, spanning from micro to macro interactions (Gruenewald, 2003). These interactions include not only individuals and communities but also the natural world. Gruenwald (2003) explains, “It is this spatial dimension of situationality, and its attention to social transformation, that connects critical pedagogy with a pedagogy of place,” as both consider “the contextual, geographical conditions that shape people and the actions people take to shape these conditions” (p. 4). Freire’s concern for understanding and acting according to one’s situationality is fundamental to what makes us human (Gruenewald, 2003).

In today's world, it's essential to comprehend the significance of place, context, and Others. Critical pedagogy encourages students to explore perspectives beyond the dominant and often hegemonic Western outlook, which frequently disregards other ways of knowing (Jackson, 2018). By doing so, critical educators aim to help learners recognize the limitations and boundaries of their positionality and to mediate differences (Hovey, 2004). Gruenewald (2003) takes this idea further and suggests that a critical pedagogy of place can enable students to establish an empathetic bond with one another and the natural environment, leading to the formation of "relationships of care" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 7).

Singleton (2015) agrees when discussing the integration of the critically transformative HHH model, “Being physically present in a place, building relationship with that place, critically reflecting on the values one puts on a place can transform perspectives, change behaviors and increase engagement” (p. 9). The focus on experience with a place is a “response against both a

‘gloom and doom’ approach to environmental education and a conventional education that keeps students indoors and thinking about outdoor places only in the abstract” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 7). Gruenewald’s (2003) sentiment echoes the concern with objective learning discussed earlier.

Critical education should “foster an ability for autonomous thought and independent action by encouraging students to actively take part in the development of their personalized systems of logic to deal with the knowledge claims thrust upon them” (Trifonas & Balomenos, 2012, p. 222). The concept that critical pedagogy involves students exploring external systems in light of their internal motivations is akin to contemplative pedagogy. Kauffman (2017) makes a case for calling the two combined theories critical contemplative pedagogy. Critical contemplative pedagogy has five dimensions: “establishes a foundation of nonduality; promotes an awareness of interdependence; encourages us to embrace impermanence; fosters intentionality; grounds the political with the personal” (Kaufman, 2017, p. 1).

The first dimension of critical contemplative pedagogy is nonduality. Nonduality shifts individuals away from separateness toward recognition of the needs of others under a contemplative lens (Kaufman, 2017). The shift towards non-duality reduces the “us” versus “them” dichotomy to bring others into our circle of care (Hanson & Mendius, 2009). The critical perspective offers a “mutually supportive and equally responsive” (Kaufman, 2017, p. 8) attention toward others for social change. Each of the two pedagogies has a shared goal for transformative education (Mah y Busch, 2014).

The second dimension is the awareness of interdependence, like the learning outcome related to connection noted earlier in this chapter by Barbazet and Bush (2014). In the United States, where individuality is valued, interdependence is challenging to master despite being central to many contemplative philosophies (Kaufman, 2017). According to Kauffman (2017),

the concept of interdependence within critical perspectives is known as intersectionality. In this context, intersectionality refers to the interconnections present within systems of oppression (Kaufman, 2017). Critical contemplation fuses the "experiential wisdom of interdependence gained through contemplation with the analytical understanding of oppression" (Kaufman, 2017, p. 10).

The third dimension of critical contemplative pedagogy is impermanence. Contemplating the transient nature of our thoughts, senses, and emotions reflects impermanence, an essential component of critical pedagogies to bring about social change (Kaufman, 2017). Within critical pedagogy, a new space for liberation emerges as differences come to light through dialogue and word-based reflective communication (Mah y Busch, 2014). On the other hand, in contemplative pedagogy, this space for liberation arises from a relational lens rooted in wordless experiences (Mah y Busch, 2014). By integrating critical and contemplative pedagogies, one can combine the awareness of change at individual and collective levels to better understand the human experience (Kaufman, 2017). The fusion of deep personal and social awareness in this fourth dimension of intentionality requires learners and educators to carefully reflect on their intentions for meditation and how to navigate radical change (Kaufman, 2017).

The final critical contemplative dimension is grounding the political with the personal, which considers social conditioning a powerful force that necessitates a conscious effort to deconstruct and recondition (Kaufman, 2017). Earlier in this chapter, these were referred to as external agreements (Rendón and Nepo, 2014), but Kauffman (2017) extrapolates on the connection to critical pedagogy when he says:

> By anchoring ourselves in our practice of contemplation, and by coming to realize our non-dual, interdependent, and impermanent nature, we begin to shed the "it's-all-about-

> me" mentality of greed and wanting that underlies the quest for power, control, and domination. Narcissism, competitive individualism, and even the distrust or dismissal of others become less pronounced (p. 15).

The synthesis of the two pedagogies encourages replacing self-interest with social interest, where "the personal grounds the political" (Kaufman, 2017, p. 15). The identification between the personal and the political refers to how individuals perceive their Self within their local environment and how this perception transforms as they engage in a global context. As explained below, the movement toward creating a sense of compassion in students beyond themselves and toward society and the natural world is crucial in education abroad.

### *Education Abroad Intersubjective Learning*

Recent research on education abroad has found that many programs are lacking concerning place-based pedagogy (Adkins & Messerly, 2019). In addition, merely sending students abroad, irrespective of the duration, does not lead to transformative change (Adkins & Messerly, 2019; Chiocca, 2021; Engle, 2013; Paige & Vande Berg, 2012; Savicki & Brewer, 2015). Increasingly, researchers are discovering the power of targeted learning interventions and carefully designed short-term program experiences to positively impact intercultural competence and sensitivity (Chiocca, 2021; McLaughlin et al., 2018; Nguyen, 2017; Shiveley & Misco, 2015). Chiocca (2021) suggests that "the type of intervention might be more significant for intercultural competence and sensitivity development than the length of the program itself" (p. 38). Chiocca's (2021) study highlights the importance of incorporating place-based pedagogy into program design.

Place is more than a physical setting; it is a "meeting of learners' experiences, the ideas and ideals of their group and culture, and the geophysical reality of the site of learning itself"

(Wattchow & Brown, 2011, p. 77). A pedagogy of place centers learning within the students' bodies as a personal and embodied experience (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). Wattchow and Brown (2011) critique the experiential learning cycle for favoring cognitive learning and overlooking the embodied way of knowing. They argue that students actively interpret and reflect not just through their minds but also through their embodied experiences. Placed-based pedagogy fosters reciprocity in learning with social connectedness that deepens the experience in an active journey toward connection and an ethic of care (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). This approach helps students learn firsthand how communities are shaped by their environment and inhabitants (Chiocca, 2021). Developing a sense of place can promote transformational learning and increase intercultural awareness (Chiocca, 2021).

Students and faculty participating in short-term education abroad programs form a unique learning environment "unbound by their usual social networks and routines back home" (Herbst, 2011, p. 224). Short-term education abroad students and instructors are "bonded as a tight-knit learning community" (Herbst, 2011, p. 224). These programs are ideal for group connection, where dialogue and discussions help guide students to derive deeper meanings from experiences (Pasquarelli, 2018). Group reflective discussions on real-world experiences enhance innovative thinking through collaboration and idea exchange while increasing critical consciousness and self-actualization (Quezada de Tavarez & Staroscik Warren, 2018).

An essential component for learning about others is the opportunity to interact with local community members. Chiocca (2021) describes the importance of dialogue within short-term programs abroad to foster transformative learning and for "deep learning abroad that is more than 'upgraded' tourism" (p. 35). Short-term education abroad programs should contribute to students' understanding of place by having them engage in dialogue "as collaborators in the

project of true intercultural exchange" (Adkins & Messerly, 2019, p. 89). The discussions should be framed by instructors and followed by self-reflection (Chiocca, 2021). Chiocca (2021) describes that reflecting after dialogue is crucial in considering one's positionality and impact on interactions. Reflection on the reciprocal nature of interactions with the local community helps students to understand the perspectives of those they have encountered (Adkins & Messerly, 2019).

Compared to the purpose of contemplative self-reflection, as discussed above, education abroad considers introspection to be an outward understanding that guides students toward a transformative change in perspective (Chiocca, 2021). Dialogue and interactions with local community members are effective interventions that lead to cultural understanding while providing a sense of place. Interactions with local residents on programs abroad do not only have to occur in structured activities. Tonking and Bourgault du Choudray (2016) found that students who socialized with local residents increased their intercultural learning more than when students learned about intercultural theory through online peer discussions.

As illustrated above, dialogue's experiential and relational nature in an intercultural setting can be more impactful than objective learning. Learning through intersubjective experience is effective and highlights the importance of including social interactions in an education abroad program (Tonkin & Bourgault du Coudray, 2016). Intersubjective learning is just one part of a holistic and dynamic educational experience, with necessary objective and subjective learning. The following will explore the intersection of objective, subjective, and intersubjective in examining wisdom. Wisdom is the final part that unites the conceptual model found in Figure 2.1.

**Wisdom**

Integrating all three learning aspects – objective, subjective, and intersubjective – leads individuals to a holistic sense of knowing. Wisdom is the synergy of all three approaches, as it allows for separation and unity to be understood together (Gozawa, 2017). As noted in Chapter 1, this study employs Gozawa's (2017) description of wisdom as an integral consciousness that shifts the "fragmenting duality that perceives a gap between subject-object, between body-mind, between Self and other, between interior-focused and exterior-focused consciousness" (p. 61). Identifying only with the Self falls on the side of ignorance, while wisdom is the opposite and occurs as one empties the "self out into allness" (Hanson & Mendius, 2009, p. 221).

Contemplative pedagogy guides students to explore the Self, not only concerning the subject matter but also in engagement with and connection to others who complement the other learning facets (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Palmer (1993) concurs with this idea by presenting a holistic perspective on knowledge, which incorporates objective learning through our senses and reason, subjective knowledge from our intuitions, beliefs, and bodies, as well as intersubjective knowledge from our behaviors, interactions, and relationships. This comprehensive approach to knowledge seeks to encompass all aspects of human experience.

Barbezat and Bush (2014) indicate that placing students at the center of their education offers a rich learning environment. The centering of student learning "provides the opportunity for students to cultivate attention, deepen their understanding of their studies, engender richer relationships with themselves and others, and stimulate profound inquiries into the nature of themselves and the world around them" (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 20). Gunnlaugson et al. (2017) underscore the importance of this integral framework when they state that "perhaps one

of the major educational imperatives of our time is to refine understanding and approaches to this wholeness through all three lenses: first, second, and third person" (p. xvi).

Although acquiring wisdom is introduced as a potential outcome of contemplative education abroad, this study acknowledges that learning from a single experience is merely the first step in an ongoing journey. Students who participate in a contemplative education abroad program would likely indicate an increase in compassion, connection, and self-awareness while fostering cultural understanding, similar to the participants in the Vietnam program referred to earlier in the chapter (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Conboy and Clancy (2022) identified emergent themes of external awareness, self-awareness, connections, and memory in a longitudinal study conducted 18 months after students returned from a contemplative education abroad experience. The first three themes found in the study mirror the objective, subjective, and intersubjective learning, a positive indication that the participants are on the path toward wisdom.

**Conclusion**

This chapter offers an overview of the conceptual framework that provides a context for the interrelated aspects discussed throughout the chapter. The Contemplative Learning for Education Abroad Conceptual Model, Figure 2.1, highlights three overarching approaches to learning that can be applied to education abroad. Objective learning serves as the foundation for conventional Western education and offers an externalized view of the world, specifically in learning *about* other cultures. In education abroad, objective learning includes conventional classroom experiences, observational site visits, and the exploration of cultural norms.

Education abroad can benefit from incorporating contemplative subjective learning, which complements objective learning. Subjective learning is already present in education abroad through reflection, and it is a crucial component of experiential and transformational

learning theories. By using contemplative pedagogy and practices involving subjective learning, individuals can develop a more profound sense of inner awareness and compassion. Incorporating these practices in education abroad can promote empathy towards others.

Contemplative pedagogy and practices also delve into the subjective Self and the collaborative learning fostered within groups. This third learning approach, described in the conceptual model, is the We of intersubjective learning. Intersubjective learning allows students to discover previously unknown subjective perspectives through dialogue and interactions with others while learning *with* them.

The chapter also explores the connection between intersubjective practices and critical pedagogy, especially regarding critical education abroad and the connection with a Place. By integrating intersubjective contemplative practices into education abroad, such as reflective discussions on the mutually responsive nature of local community interactions, students are encouraged to understand the perspectives of Others and cultivate a deeper sense of Place. Education abroad can benefit from critical and contemplative pedagogies as the combination supports "emotional freedom, social solidarity, and meaning-making" (Krikorian, 2020, p. 273) that fosters "holistic human development and transformative adult learning for personal and social liberation" (Krikorian, 2020, p. 267).

This study investigates the potential outcomes of incorporating contemplative approaches into critical education abroad, aiming to enhance student learning by cultivating deeper compassion, open-mindedness, and understanding towards themselves and others. Furthermore, the study proposes that integrating all three contemplative approaches—objective, subjective, and intersubjective—creates a comprehensive framework for a holistic education abroad experience. The integral approach intends to shift students from a feeling of separateness to a

sense of relational compassion for themselves and Others. While the aspiration of acquiring wisdom is introduced as a learning outcome of contemplative education abroad, the study recognizes that learning from a single experience is just the initial step in an ongoing journey. This research explores students' perspectives of their learning and experiences in a short-term education abroad program that incorporates contemplative practices.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

## Introduction

As discussed in previous chapters, global engagement, including Self-knowledge, may foster learners who counter the dominant neoliberal hegemony through empowerment and agency. Combining contemplative practice with global engagement can lead to a deeper connection with students' authentic selves and not just the aspects they portray to the world (Rendón & Nepo, 2014). When done well, students can increase their openness to others' perspectives, cultures, and values.

This study investigated participants' perceptions of their internal Self and connection with others through a contemplative education abroad experience. Furthermore, this research explored the relationship of global engagement with inner awareness gained through the intentional combination of critical and contemplative learning experiences. Specifically, it examined participants' perceptions throughout their experience in a short-term, faculty-led education abroad program in Finland that included subjective and intersubjective contemplative practices.

Data for this study was gathered from the course documents, including the syllabus and participant assignments. The course document analysis provided valuable insights into the course structure, learning activities, and topics. The participant assignments, particularly the written reflections, offered valuable insight into the students' perspectives during the course and experience abroad. Additionally, two focus groups were conducted, the first eight days into the experience in Finland and the second upon the course conclusion in mid-July. Participant observations took place throughout the experience abroad. Written reflections from both the researcher and the course instructor were gathered as supporting documentation. As a researcher,

I explored the topic with an open and inquisitive mind, taking time to reflect so that additional insights and themes could emerge.

This chapter begins by exploring why the study employed a spiritual research paradigm and how it aligns with a qualitative methodology. The heuristic research approach, which emphasizes a person-centered and intersubjective perspective, is thoroughly described. An overview of the research context is provided, including the study population selection and the employed sampling methods. Then, the chapter delves into the data collection methods utilized. The subsequent sections present the ethical principles governing the study, the researcher's positionality, and the measures taken to enhance the credibility of the research. The final sections discuss the data management and analysis process, the feasibility of the study, and any limitations and delimitations considered.

**Research Methodology**

This study delved into the participants' internal realms, exploring their connection with their inner Selves, experiences abroad, and interactions with the instructor and individuals they encountered in Finland. A qualitative research methodology was adopted to investigate these phenomena, centering on "the world of lived experience" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p. 4) to collect data from personal encounters.

To obtain a comprehensive understanding of personal experiences, collection of "thick data" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 288) was required, entailing a detailed recording of the phenomenon. Thick data is essential for gaining a deep insight into personal experiences, as it “gives voices to participants, and it probes issues that lie beneath the surface” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 288). Qualitative research methods were well suited to investigate this topic in its natural setting and enabled an interpretation of the phenomena and associated meanings assigned

by the students (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Most importantly, the qualitative approach provided a "deep understanding about what a subject matter is, in all its real-world complexity, and an ability to describe, explain, and communicate that understanding" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), understanding the theoretical principles that shape the logic of one's inquiry is crucial in positioning the study appropriately within an inquiry tradition. Qualitative research is a well-established tradition that diverges from traditional positivist and post-positivist approaches, which aim to objectively understand the material world and its associated truths. Instead, qualitative research methodologies prioritize the interactions and interdependencies among the researcher, the research process, and the participants and focus on the world of lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013).

Compared to qualitative methodology, the spiritual paradigm is a more recent development (Lin et al., 2016). The spiritual research paradigm seeks to explore and understand phenomena beyond the physical and material world while incorporating spiritual or transcendent aspects of human experience. By employing qualitative and spiritual paradigms, this study aims for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject beyond traditional scientific inquiry.

While the spiritual research paradigm is relatively new, employing it allows for other forms of knowing beyond traditional research. Furthermore, the spiritual paradigm is compatible with contemplative inquiry and practices. The spiritual research paradigm involves an ontology in which reality is "multidimensional, interconnected, and interdependent" (Lin et al., 2016, p. ix) and an epistemology that "integrates knowing from outer sources as well as inner contemplation" (Lin et al., 2016, p. ix). This paradigm is best suited for research investigating inward experience, and it "promotes meaning, purpose, interconnection with nature and other

beings, inner peace, compassion, and tranquility of mind and heart" (Lin et al., 2016, p. xi). The research purpose and my role as a researcher were philosophically aligned with the spiritual paradigm.

The spiritual research paradigm is holistic and incorporates contemplative inquiry (Lamb, 2016). Contemplative inquiry expands qualitative methods "beyond a mind that is confined to reason and sense to witness consciousness, such as cultivated by contemplative practices" (Lin et al., 2016). The techniques of contemplative inquiry situate a deep and thoughtful emphasis on knowing during the study, relying on intuition, creativity, and imagination (Janesick, 2015). The paradigm seeks to incorporate participants' experiences and perceptions as tools for knowing and interpreting the world and their "inner awareness" (Lamb, 2016). Lamb (2016) defines "inner awareness" within the spiritual paradigm as "knowledge about oneself that is not limited to one's physical, mental, or emotional dimensions but comes about as one's inner consciousness awakens" (p. 57). According to Lamb (2016), this awareness is not limited to the individual but is more holistic, encompassing relationships with others and all forms of existence.

At its core, the spiritual research paradigm is intended for studies aiming to acquire "knowledge of or connection with an inner reality" (Lamb, 2016, p. 65). These studies prioritize the centrality of an individual's inner growth in the process, highlighting the significance of Self-discovery for both participants and the researcher throughout the study (Lamb, 2016). The elements of inner growth are investigated to shape a holistic internal and external research process for all involved.

Within qualitative research, the participants, the process, and the researcher co-exist in an intimate relationship where a change in one would influence the outcome (Lamb, 2016). The role of intersubjectivity is key within the spiritual paradigm as it assumes interdependence and

connection between the researcher and participants (Brantmeier & Brantmeier, 2016). The ontology of the spiritual paradigm is one in which "the nature of reality is co-created through interactions with all sentient beings" (Brantmeier & Brantmeier, 2016, p. 241). The epistemology of the spiritual paradigm assumes that all humans relate to one another through our process of meaning-making and that spiritual knowing exists "beyond logic, reason, and emotion" (Brantmeier & Brantmeier, 2016, p. 241).

As a researcher, it is important to examine one's subjectivity, bias, and positionality using reflexivity to enhance quality and credibility (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The phenomenological paradigm intends for the researcher to keep a journal to "deepen your thinking around critical and key issues and processes" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 47). In comparison, the spiritual paradigm encourages journaling to note how the researcher evolves and cognizes through other ways of knowing beyond the cognitive or rational, such as "intuition, insights through contemplative means, and less tangible modes" (Brantmeier & Brantmeier, 2016, p. 235). Journaling offers a cognitive lens for reflection on the topic. At the same time, the spiritual paradigm welcomes the formulation of insights through creativity and other ways of knowing that emerge from within the researcher's Self. The heuristic research approach, outlined in the following section, aligns the personal and shared journey throughout the research process.

**Research Approach**

As indicated previously, the heuristic approach is well-suited for this research. Not only is the researcher accepted as fundamentally entwined with the topic, but the phenomenon is considered an ongoing, living experience. Literature has noted similarities between the heuristic and phenomenological approaches, with some research method textbooks classifying heuristics as a phenomenological method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton & Patton, 2002). Moustakas

(1990), Creswell and Creswell (2018), and Sultan (2019), however, make a clear case for it being a stand-alone approach due to open acknowledgment of the researcher's integrated rather than disconnected role (Mihalache, 2019). Additionally, the heuristic approach views the phenomenon as a continual living experience and accepts intuitive ways of knowing (Mihalache, 2019).

The participants engage in learning centered on contemplation and reflection. Both encourage ongoing reevaluation of experiences and extend beyond the cognitive and affective domains (Sultan, 2019). The researcher's role is fundamental to the research process, with their experiences, insights, and knowledge shaping the endeavor. Other research approaches create separation and distance that can feel artificial within a spiritual paradigm (Sultan, 2019). While different approaches would be suitable, the philosophy and techniques of the heuristic method support this research's contemplative and intersubjective nature.

Sultan (2019) states that heuristic inquiry studies the "living experience (i.e., interrelated, interconnected, and continuing experience) rather than the lived experience" (p. 4). This approach aims to unify the individual with their experiences to investigate the nature of the relationship (Sultan, 2019). While phenomenology is a phenomena-centered approach, the heuristic is person-centered (Mihalache, 2019). Sultan (2019) explains heuristic inquiry's central premise as "self-and other-exploration toward shared understanding of the essential nature of the core phenomena, how it is sensed and experienced, and its significance to oneself, to others, and to the world" (p. 9). The heuristic approach provides a holistic inquiry, accounting for the ongoing exploration of subjective and intersubjective contemplative global experiences.

Clark Moustakas (1990) developed the heuristic approach as a method of discovery with "self-inquiry and dialogue with others aimed at finding the underlying meanings of important

human experiences" (p. 15). Not only is the researcher expected to be engaged with the participants, but the participants also provide a plurality of knowledge contributing to the phenomena under investigation (Mihalache, 2019). This approach facilitates connectedness and relationship rather than disconnection (Moustakas, 1990). The participants are visible throughout the data analysis and are portrayed in the findings as whole people with the essence of their experience intact (Moustakas, 1990). Sultan (2019) describes the following as characteristics of heuristic inquiry:

- Exploratory, serendipitous, and discovery-oriented
- Process- and content-focused
- Intuitive, introspective, and reflexive
- Experiential, embodied, and holistic
- Existential and humanistic
- Culturally embedded and emancipatory
- Relational, authentic, and participatory
- Imaginative and creative
- Nonlinear, fluid, and flexible (p. 3)

Furthermore, the heuristic approach is not separate from our personhood but integrated into every aspect of the study, starting from the moment the researcher raises the question, throughout the data collection process, and collaborating with the participants to co-create meaning (Sultan, 2019). For example, as researchers, we are meant to engage the topic with "our senses, our intuition, our thoughts, our feelings, and our awareness in our search for the qualities, conditions, and relationships that motivate our research question" (Sultan, 2019, p. 11). A researcher's engagement with the topic does not create distance as a disembodied process

(Sultan, 2019). A valued notion of the heuristic approach is that it encourages openness and receptivity in collecting data using "implicit knowing, or knowing that lies beyond what may be readily observed or articulated" (Sultan, 2019, p. 14).

The entire heuristic research process assumes the researcher is fundamentally integrated with the research. Even the formulation of the research question is expected to originate from the researcher's "direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 14) or at least a comparable experience. The researcher is where the initial spark of the idea occurred, and they are present and engaged with the question throughout the process, creating a depth of experience that leads to an increase in self-awareness and self-knowledge (Sultan, 2019).

The intimate relationship between the researcher and the research process is a distinguishing feature of heuristic inquiry; bracketing is a common technique utilized within qualitative research to approach reflexivity and to "critically assess, recognize, and suspend or set aside some of their personal motives and values" (Sultan, 2019, p. 18). Given that the initial idea for the inquiry emerged from the researcher's experience, heuristic inquiry argues that it is better to situate personal values rather than eliminate them (Sultan, 2019).

Considering the above, the researcher's reflective journal was one of the methods employed. Another participant fundamental to the experience is the course instructor, who wrote reflections while traveling in Finland. As illustrated throughout this section, the heuristic inquiry is especially suited to this study's purpose and questions under consideration. The following outlines the research process utilizing the lens of heuristic inquiry.

## Sampling

### *Research Setting*

The research was conducted on a short-term education abroad program sponsored by North Dakota State University (NDSU), a large, public research university in the Midwest. I selected the research site due to my familiarity with the setting and ability to access an education abroad program and participants. I also have extensive knowledge of the short-term education abroad programs at NDSU, and I have selected one that aligns with the research questions and purpose of the study. Heuristic inquiry encourages the researcher to have personal knowledge of the setting to immerse deeply in the content and context of the study (Sultan, 2019).

As an employee at NDSU in education abroad for the past fourteen years, I have extensive experience with short-term programs, instructors, and course content from which to select a fitting sample. While formulating the topic of this study, it occurred to me that a new Finland program exploring well-being and sustainability with integrated mindfulness practices would be well suited. Clancy (2020) indicated the importance of having instructor-led contemplative practices to guide students who may not be familiar with them and to facilitate regular practice.

After discussions with the instructor, who designed the *Growing Green* course (Appendix A) for her master's thesis in sociology, we recognized that our interests overlap. The short-term, faculty-led course began in late March 2023, with weekly classes before departure to teach the course content, practice mindfulness as a group, and prepare for the experience abroad. The group departed for Finland in mid-May 2023 for a ten-day experience (Appendix B). One of the primary learning outcomes was to explore how Finland has incorporated sustainability and well-being practices that have assisted in its ranking as one of the happiest countries in the world

(*World Happiness Report 2023*, 2023). The instructor designed the course with a sociological approach to understand how Finns interact with their environment. As a global leader in sustainability, Finnish culture flourishes with embedded sustainable practices, promoting healthy living and well-being. The course conducted mindfulness activities during the classes held at NDSU and while abroad. The instructor allowed the course to be the site of this research. The syllabus and participant assignments, including their written reflections, contributed to exploring the research questions. The instructor participated in the study by journaling to add her perspectives to the data collected.

***Population Sample***

The participants were selected through purposive sampling (Cohen et al., 2018), as only the students participating in the chosen short-term program would have shared experiences or phenomena (Krueger & Casey, 2001). Students in the *Growing Green* program were enrolled NDSU students who had self-selected to attend by applying through the standard process of the education abroad office. The program was open to all undergraduate students from any major and academic level. The *Growing Green* program had 11 students committed to attending; all were invited to participate in the study. The sample size for this study aligned with what Moustakas (1990) suggests is necessary to "achieve richer, deeper, more profound, and more varied meanings" (p.46).

Of the 11 students enrolled in the program, ten opted to participate in the study—nine students identified as female and one as male. The high participation of females in the program is not unusual within the field of education abroad (*Open Doors Fast Facts,* 2020) and is consistent with participation rates at NDSU (*Study Abroad Data*, 2019). All students identified their ethnicity as White, and they were above the age of 18. The ethnicity of the participants in the

program aligns with the predominant student population at NDSU, where eighty percent of students identify as White (*Enrollment Demographics*, n.d.). Three students indicated they grew up in Minnesota and one in South Dakota, while the rest were from North Dakota. Eighty-four percent of enrolled NDSU students are residents of North Dakota or Minnesota. Overall, this indicates that the student demographic representation in the Finland program is consistent with participation in U.S. education abroad and NDSU enrollment.

## Methods of Data Collection

The selected data collection methods included the analysis of course documents, focus groups, and observations. These methods were chosen based on their effectiveness in investigating the "nature, meaning, and essence" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 44) of participants' experiences in the *Growing Green* program. As mentioned earlier, the spiritual research paradigm aligns with aspects of contemplative inquiry, which advocates for using reflective journal writing over an extended period, along with focus groups and observations (Janesick, 2015). An additional component of this research involved the written reflections of both the researcher and the instructor, following the heuristic approach (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019). Document analysis gathered the subjective perspectives of the participants through the course reflection assignments. The focus groups captured intersubjective data during a specific, structured timeframe, while participant observation recorded informal interactions. The following describes each of the data collection methods and procedures.

### *Document Analysis*

All course-related documents, including the syllabus, instructor reflections, and assignments, were collected for analysis. The course syllabus yielded insights into the coursework structure and content, including readings and assignments. The written reflections

were a crucial set of documents to be analyzed. These reflections documented participants' understanding and perceptions throughout the phenomena. Reflections encouraged "both *reflective* (deep thought) and *reflexive* (self and other) processing of experience" (Sultan, 2019, p. 136). Sultan (2019) describes written reflections as an essential part of heuristic research that "honors the social constructivist, autobiographical, exploratory, process-focused, intuitive, introspective, creative, and humanist facets" (p.136), leading to more profound knowing. The student reflections reflected their subjective perceptions and experiences, allowing central themes to emerge.

**Student Reflections.**

As part of the course, the students submitted weekly written reflections before departing to Finland, daily reflections while abroad, and a final reflection upon return. The instructor developed reflection prompts to have students consider the meaning they assigned to their learning experiences as they contemplated their internal world and how they connected to Others. The initial reflection prompt asked the students to discuss their thoughts on well-being, sustainability, and mindfulness to gather their initial perspectives. This initial prompt inquired about students' prior knowledge and informal understanding of the course content. Students submitted the reflections electronically or wrote them according to their preferences. When they wrote by hand, the students uploaded a photo of their reflection for submission. The course instructor shared all course documents and assignments of the participating students with me upon the conclusion of the course. The course documents were shared utilizing a password-protected Google Drive folder that only the instructor and researcher could access. After receiving participant consent, I uploaded the records the instructor shared into the password-protected NVivo coding software that only I could access.

**Instructor Reflections.**

In her role with the students, the course instructor was an integral part of the research. She deeply understood the research topic and its relevance to the course and the experience abroad. Furthermore, the instructor engaged in written reflections during the program in Finland upon obtaining informed consent from the participants and providing consent for herself. Her reflections complemented those of the students and the researcher, offering another lens of perspective. The instructor conducted reflections while in Finland with the students and wrote her reflections by hand. Her reflections were photographed and uploaded to the same password-protected Google Drive folder used for the course documents. Subsequently, I uploaded them into the password-protected NVivo software for coding.

**Researcher Reflections.**

A central part of the heuristic approach is to collect data from the researcher beyond what traditional qualitative methods employ (Sultan, 2019). The researcher's personal experience with the topic is "just as important as any other member of the research team" (Sultan, 2019, p. 115). This process begins before collecting data from participants. Moustakas (1990) indicated that the researcher's own "self-discoveries, awarenesses, and understandings are the initial step in the process" (p. 16).

While many qualitative research methodologies recommend that researchers position the Self within their study, the heuristic approach is more inclusive and self-disclosing (Lillrank, 2012). Heuristic researchers delve into and elucidate their connection with the research question, what motivated their line of inquiry, their experience with the phenomena, and their exploration of the topic throughout the study (Sultan, 2019). Consequently, during the study, I regularly engaged in a "process of self-searching … through extensive journaling" (Mihalache, 2019, p.

138). My reflections as a researcher complement the data collected on the students, recording my thoughts as I encountered challenges and insights (Sultan, 2019). While in Finland, I reflected daily, often upon concluding the observations. Additionally, I reflected immediately after conducting the focus groups, regularly throughout data analysis, and during bursts of insights that occurred when I was incubating on the data (Moustakas, 1990). As Sultan (2019) describes, "Most important, your journal will contain multiple sources of information about potential themes" (p. 138). Like instructor reflections, researcher reflections were hand-written, photographed, and uploaded into the password-protected NVivo software.

***Participant Observations***

There was a need to establish a data collection method given the program's travel component, where multiple touchpoints occurred between the students, instructor, and myself as the researcher. Unstructured participant observations within the natural setting permitted detailed descriptions of situations that unfolded during official program activities in Finland (Cohen et al., 2018). A less structured form of observation aimed to let the elements of the experiences emerge naturally from the situation. Unstructured observations are more participant-centered and responsive to unfolding events than a more structured type of observation (Cohen et al., 2018).

While the students and instructor were aware of my role as a researcher, I functioned as a participant-as-observer, being "part of the social life of participants, documenting and recording what is happening" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 552). The observations, coupled with the focus groups and written reflections, captured the evolution of student perceptions, personalities, contextual factors, and the dynamics of the experiences to achieve a holistic view of the "interrelationship of factors" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 552). According to Cohen et al. (2018), this immersive style

"facilitates the generation of 'thick descriptions,' particularly of social processes and interaction, which lend themselves to accurate explanation and interpretation" (p. 552).

Given the multifaceted nature of my role in this study, I executed several levels of observational notes throughout each interaction with the participants. The first set of notes was made in situ to gather data as it occurred (Cohen et al., 2018). The second set involved expanding on my notes as promptly as possible after concluding the initial observation period. The process proved challenging due to the continuous interactions with the participants, mainly when the group engaged in activities where writing proved difficult. To address this, I documented observations promptly during break periods or while in transit to capture the data while it was fresh. I ensured my observation journal was always available and dedicated specific times for observational notes and reflections each morning and evening. Observations were confined to official program activities or public locations to minimize participant discomfort. Participants could request the exclusion of specific information during data collection and member checking. The observation notes were uploaded to the password-protected NVivo for data analysis.

### *Focus Groups*

Focus groups enabled the students to provide their perspectives on the phenomena under study (Sultan, 2019). The focus groups collected data using an intersubjective lens, whereas the written reflections were subjective. Gathering data on stakeholder relationships is central to heuristic inquiry (Sultan, 2019). The ability to "successfully facilitate the flow of relationship and conversation" (Sultan, 2019, p. 125) was critical to this process. Heuristic inquiry frequently involves one-on-one interviews with participants, a choice influenced by the researcher's limited

interactions (Sultan, 2019). In my involvement in the short-term experience abroad, I engaged in substantial formal and informal interactions with participants.

Moustakas (1990) encourages using an informal, conversational interview that initiates dialogue to generate comprehensive accounts from participants. Rather than conduct individual interviews, the focus groups facilitated discussion among participants about their perceptions and experiences while simultaneously investigating the intersubjectivity of the group. As Cohen et al. (2018) notes, "It is from the *interaction* of the group that the data emerge, hence the dynamics of the groups are important" (p. 532). The benefit of this method was that participants shared their perspectives as a group, yielding diverse insights compared to the individual reflections. A potential drawback of this method is that some students may have refrained from sharing information due to discomfort in front of their classmates.

The nature of a focus group meant that the interactions between the participants created a "collective rather than individual view" on the topic and yielded "insights that might not otherwise have been gained from a straightforward interview" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 532). One focus group was held on day eight of ten in Finland, capturing insights while students were immersed in the experience. The second focus group occurred in late July after the coursework was completed. The focus groups were formatted identically and incorporated the spiritual research paradigm (Cohen et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2016).

During the first portion of each focus group, I guided students through an intersubjective contemplative practice, a Power of Eight intention group (McTaggart, 2017). The Power of Eight intention group typically consists of six to fourteen individuals. Intersubjective practice focuses on a positive intention formulated by the group for a member who volunteers (McTaggart, 2017). The intention for the volunteer was formulated through dialogue employing a positive approach

as if the issue had already been resolved. Multiple rounds of discussion took place, with the language of intention evolving as each member contributed insights until the volunteer felt content. The Power of Eight script enabled the group to visualize the recipient achieving their goal before concentrating on the positive intention during a ten-minute meditation (McTaggart, 2017). To prepare the participants for the Power of Eight group, they watched an eight-minute YouTube video describing the process before the focus group (McTaggart, 2017). The focus group continued with semi-structured, open-ended questions after concluding with the Power of Eight exercise.

For the latter section of the focus group, I designed the protocol to have semi-structured questions to spark conversation as participants connected. Sultan (2019) recommends flexibility rather than too much structure with the focus group protocol, or it might place the researcher in a position of power that could invite ethical breaches and undermine the methodology. The questions generated conversation and gathered collective knowledge, attitudes, opinions, and perceptions with "the attraction of synergy, [from] several people stimulating discussion" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 532). All students participated in the first focus group, which was conducted in a conference room in a hotel in Finland. Seven of the ten students attended the second one held on Zoom in late July.

The first focus group was recorded using Trint, which provided an initial transcription. The second focus group was conducted virtually through Zoom to accommodate student schedules and locations. Zoom recorded the second focus group and created an initial transcription. Participants had the option to turn the camera on or off. The focus group recordings were deleted once they were fully transcribed. The transcriptions were uploaded to the password-protected NVivo coding software using only participant pseudonyms. Each focus

group was approximately two hours long. I wrote notes during the focus groups, gathering insights at the moment. Immediately upon the conclusion of the focus groups, I recorded memos of my initial impressions.

**Ethics of Research**

Ethical considerations for the research process guide researchers to consider "which is good and bad, right and wrong" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 111). This research adhered to ethical principles and protected the rights of the participants by following research guidelines. The research guidelines involved seeking appropriate approvals, obtaining informed consent from all participants, maintaining the principle of doing no harm, ensuring privacy and confidentiality, and considering my power and positionality. This study was conducted as part of my dissertation research through SIT Graduate Institute and followed its process for Human Subjects Review (HSR). Additionally, Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from NDSU as the sponsor of the education abroad program. This study required full approval due to the contemplative nature of the research, the course topic on well-being, and my position as a researcher and staff member at NDSU, which made students a vulnerable population. As the assistant director of education abroad at NDSU, I held a higher power differential to the student participants. Additionally, the focus groups led students through a group intention exercise that had the potential to influence the well-being of the participants. Requesting full HSR approval ensured the participants were protected.

As outlined in the informed consent, the participants were provided an overview of the study purpose, methods, and the participant role. Once HSR approval was obtained (Appendix C), the invitation to participate was sent electronically while carbon copying the instructor, maintaining transparency. I also presented the opportunity to participate in person, allowing for

questions and multiple means of engagement. The oral and written invitations clearly stated that participation was voluntary and not required as part of the course. I indicated that I had no role in the course instruction and would not grade any coursework. The participants had "the right to refuse to take part, or to withdraw once the research ha[d] begun" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 122). Participants were informed about potential risks, that the information would be recorded and transcribed, how the data would be utilized, data confidentiality, the course instructor's role in the research, and how they could obtain a copy of their data.

Participants were informed that they could request information not be included during collection and member checking. Participant privacy was maintained with the intention to do no harm. The one student who opted not to participate in the study was not included in the observation notes, and none of their assignments were collected. Sensitive information disclosure was more likely abroad due to close contact, so observations were only collected during official program activities in public locations to mitigate participant discomfort. In addition to my role as an ethical researcher, sensitive information was not included in the study, and the participants had the right to request not to have information recorded, to request the withdrawal of any data collected, and to review the data about them to ensure trustworthiness (Cohen et al., 2018).

Confidentiality of the participants' identities was maintained throughout the study, with de-identification using code names to mask participant identities (Sultan, 2019). Furthermore, my advisor and committee reviewed the focus group protocol as part of the proposal defense, an ethical aspect of the research process, to establish rigor and quality (Cohen, 2018). The following explores my power, positionality as a researcher, and the procedures utilized to maintain ethical standards.

## Researcher Positionality

Sultan (2019) explains that one of the essential features of heuristic inquiry is that it is grounded in the researcher's personal experience. The researcher usually has an intense interest in the topic that emerges through an "autobiographical experience" (Sultan, 2019, p. 11). The experience is felt so deeply that it "arouses one central question you are unable to ignore" (Sultan, 2019, p. 11) that may have "social and universal significance" (Sultan, 2019, p. 11). The topic of inquiry for this study centered around my personal and professional experiences, culminating in a blend of the two that led to insight and this inquisitive journey.

When I applied to the doctoral program and began my studies, I intended my dissertation to design a global studies curriculum. After writing for two semesters on the topic, I realized that the subject was only tangentially related to my interests. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, I became interested in spirituality related to meditation. Initially, my interest began because of a post on social media and the subsequent posts appearing in my feed. During the initial period of the pandemic, I felt at peace and very introspective at home with my children while my husband worked away for extended periods for safety reasons. After the periods of separation, we initiated divorce. My meditative practices during this time fostered a feeling of contentment. My children commented that I was happier than they had ever seen me, and I recognized having gained greater awareness about myself.

From the beginning of my doctoral studies, I consumed information on contemplative topics as a pastime. During my second qualitative research course, one of the readings was about the spiritual research paradigm. Although I did not realize it then, an idea had begun to incubate. The thought finally emerged that I needed to combine my interest in spirituality with my dissertation topic. As Sultan (2019) describes, "the topic of inquiry chooses you" (p. 11) and

"becomes a point of encounter between your internal world and the external world" (Sultan, 2019, p. 11). Insight rushed in as I drew and scribbled down my ideas into what I later learned was my conceptual model. From there, I embarked on a journey of learning and researching contemplative practices and pedagogy to connect them to global studies.

Within the field of global studies, my passion has always been a focus on education abroad. It began with my formative experiences abroad as an undergraduate student but continued throughout my fourteen years as an education abroad professional. I work in a combined international office, where I have many opportunities to work with incoming international students, yet I remain immersed in education abroad. Even as I studied international education for my master's degree, education abroad remained my primary focus.

While editing the first draft of my dissertation proposal introduction and reading about intersubjective contemplative inquiry, I realized something needed to shift. Having led many groups of students abroad on short-term programs, I became curious about the potential connection between intersubjective contemplation and group dynamics. Around that time, I encountered the Power of Eight (McTaggart, 2017) and began participating in intention groups. Through this meandering, I was guided to the concept for this study. I did not realize it initially, but my shift in interest followed the heuristic journey that is experienced through the opening of "our senses, our intuition, our thoughts, our feelings, and our awareness in our search for the qualities, conditions, and relationships that motivate our research question" (Sultan, 2019, p. 11).

The assumption I brought to this study is that contemplative practices within education abroad will positively affect the participants, increasing awareness of themselves and how they relate to Others and the world. I witnessed students' positive experiences relating to other participants in the education abroad program. Combining contemplative practices and education

abroad experiences would deepen the relational aspects, which is why this topic had "chose[n] me" (Sultan, 2019, p. 11). Throughout the study, I maintained awareness of my bias and practiced reflexivity to maintain neutrality with the topic and participants.

As an education abroad professional and researcher, I maintained an awareness of power asymmetries with the students (Cohen, 2018). As discussed, I, a White female, embody the typical American identity of students who participate in education abroad. Additionally, being a first-generation college student from a rural background in the Midwest, I align with the representative NDSU student profile. My shared background and familiarity with local perspectives facilitated smooth communication with the students. The students' active involvement in feedback during member checking allowed them to share authority.

An essential aspect of heuristic inquiry was creating a relationship of rapport and trust with the participants by being authentically present during interactions, engaging in transparency during the study, and demonstrating congruence between my words and actions (Sultan, 2019). I adopted a collegial and collaborative role as a researcher, recognizing the potential impact of the power imbalance on the participants. Regular check-ins with the instructor for feedback ensured that my role contributed to a positive experience for the participants.

**Trustworthiness of Findings**

In heuristic research, the interrelation between rigor and trustworthiness is considered evident. As Sultan (2019) states, "A rigorous process promotes a trustworthy outcome, and a trustworthy outcome demonstrates that a rigorous process took place" (p. 180). Qualitative research demonstrates trustworthiness and rigor through four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings are believable and trustworthy, while transferability assesses their

applicability to other contexts or settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability evaluates the consistency of the findings over time and across researchers, and confirmability concerns the objectivity and neutrality of the findings, ensuring they are not influenced by the researcher's biases or preferences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In my study, I engaged extensively with the phenomena and participants, bolstering credibility and transferability (Sultan, 2019). The prolonged engagement with the site and participants and the choice of methods enabled the generation of thick descriptions supporting all four criteria (Sultan, 2019). The level of engagement and the array of methods employed for data collection involved "intensive personal involvement and in-depth responses" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 247), ensuring "a sufficient level of validity and reliability" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 247).

Moreover, the three research methods facilitated data collection from multiple perspectives, including that of the instructor and myself as a researcher, providing triangulation to enhance trustworthiness and rigor (Sultan, 2019). Researcher reflexivity and identifying my assumptions, beliefs, values, and positionality were also imperative to strengthen credibility, confirmability, and dependability (Sultan, 2019). Cohen (2018) asks an important question when he states, “In qualitative research, given that multiple views of ‘reality’ exist, whose is credible and ‘correct,’ how do we know and how do we validate socially constructed knowledge?” (p. 246). I kept Cohen’s (2018) question in mind as I engaged with the research process.

The strategies I have outlined so far facilitated the engagement of multiple perspectives. Member checking played a crucial role in enhancing the credibility of findings and confirming the accuracy of interpretations (Sultan, 2019). As detailed in the following section, member checking involved each participant reviewing the focus group transcripts and the written individual depiction of their experience. Throughout the study, documentation, including written

reflections, field notes, recordings, and transcriptions, was generated to support the credibility of the data (Cohen et al., 2018).

**Data Management and Analysis**

Working in education abroad in a university setting taught me the importance of a systematic approach to organizing and compiling the vast amount of information crossing my desk. Throughout the study, I logged data using consistent techniques, such as creating clear folders and subfolders containing documents with file names that incorporated relevant information. This information allowed quick file retrieval utilizing the participant's code name, date, and location (Lareau, 2021).

The data was stored on my Google Drive hosted by NDSU and accessible from the cloud using password-protected, double-authentication credentials. The instructor submitted course documents into a private folder on NDSU's secure Google Drive. These files were then uploaded to the cloud-based, password-protected NVivo coding software. Focus groups were recorded using Trint for the in-person session and the university-secured version of Zoom for the second, which required authentication to join the meeting. Trint and Zoom included an automated transcription process, and afterward, I reviewed these transcripts for accuracy and fully transcribed the data in NVivo while de-identifying the participants. Both recordings were deleted after completing the full transcription in NVivo. Pseudonyms were utilized across all collected data, with only one file noting participant identities to preserve anonymity (Cohen et al., 2018). Confidentiality was maintained with pseudonyms, with the list of research participants connecting their names with pseudonyms remaining confidential in a separate password-protected document and folder.

A fundamental aspect of heuristic inquiry requires the researcher to continuously immerse themselves in the data throughout and after the collection process (Sultan, 2019). For the immersion process, I listened to the recordings and read the data while formulating an individual depiction of each participant's experience (Moustakas, 1990). The individual depiction aimed to provide a holistic, detailed portrayal of the participant's experience with the phenomenon. The heuristic process details four methods for identifying themes with the individual depiction as the first (Sultan, 2019). Subsequently, I contacted each participant to request feedback on their individual depiction and to confirm accuracy (Moustakas, 1990). Throughout the formulation of the individual depictions, I continued to memo with any insights, themes, and patterns that began to take shape while allowing time to reflect and incubate on the data (Moustakas, 1990). Once the individual depictions were completed and verified by the participants for accuracy, they were reviewed to generate a composite depiction. The composite depiction represents "the shared experience of the phenomenon among various [participants]" (Sultan, p. 152, 2019). All depictions were saved in password-protected NVivo.

The next stage involved immersing myself again in the data in NVivo, using open coding in a line-by-line manner to describe rather than interpret the data and observe what emerged (Saldaña, 2021). Additional levels of coding, utilizing both descriptive and process coding, helped identify participant perspectives (Saldaña, 2021). As themes emerged from the inductive nature of the analysis, I began to organize them with larger parent codes and smaller, related subcodes that "add detail or enrich the entry" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 121). This part of the analysis aimed to "generate a composite depiction representing the integrated experience of all" (Sultan, 2019, p. 148). From there, the heuristic process intends for the researcher to return to the data to select two or three participants exemplifying the composite group while highlighting their

uniqueness to create exemplary portraits (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019). The exemplary portraits illustrated the topic using an individual's perspective while detailing the collective experience (Sultan, 2019).

**Feasibility**

The feasibility of this study was very high due to the time I had available to complete the study and my direct access to the site. I had already gained enthusiastic support from the instructor, and she had expressed willingness to participate once the study commenced. The HSR/IRB approvals were obtained after the students registered in the *Growing Green* program. Once IRB approval was received, I emailed the students the invitation letter and consent form, copying the instructor. I also orally presented the invitation to participate, allowing the students time to clarify and ask questions. Students opting to participate in the study could sign the informed consent digitally and submit it to me by email.

As previously described, the data collection methods of observations and focus groups were conducted during and after the experience abroad. The course documents provided insight throughout the entire class experience before, during, and after the travel to Finland. The data collection did not include students participating in the course who chose not to join the study. After that, the data analysis process began by mid-summer, followed by writing up the findings, discussion, and conclusions.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

As with all qualitative research, the transferability of the findings is more limited and less generalizable than quantitative, especially given the study's limited scope (Cohen et al., 2018). NDSU's location and respective student demographics are representative of the region but are unique compared to the overall diversity of the United States. Additionally, the destination of

Finland situates the study as an exchange between two areas within the Global North. The findings of this study may not be directly generalizable to other education abroad programs. The decision to conduct the program in Finland was based on its unique characteristic of being the sole program at NDSU that integrated contemplative practices. It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this setting; Finnish culture places a strong emphasis on wellbeing for both individuals and the natural world, which may not be representative of other cultural contexts. Transitioning to a different environment could present challenges that were not evident in the Finnish context. It is essential to recognize that their respective cultural and subcultural backgrounds influenced the participants' perspectives and the specific location abroad. Since this study focused on a single case, additional research in different contexts may yield varying results.

The study's scope was confined to the dissertation timeframe, and the data collection period was limited to the participants' active engagement in the course and experience abroad. This timeframe posed a limitation, as participants might continue deriving meaning and insights from their experience long after completing the study. A related limitation stemmed from the dissertation timeframe, which constrained the program options and the ability to collect data from multiple programs. Additionally, the researcher restricted the study site to one that provided access to the course content and allowed for observation of the study abroad experience. This study only represents one program with a small number of participants, while including additional sites and programs could have provided a more comprehensive depiction of the inquiry. A related limitation was that only seven of the 10 students participated in the second focus group upon return.

The data represents a relatively homogenous demographic of students, all White, primarily women, from the same geographic location in the Midwest, and other perspectives may have yielded different results. Although other NDSU short-term, faculty-led programs could have been selected, this program included contemplative practices in the coursework. As discussed earlier, incorporating contemplative practices in the curriculum was fundamental to investigating the research questions. As such, this project was limited to the participants in one cohort.

To gather the richest data, I deliberately chose a program that incorporated contemplative practices in the curriculum, resulting in only one program option. None of the other four NDSU short-term, faculty-led programs offered during the summer 2023 term included contemplative practices. The program focused on sustainability and well-being practices, potentially positively predisposing student perspectives on contemplative practice. The initial reflection prompt aimed to gain insight into the students' perspectives at the beginning of the course.

While well-suited for this research type, the spiritual paradigm and heuristic inquiry allowed for incorporating more subjective perspectives, insights, and alternative ways of knowing (Janesick, 2015; Lin et al., 2016; Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019). Including these spiritual insights might be perceived as a threat to credibility and confirmability by researchers less familiar with this research type. Initially, given my limited experience in conducting a research study of this scope, there was a possibility that I could have been more proficient in planning the study. However, a comprehensive review by my advisors helped mitigate this. As an emerging researcher/scholar in the field, there might have been instances where I misinterpreted the data or where my personal bias for the transformative nature of study abroad and contemplative practice influenced my interpretation. Additionally, this marked my first time

guiding a Power of Eight group for research, and during data analysis, I recognized a missed opportunity to inquire about the students' experiences in the intention groups. Despite being an emerging researcher/scholar, I followed the outlined process, maintaining transparency and reflexivity.

**Summary**

This chapter begins by explaining why the spiritual research paradigm was employed within the context of qualitative methodology and how it aligned with exploring student perceptions of this topic. The heuristic research approach, with its person-centered and intersubjective nature, elucidates how the study was conducted. I selected the research site at NDSU due to my access to and knowledge of the location. I used purposive sampling to select participants who chose to attend the short-term education program *Growing Green*, as the program matched the study's intent. A detailed explanation was provided for each data collection method: participant observations, focus groups, and document analysis of the course assignments, syllabus, and written reflections from the participants, course instructor, and researcher. Subsequently, I provided an overview of this study's ethical principles, my positionality, and the measures taken to improve trustworthiness. Finally, the chapter describes the data management and analysis process, the feasibility of the study, and its limitations and delimitations.

# Chapter 4: Experience of Place Finding

## Introduction to Findings

This study investigated the perspectives of students participating in a short-term, faculty-led education abroad program that incorporated contemplative practices – specifically, the *Growing Green* program at NDSU. The program took place during the second half of the spring semester 2023. The course explored how Finland integrates sustainability and well-being practices into daily life, contributing to its ranking as one of the happiest countries globally (*World Happiness Report 2023*, 2023). The course, designed by the instructor (see Appendix A), adopted a sociological approach to comprehend Finland's interaction with the natural world. Given Finland's position as a world leader in sustainability, the course explores the embedded Finnish practices that promote well-being, sustainability, and health. The course incorporated contemplative and reflective practices throughout the classes held at NDSU and while abroad.

The *Growing Green* class embarked on a ten-day journey to Finland in mid-May after meeting weekly for eight weeks (see Appendix B). The program was conducted exclusively in the southern part of Finland, given the country's extensive size. Beginning in a rural area outside Turku, students stayed a night in farm cabins that had been converted into a bed and breakfast, which gave them insight into Finnish rural life with its emphasis on sustainability and simple living. The instructor designed the program to begin in a rural setting and then transition to Turku, Finland's second-largest city, exposing students to traditional Finnish culture. During the four-night stay in Turku, students engaged in various activities, including visiting a traditional farm, experiencing Finnish home life, exploring holistic education at Turku University, and navigating the city both as a group and independently. Similar in size to Fargo, where NDSU is

located, Turku enabled students to navigate independently, a concept reinforced by the instructor through initial course activities.

En route to Helsinki, students spent an afternoon at Nuuksio National Park, where they toured the visitor center, canoed, and hiked independently. Finland's numerous national parks, a source of pride in Finnish culture, led to the strategic inclusion of Nuuksio National Park in the itinerary due to its popularity among Helsinki residents. As a large international city, Helsinki was positioned last in the itinerary to ensure students felt confident navigating and interacting with local residents. Upon arrival in Helsinki, the group engaged in a walking tour of the downtown area and nearby Suomenlinna Island, providing an orientation to the city and familiarization with public transportation to encourage independent exploration. A day trip to Porvoo, one of the world's most sustainable cities, followed by an afternoon at an organic farm, aimed to deepen students' understanding of sustainability in the Finnish context. On the final day in Helsinki, students traveled to a nearby island to forage with a Finnish herbalist, engaging all senses in nature. This culminated their experiences in Finland. Two virtual class meetings were conducted upon return, with final course assignments due by mid-July. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the Finland Itinerary.

**Table 4.1**

*Growing Green Finland Itinerary Overview*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Day 1 | Morning Arrival | Fiskars Village Tour | Farm Cottages |
| Day 2 | Traditional Farm Visit | Turku Walking Tour | Turku Free Evening |
| Day 3 | University Tour and Lecture | Finnish Home Visit | Turku Group Dinner |
| Day 4 | Turku Free Day | | |
| Day 5 | Nuuksio National Park | Helsinki Evening Arrival | |
| Day 6 | Helsinki Walking Tour | Suomenlinna Island Tour | Helsinki Free Evening |
| Day 7 | Helsinki Free Day | | |
| Day 8 | Porvoo City Visit | Organic Farm Visit | Focus Group in Helsinki |
| Day 9 | Foraging with Herbalist | Public Sauna Activity | Helsinki Group Dinner |
| Day 10 | Departure | | |

Out of the 11 students in the *Growing Green* program, ten chose to participate in the study. The study group comprised one male and nine females, all of whom identified as White and over the age of eighteen. Originating from the Midwest, specifically North Dakota, Minnesota, and South Dakota, most students were from urban areas, with two from semi-urban regions and one from a small town. The program welcomed students from various majors and academic levels, including five seniors, four juniors, and one sophomore, representing a diverse array of majors (see Table 4.2).

**Table 4.2**

*Growing Green Student Demographics*

| Name | Year | Major | State | City Size |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Annie | Senior | Biological Science Education | North Dakota | Urban |
| Aura | Junior | University Studies | Minnesota | Semi-Urban |
| Bella | Senior | Biological Sciences | North Dakota | Urban |
| Calli | Junior | English | Minnesota | Urban |
| Jordan | Junior | Natural Resource Management | North Dakota | Semi-Urban |
| Kat | Senior | Dietetics | South Dakota | Urban |
| Lauren | Senior | Dietetics | North Dakota | Urban |
| Megan | Sophomore | Civil Engineering | Minnesota | Semi-Urban |
| Mya | Senior | Hospitality and Tourism | North Dakota | Urban |
| Scarlet | Junior | Radiological Sciences | North Dakota | Semi-Urban |

The data analysis resulted in three chapters of findings. One central theme from the findings was the transformative power of experiential learning within a short-term education abroad program that integrates subjective and intersubjective contemplative practices. This theme underscores the significance of incorporating contemplative practices and reflections to support the Self's physical, mental, and emotional engagement during the external experience abroad. These immersive experiences contribute to personal growth, altered perspectives, and a deeper connection with oneself, the environment, and Others. Although each chapter explores this theme from a distinctive perspective, they collectively highlight the program's profound impact on the students.

Chapter 4 delves into the theme of the experience of Place, detailing how participants connected with Finland's local environment and culture. Through contemplative and reflective practices during their experiences in Finland, students better understood themselves, Others, and

Place. The chapter emphasizes that this immersive approach surpasses objective learning, which students predominantly experience in the college classroom, by involving sensory and emotional engagement with local residents and the natural environment of Finland. Independent exploration also played a pivotal role in cultivating a critical understanding of Place. The chapter illuminates several experiential subthemes, including interactions with local Others, connection with nature, and independent exploration, which substantiate the overarching theme.

Chapter 5 explores experiential coherence, in which the students engage their minds, bodies, and emotions in the present moment. The physical and emotional distance from their regular cultural norms and stressors allowed students to achieve periods of "experiential coherence," facilitating a deep connection with Place and Others. Contemplative practices and daily written reflections also enabled experiential coherence, leading to subjective and intersubjective encounters that resonated with each other and the world around them. Chapter 5 contrasts experiential coherence with objective learning, showcasing how experiential coherence induced conscious and unconscious behavioral changes and shifted students' perceptions.

Chapter 6 introduces the theme of individual perspectives within a collective experience. Specifically, the chapter centers on two participants, Mya and Paige, and their personal growth and changing perspectives in Finland. Their experiences and those of their peers demonstrate how these programs unite individuals and foster collective yet individually nuanced experiences. Each student interprets their experiences through their unique worldview and social context, with their perspective telling the story of who they are and the patterns influencing their thoughts, emotions, and actions. The chapter underscores the enduring impact of contemplative immersion abroad, revealing that students return with heightened Self and Other awareness and a desire to integrate their newfound insights into their lives.

## Introduction to Experience of Place

This chapter centers on the experience of Place and its associated subthemes. These themes have emerged in response to the research question: What are the students' perspectives on their learning when participating in an education abroad program that incorporates contemplative practices? The data demonstrates that the students deepened their connection with Finland through experiences that promoted a critical pedagogy of Place. The initial section delves into the core theme of the experience of Place, providing insights into how the students perceive their learning and how it deepens their connection with and understanding of Finland. This theme is substantiated by evidence and participant quotes to illustrate the supporting experience-based subthemes.

Chapter 4 outlines that engaging with local community members is integral to learning about Others. The contemplative subjective approach relates to the inner world or Self of the individual learner and emerged in direct response to the dominance of objective learning in conventional Western education (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017). Objective learning accentuates a division between the learner and the subject, emphasizing acquiring knowledge about the external world or Others (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017). The first subtheme explores the students' interactions with local Others, a significant component of their experience of Place. Subsequent subthemes delve into the students' connection with nature and how independent exploration nurtured their experience of Place. Each of these experiential subthemes clarifies the methods that facilitate a critical understanding of the pedagogy of place.

## Experience of Place

The study's findings reveal students' perspectives on learning, highlighting the impact derived from the experience of Place. As presented in Chapter 2, the concept of critical pedagogy

of place involves an educational approach that examines the place-based intersection of environment, culture, and education (Gruenewald, 2003). This approach is characterized by critical dialogue and relationships of care for human and non-human Others (Gruenewald, 2003). Building on this framework, Wattchow and Brown (2011) extend the concept to encompass the bodily experience of Place through sensory engagement and exploration of the inward subjective experience, which leads to an active journey of belonging and connection. Contemplative education abroad allows students to intertwine learning about a new cultural environment with their own lived experiences, resulting in an updated Self-understanding. Unlike conventional Western education, immersion in a new cultural context is a fully embodied experience involving a student's body, mind, and emotions. This embodiment, in turn, nurtures critical Place-based learning (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). The practice of contemplation plays a central role in student learning within the *Growing Green* program, fostering awareness of Place by encouraging students to be fully present in the experience. The synergy of the mind, body, heart, and Place enhances the students' capacity to become "empathetic visitors" (Wattchow & Brown, 2011, p. 65). This chapter offers compelling evidence that the students actively sought to uncover local meanings to comprehend Finland's unique qualities and interpret the phenomena of Place compared to their home environments. These actions reflect the core attributes of being an empathetic visitor (Wattchow & Brown, 2011).

Annie, one of the students, reflected on the embodied experience of Place in Finland in her daily reflection: "The best part of this trip is the cultural immersion. I'm not letting Finland pass me by [I am] being part of it." During the first focus group, held near the program's conclusion in Finland, the students discussed the distinctive nature of their learning experiences abroad compared to conventional classroom learning typified by neoliberal ideologies. The

following encapsulates the essence of their focus group conversation. Mya, one of the students, drew a clear contrast with conventional Western education, where she emphasized an absence of experiential learning. Mya pointed out how classroom learning often leads to intellectual disengagement when she said, “intellectually, you just lose interest, or you can doze off,” but in Finland, “you’re learning a lot more because you’re on the ground.” Mya highlighted that learning is significantly amplified when it involves an embodied experience. Her sentiments resonated with other students, who expressed their agreement. Another student, Aura, added her perspective, stating, “I don’t learn anything in the classroom; I fall asleep every time.”

As the conversation among the students in the first focus group continued, Paige verbalized her agreement with these sentiments. Kat and Lauren explored how the on-site learning experiences in Finland provide a deeper understanding. Lauren gave an insightful perspective on the topic when she said:

> Also, conceptualizing it, you can learn all about sustainable agriculture… It doesn't really come to life until you're on the farm, and he's showing you how his, you know, cattle have so much room to graze. And so they're not just destroying one area of land; they have room so the forests can still flourish. Just being there, conceptualizing; it really brings the material to life and makes it real for you.

The focus group discussion continued with another student, Calli, agreeing with the sentiments expressed. Calli elaborated on how her profound experience in Finland facilitated understanding by allowing her to be “able to see those concepts and have them realized, I guess, by a society where it's normalized [and] … more [integrated].” The course readings and classes conducted before their departure had introduced the concepts that Calli was referring to. Still, the firsthand experiences in Finland truly brought these tenets to life.

The students' direct insights from their experiences in Finland also emerged in their written reflections. For instance, Kat found the walking tour of Helsinki intriguing and observed how different cultural priorities shaped the city. She noted, “It was interesting to see the amount of resources that [are] put into things such as libraries, universities, public transportation, and easy access to nature.” Kat recognized these priorities within several days of being in Finland, on her first day in Helsinki. Paige, too, reflected how the combination of visits to the National Library, National Museum, and Suomenlinna Island contributed to her understanding of Finnish culture. She wrote, “I really got to see the strength of the Finns through the history of gaining their freedom. … Being on the island taught me a lot about Finland. They have had such a rough past, fighting for independence.” The students had read about Finland’s long road to independence before their arrival; however, the multiple on-site experiences situated the learning within the context, allowing it to resonate more deeply.

The experience of Place was pivotal in helping students comprehend the foundations of culture and society in a broader context. This program marked the first time abroad for half of the students, expanding their perspectives beyond the United States. In the second focus group, conducted a month after the program's conclusion in Finland, Lauren shared how her initial experience in a different culture profoundly impacted her. Lauren said it “really opened my eyes to the fact that we are products of our environment.” Paige, another student, emphasized that her newfound perspective extended to her understanding of others during her first time abroad. In her final written reflection, Paige concluded that “no matter what country you're from or what heritage you are, everyone has many similarities and many differences. No one is perfect, and everyone should be treated fairly.” Lauren further elaborated that her learning extended beyond an understanding of Finnish culture and encompassed a broader view of culture as a whole.

During the final focus group, Lauren said she "learned more about … the [Finnish] culture and … culture in general. …how different societies accept things as normal, and it just becomes ingrained and embedded in their society." While most students described their connection with Finnish culture as an outcome of their experience, Paige and Lauren's perspectives underscore that their learning transcended the boundaries of their home and host cultures.

Experience of Place abroad triggers bodily sensations, evokes emotions, and engages the mind in an enduring manner that is challenging to replicate within the confines of a classroom. During her daily reflection, Bella recounted her experience of foraging and how it offered a unique opportunity for whole-body learning. She wrote, "It was different to explore with your mouth and [to] taste. Usually[,] when you explore, you use your eyes, touch, and hearing, but you don't use your taste that often[,] and I thought that was very different and cool." The embodied experience of Place is at the core of education abroad, as students consistently employ all of their senses during formal program activities and informal ones. Each of the outlined subthemes highlights experiences that unfolded during structured and unstructured learning settings, underscoring their importance in the overall experience of Place.

Students experienced various emotions during their on-site experiences, and they contended with these emotions when reflecting on what they learned. The prevailing emotion students described having while in Finland was a sense of peace and relaxation. Eight out of the ten students narrated at least one experience in which they felt this way. This sentiment was frequently reiterated in their written reflections and focus group discussions. For instance, Bella repeatedly mentioned this in her daily reflections, describing the Finnish home experience as "fun and peaceful," Turku as "clean and quiet … it felt safe to walk around," and her time in Helsinki's Central Park as "soooo pretty and tranquil." Similarly, Kat shared her sense of peace

on various occasions. She wrote about her first morning in Finland at the rural farm cottages as being “very peaceful,” and that during her free day in Turku, where she picnicked with friends, she felt herself “getting calmer throughout the day.” Kat also said that her time in nature helped her realize why the Finns “find it so calming.” The students collectively echoed the sentiment of peaceful relaxation throughout numerous encounters in Finland.

The profound sense of peace and relaxation that the students referenced from their time in Finland aligned with Orr’s (1992) assertion that the exploration of Place contributes to "reeducating people in the art of living well where they are" (p. 130). Through excursion in Finland, the students learned how to incorporate the essence of living well into their personal lives. Annie wrote in her final reflection, “The Finnish culture of slowing down, making yourself and nature a priority are novel and wonderful. It was great to see how the Finns made those things work and that they weren’t so much a choice but a way of life. Moving forward[,] taking care of ourselves should be a non[-]negotiable.” Bella concurred with Annie’s sentiments, expressing her desire to embrace the tranquility of Finland, even if she was unsure how to attain it. Bella wrote, “It gave me a taste of what calm felt like, and I want to be able to achieve that more. I don’t know how I am going to do that[;] I just know that I want to.”

Students continued to express how the experience of Place influenced their concept of well-being. Reflecting on her experiences in saunas and pools during the first focus group, Paige articulated her understanding of Finnish well-being: “I see why the Finns are so happy and healthy! If I could relax like that every day[,] then I would never be crabby.” During the focus group in Finland, Mya expressed her astonishment at discovering “how living in a wellness and sustainable manner does not necessarily have to relate to a specific country.” The realizations described by the students resulted from internalizing the deeply felt experience of Place (body

and emotion), extending beyond mere intellectual reflection (mind). This deep resonance was embedded within them, driving them to connect with who they are and resulting in an updated Self-awareness. The students not only observed the Finnish art of living well; they felt it through embodied experiences and were inspired to replicate it in their own lives.

***Interactions with Local Others***

An essential experience for students to deepen their sense of Place was their interactions with residents of Finland. As mentioned earlier, contemplative practices have predominantly focused on developing awareness of one's interiority or Self. However, intersubjective contemplation also encompasses the awareness that emerges in the interaction between Self and Other. The *Growing Green* program provided students with multiple opportunities to converse with Finns beyond formal tours. On the second day in Finland, the group visited a traditional farm. During this visit, the Finnish farmer extensively discussed his background, Finnish farming practices, and the cultural distinctions he observed between Finnish and American culture. He also led a tour of the farm. In her daily written reflection, Bella shared her perspective on this conversation: "I feel like he embodied Finland. He was the personification of Finland. He was a traditional farmer of a farm that had been in their family for generations." This initial site visit was crucial in helping students acclimate to the context, and subsequent interactions further enriched their understanding of how to navigate this new culture.

Every student expressed profound appreciation for the half-day Finnish home visit. The hostess, who also worked as a tour guide, warmly welcomed travelers into her home to prepare traditional foods and use her home sauna. Additionally, she led the group on a forest walk, demonstrating her skills in foraging. The students ate food with some mushrooms the Finnish hostess had gathered before our arrival and prepared simple recipes incorporating local berries

and plants. In her reflection, Scarlet wrote about her enjoyment of learning from the Finnish hostess, “Making those pies and having the lady explain how she picks berries and is able to use her environment to [benefit] their home life was inspiring.” In her reflection, Lauren described gaining “insights and reflections about their way of life” as she observed the children at play. Lauren noted, “The Finnish children are very independent. … It’s very refreshing to see how Finnish families live.” Mya emphasized the value of interacting with local people as an essential practice in her reflection, writing, “I learned that I would try to seek out a local whenever I travel abroad in the future – I [found] it very relaxing and valuable to see life … lived in a natural manner.” The instructor’s reflections and my on-site observations also underscored the significance of this experience for the students. My reflection from that day aligned with the students’ perspectives, “The experience … will most likely be one of the highlights of the students’ experience... So many were happy to have had the opportunity to glimpse local life and to have access to someone who could answer their questions.” The home visit occurred on the program's second day, providing students with early exposure to perspectives of local Others that would serve as a foundation for the remainder of their experiences.

On the last day in Helsinki, an additional activity significantly impacted the experience of Place. The students spent the morning foraging with a local herbalist in a nearby island park. The two foraging experiences significantly impacted all of the students’ perspectives. Each shared their thoughts on what they learned during their reflections or the focus groups. One notable interaction with the herbalist was a group conversation about widespread mosquito spraying in the United States. That concept had not occurred to the herbalist, as Finns only utilize personal repellents. Eight students described the conversation with varying degrees of admiration for the Finnish herbalist's connection with nature and with a sense of sadness. In her written reflection,

Bella wrote that the herbalist wondered why the mosquitos were sprayed and how she did not have a good reason other than mosquitos are pests. She said, “Her [‘why?’] was so pure. I feel like she is very connected to nature, and it is cool to see that.” Paige echoed Bella’s sentiments as she wrote in her reflection that the herbalist “loves the pureness of nature. .... She was confused on why. It was kind of sad to see her like that. I wish there was a more natural way to deter bugs in the [United States].” Jordan also felt sad as he wrote, “It was kind of a bummer when we started talking back in the [States] how everything is sprayed[,] so it’s harder to forage.” In Scarlet’s written reflection, she exclaimed, "It was cool that you can just go out in nature and pick some plants to use in your recipes[,] but that would never happen in America because of all the pesticides.” These statements highlight how this interaction and experience prompted a critical understanding of Place among several students, as they recognized the Finnish people's respect and care for nature while reflecting on their own experiences in the United States.

Before their trip to Finland, the course readings about Finnish culture highlighted that the Finns often keep to themselves, avoid eye contact, and refrain from smiling at others in public. With this knowledge in mind, the students were initially cautious in their interactions with the Finns. In the first focus group, Calli provided an overview of her experience when interacting with Finns:

> …when we first came here, … people [did not] smile; people weren't going to be the first ones to interact with you. … We even had one Finnish person tell us, oh, no one interacts with each other. It's really hard to make friends here. [But] I made a pen pal, which took about two minutes. … I found people here [to be] extremely friendly [multiple students said "Yes" simultaneously]. With just one nice word and a smile you've made their day

and they are willing to just keep talking. Sure, you have to be the person to interact first [but] … then they can carry the rest.

Paige continued the focus group conversation, adding, “People in their stores or waitresses and waiters and the cute guy selling the berries... [group laughter], they actually want to interact.” These social connections are valuable for experiencing how the people in a specific location are attuned to their environment. Interactions with local Others enhanced the learning process and deeply connected students with the culture.

This discussion continued in the second focus group after the program ended, in which Bella stated that she “felt very connected when they talked about themselves.” This sentiment is further elaborated in the following chapter on experiential coherence. Although these exchanges with Finns were often brief, they evoked positive emotions that students mentioned on multiple occasions. Scarlet, for instance, commented about her interaction with the canoe guide in her reflections and during both focus group discussions. Each time, Scarlet explained how much she enjoyed the experience, noting during the final focus group, “He told me his whole life story; I thought it was great.” These interplays contributed to the students’ awareness of how the culture reflects the sense of Place.

In the first focus group, the group discussed the sense of authenticity in their interactions with Finns, emphasizing that it was not merely a “social nicety … to maintain politeness,” as noted by Calli. During the second focus group, Bella pointed out that the Finnish waitstaff was “very chill” and engaged in personal conversations once initiated, in contrast to the more surface-level, "very customer service" approach in the United States. As the conversation unfolded, Paige shared her experience of speaking with the Finnish hostess about stopping to chat with others during a walk. Paige said the hostess found it “absolutely crazy that I could stop

on a walk and talk to someone." This revelation surprised many students because the Finnish hostess lives on a small island where she regularly encounters the same people. Through these discussions among themselves, the students continued to reinforce their understanding of Finnish culture and norms.

In the first focus group discussion, the students continued to express their awareness of the polite and reserved nature that epitomizes the people of Finland. The experience of Place involved non-verbal interactions as students navigated their new cultural setting. Although they had been informed about the Finnish cultural norms of limited eye contact, smiling, and reserved behavior through the coursework before departure, living through these experiences allowed them to feel the emotions and ponder their reactions. For instance, when the group boarded or exited the bus, they would greet or thank the driver. During the first focus group, Bella recalled, "Our first bus driver would seem more reserved, but then at the end he was saying hi to us first [many students agreed at once]." Paige and Kat continued the conversation, sensing that these interactions "changed him," but what remained unspoken during that conversation was how these interactions also contributed to a change in *their* perspectives. After returning from Finland, Annie wrote in her final reflection that her perception of Others had evolved, "…you do not have to be smiling to be happy or friendly. Perhaps we are too friendly or fake nice over here. I enjoyed not having to smile at everyone … in Finland[,] and I have retained that mentality…" These embodied interactions brought the culture to life beyond mere cognitive knowing.

***Connection with Nature***

As noted previously, the Finns share a profound connection with nature, and a subtheme that became evident was how the relationship with nature enhanced students' understanding of

Place. One of the students' assignments while in Helsinki was to capture a mindful photograph. The instructor defined a mindful photograph as one taken with deliberate awareness and observation with an engaged embodiment in the present moment. Two students took mindful photos that underscored the cultural bond with nature they experienced first-hand. Kat described the picture she took during a period of solitude on her free day and how it symbolized her perception of the connection to the Place, writing, “This forest is very important to the citizens because it allows them to connect with nature right outside of the city, which goes to show the importance of nature in the Finnish people's li[ves].” Figure 4.1 is the mindful photograph Kat submitted for her assignment.

**Figure 4.1**

*Kat’s Mindful Photograph*

Bella expressed her astonishment at the presence of a "full forest so close to the capital," a sentiment she conveyed in her reflection about her free day in Helsinki. Calli and Bella got lost after misunderstanding the tram system and seized the opportunity to capture mindful photographs of nature. Bella's written description of her mindful photo underscores the connection to Place she observed:

> We walked around and got to this park, and [it] had a basketball court. And around the court, there were these blue structured fence things. I thought it was odd because the blue didn't match[,] and the structure[es were] a weird height. I didn't really understand until I was waiting on Calli … then it hit me, the structuring was for vines to grow on. …This just brought me right back to Finland because[,] of course[,] they make structure[es] for nature [to flourish].

In her written reflections, Bella expressed how Finland felt familiar to Minnesota. However, her realization of the purpose behind the structure served as a reminder of her actual location. Here is the mindful photograph captured by Bella while she patiently waited for Calli to take pictures of flowers:

**Figure 4.2**

*Bella's Mindful Photograph*

Slowing down to capture mindful photographs in nature allowed students to develop a deepened awareness of Place. These two photos and accompanying descriptions showcase Kat and Bell's understanding of Place, which occurs when embodied in the present moment. The photos also underscore the recurring theme of experiences in nature as valuable to the experience of Place.

Seven students indicated that their experience in nature sparked their awareness of the high value placed on the natural world within Finnish culture. Paige wrote in her reflection how she made the connection while canoeing at the National Park, "No gas motors are allowed on the lake to preserve the area and keep others safe. I thought this was cool. Finland wants to keep their natural resources and parks healthy, and the actions and regulations show that!" Kat recognized these signs of value, too, as she explored the National Park independently, writing in

her reflection, “There were even trails that could be accessed by wheelchair. This shows the importance of nature to Finns.” After spending the first morning alone in the woods, Lauren shared her perspective on nature in Finland compared to the United States in her written reflection, “It reminded me that our materialistic culture in the U.S. is destructive and leaves us feeling empty. Nature is energizing[,] and it doesn't lie. Nature is everything, though it can be described as nothing viewed from our American materialistic lens.” Nature is deeply intertwined with Finnish life and culture, shaping the students’ perspectives on what they learned. Their experiences with nature, a fundamental aspect of Finnish culture, brought their bodies, emotions, and thoughts into alignment with the sense of Place.

All students expressed their deep connection with nature positively and vividly, highlighting the significance of these experiences to them. Jordan, a natural resource management major raised on a farm, conveyed his reverence for nature when he wrote, “I was able to just wander through the woods aimlessly. I was [even] able to walk around barefoot since the ground was so soft.” On the other hand, Mya wrote in her reflection that it is not typical for her to engage in outdoor water activities back home, but in Finland, “I was excited to be in nature—and I caught myself saying so in the moment.” As the students spent more time in Finland, their associations with culture and Place became increasingly evident in their written reflections. Kat's solitary walk to the central park during a free day in Helsinki heightened her awareness of why the Finns “find it so calming.” Bella and Calli visited the Helsinki Central Park together during their free time. Bella describes the visit in her reflection as “soooo pretty and tranquil. … We just sat down and took it in. The small blueberry looking things that [the Finnish hostess] showed us were there, but they were so much sweeter.” These examples reflect the sensory and emotional responses evoked by the experiences the students had in nature.

### *Independent Exploration*

The students had two full days for independent exploration, one in Turku and another in Helsinki. They often had evenings free, and during organized program activities, there were moments of independent exploration. Independent exploration in this context refers to periods without structured or guided activities, where students initiate their own experiences according to their preferences. Students socialized in small groups for most of their free time, but six purposely chose to spend some time alone. The insights and deeper connections with Place that students gained from their unguided explorations underscore the significance of independently navigating a new environment.

The students' perspectives, particularly those acquired during these moments alone, demonstrated their active engagement in being present and reflecting on the surrounding culture. Kat wrote about her observations from walking around Turku:

> …while few smile at each other, and they are fairly enclosed, they are very slow to anger and patient. When people are at the crosswalk[,] they wait, and if they are in the way of the street, they don't get honked at. I only saw one instance of someone looking mad in their car.

Mya shared her insights in a written reflection while sitting alone in a park. She deliberately took the time to be present and observe the surroundings, writing, “Finns don’t get up very early as seen with the empty streets at 9 a.m. Places close early as seen with 6 p.m. closure times posted on the door. People don’t walk too swiftly, though with purpose.” As previously mentioned, Kat's reflection also highlighted her understanding of why Finns find nature so calming, a realization she gained during her solo time. Similarly, Lauren, during her moments of solitude in the park, observed many unaccompanied children and a significant number of adults on bicycles.

She wrote in her reflection that "[it's] a very popular mode of transportation in Helsinki. ... I noticed that Finnish women RARELY wear shorts." The self-exploration these students engaged in on their own led to thoughtful insights that heightened their awareness of Place.

However, solitude was not a prerequisite for developing a deeper connection and understanding of Place. In her written reflection, Kat expressed her positive feelings during independent exploration with a small group of other students, "We spent the day wandering Turku. I loved being able to walk to places and spend[ing] time in the park." In her reflections, Bella repeatedly mentioned her enjoyment of walking independently, even when accompanied by other group members, as she found it "cool to explore." The tone of her passages indicated that she was open and receptive to her surroundings during these walks, which brought her happiness. During some of their free time in Helsinki, Paige, Scarlet, and Aura went shopping together. Paige wrote, "The culture really cares about happiness of the people and of nature. … If we lived more like the Finns[,] then everyone would be more happy and healthy." Bella also drew comparisons between Finland and the United States, using her felt experience of Place to articulate her perspectives:

> Going to Finland was a really culture shock for me[,] and I think it's weird saying that because the environment and weather [were] close to Minnesota's and most of the citizens spoke English. But the way Finland was is so different than how I see and experience the U.S. Finland was so calm, quiet, and clean. The U.S. is so fast pace[d] and loud.

Overall, as the students explored their surroundings without a guide, they formed bonds with the culture and location (Place), one another (Others), and their personal, lived experience (Self).

Students reported that their interactions within the group during independent exploration were more authentic than structured activities. In her written reflection, Annie recounted an evening in Turku with others in the group who were watching and singing Karaoke. Annie wrote, “It was nice to see a different scene of Finnish life that's just like ours. Being with the group in that setting was soo great, everyone felt more free to be themselves.” Engaging with peers during unstructured activities appeared to strengthen the bonds among them. Bella's free day in Turku reflected this sentiment. She wrote about picnicking in the park with several others in her journal, reflecting that she “learned more about people on the trip.” As an introvert, Bella regretted not being more outgoing during that outing. Both the instructor and I had observed that after the free day in Turku, the students' friendships had deepened, and they appeared more connected and open with one another due to increased comfort within a new environment and the group.

There was one notable instance where everyone in the group, including the instructor and myself, yearned for free time that the guide provided much later than desired. This particular experience is discussed in detail in the following chapter, serving as an example of a situation in which negative emotions played a role in strengthening the group's bond. It is mentioned here to contrast the students’ perspectives on independent exploration during structured activities. Lauren wrote passionately about her ire at being on a guided tour in her reflection:

> I wanted to run around with my arms stretched out to the side[,] but I was trapped on a tour. Sorry if anyone is offended by this. My insight from this experience is that Freedom rocks. I felt like Finland under Swedish rule yesterday. Sorry! I don't want to walk in a line[;] I just want to be free, like Finland did! Anyway, I was happy we got to explore on our own.

Lauren was not alone in her sentiments; this experience stood out as an example of how vital independent exploration is in an education abroad program. One of the final reflections I wrote while in Finland focused on the importance of independent exploration:

> My takeaway is that the programs that fill every space with formal activities hinder the important learning that occurs when students are given the freedom to explore. The group bonds appear to strengthen when they have free evenings, free days, and time for independent exploration, even during formal activities. The instructor and I have spent time during these periods with different sets of students, and each time, the bond grows stronger, and the conversations are much richer. It's really a great experience, and it is important to remember that formal education has its place, but true learning comes from social engagement and experiences. I can see it occurring in real time.

In Finland, we learned the significance of slowing down to embrace the present during interactions with people and nature and how valuable learning is achieved through independent exploration.

This chapter elaborated on the central theme of experiencing Place, derived from the data regarding the students' perspectives on learning from participation in the *Growing Green* education abroad program. Evidence and student quotes illustrate the experience-based subthemes, which included interactions with local Others, connection with nature, and independent exploration. Each of these experiential subthemes underscored the approaches that fostered a critical understanding of the pedagogy of Place.

## Chapter 5: Experiential Coherence Finding

This chapter presents an overview of experiential coherence that addresses the research question: How do students perceive and describe their subjective and intersubjective experiences while participating in an education abroad program that incorporates contemplative practices? The following sections explore the subthemes within the subjective and intersubjective domains, focusing on experiential coherence. Finally, examining the learning that students reported in the *Growing Green* program, compared to their past learning experiences, sheds light on the objective learning subtheme.

### Experiential Coherence

As discussed in Chapter 2, literature often describes the state of being present in conjunction with contemplative practices. Additionally, psychophysiological coherence is a state in which the body, mind, and emotions come into harmony, allowing one to be receptive and calm during ordinary interactions and experiences (*The Science of HeartMath*, 2023). Research on psychophysiological coherence involves individuals focusing on the heart while feeling gratitude and positive emotions (*The Science of HeartMath*, 2023). Students in the *Growing Green* program were not explicitly using the heart-centered technique, yet a theme of coherence emerged from their experiences. Students indicated that their subjective and intersubjective experiences included a sense of harmony with each other, the location, and their body, mind, and emotions.

As the students described their subjective and intersubjective experiences, a key theme emerged to indicate that they felt experiential coherence. The data showed that experiential coherence builds upon the psychophysiological coherence literature that is heart-centered by including novel experiences abroad. These experiences form a shared resonance beyond the

Self's body, mind, and heart to encompass Place and Others. Experiential coherence occurs when an individual attunes their mind, body, and heart in awareness of the experience unfolding in the present moment. As illustrated in Chapter 4, when one steps away from previous life patterns, it nurtures the ability to be engaged and embodied in the present experience.

Moments of experiential coherence influence what students learn and how they integrate what they learn into their lives. In the first class, Lauren hinted at experiential coherence as she anticipated her upcoming travels in her written reflection: "I hope to gain mindfulness so I can become more present, grateful, and excited in mundane experiences and novel adventures. I want to reach the level of mindfulness described through the Zen Koan, 'When cold, be thoroughly cold, and when hot, be hot through and through [(Ogura, 1973, p. 4)].'" Lauren had previous experience with contemplation before joining the *Growing Green* program, so the lens with which she viewed the impending experience reflects a desire to be fully present. Although Lauren had not explicitly said experiential coherence, her awareness of what is possible through experience and contemplation demonstrates the concept.

The students experienced separation from their cultural norms and mental distractions when traveling to Finland. The physical and emotional distance reduced the stressors that students mentioned before their departure, such as schoolwork, work, and moving. In the first focus group that occurred eight days into the travel, Paige noted the distance from home as a "large step away from my problems across the ocean … a really good way for me to just, you know, let go and let things be what they are and not try and change them." Being physically present in a new cultural setting allowed students to be attuned to what was occurring externally and internally. Removing familiar cultural and mental programming enabled students to focus their minds, bodies, and emotions during subjective and intersubjective experiences. As students

harmonized themselves with the experience of Place and Others, they achieved moments of experiential coherence. Mya explored the resulting feeling during her final reflection, “I was able to recenter myself back to my internal Zen. Stepping out of routine and being able to experience novel situations was like zapping me back to my natural state of curiosity, positivity, and adventure-seeking notions.” Focusing on the present moment, whether structured or unstructured, enabled students to deeply connect with the emotions brought about by the physical experience.

Contemplative practices during class, contemplative moments on-site, and daily written reflections in Finland appear to have facilitated coherence. In her initial written reflection, Kat wrote about hoping to learn why she felt a barrier to practicing presence and to “find/implement different ways to be present and try to realize what is holding me back from being more in the moment.” The number of experiential coherence instances appears higher during the education abroad experience than what the students reported at home before departure, even though the students were engaged in contemplative practices during both. The students completed weekly reflections before going abroad and daily reflections in Finland, which likely reflected the reported instances. Nine students reported experiencing coherence at home when they were away from work and school stressors: during a snowstorm, engaging in regional travel, or spending a holiday with family. Half of the students noted having previous experience with contemplative practices before starting the class, with two specifying it as a regular practice. All students were curious and open to expanding their knowledge and experience with contemplative practices.

The instructor guided students through various contemplative practice forms at the beginning of each class. The weekly schedule included practices such as guided meditation, mindful art, a five-senses meditation, and mindful eating. The instructor also dedicated ten

minutes each class period for the students to respond to reflection prompts. Other than preparing students verbally for the contemplative practices and reflection, no additional course readings expounded upon the topic. During the second focus group, Calli shared her insights about using reflective and contemplative practices in the classroom as compared to in Finland:

> …before we went to Finland and we [practiced] mindfulness techniques, the concepts or class w[ould] stress me out. My journaling still stressed me out. … I felt that class was still class. … Just another thing added to my already busy, busy day, even though it was something that was supposed to be relieving. … Until we got to Finland, that's when I could find that it was just so relieving to be able to take these concepts and view them in a more relaxing light. To be like, okay, this is the one thing that I am focusing on.

Two additional students noted they found it challenging to be present during class contemplative practices and when writing reflections. They felt that the classroom practices were additional assignments, making it hard to quiet their minds. In the first focus group conversation, Scarlet expressed that she found the contemplative practices conducted before departure to be "really helpful moment[s] [for] my weeks" in dealing with life stressors. Although Scarlet felt that the class practices were helpful, she also acknowledged that her ability to focus on the present moment was more noticeable abroad. Scarlet described the difference during the second focus group, "When I was there, I didn't have all this other stuff to worry about. It just really helps me be present and not worry about XYZ that's going on."

Two notable differences exist between the reflections written in class and those recorded abroad. The first is the physical and mental distance the travel created from the students' regular cultural patterns and daily stressors. For example, Calli used emotion-related words to express her feelings about contemplative and reflective practices. The class evoked the negative emotion

of “stress,” while Finland brought about positive emotions like “relieving” and “relaxing.” The second difference is that the reflections abroad were written during or soon after a novel learning experience. Being close to the lived experience seems to trigger a heightened emotional response. Similar to what was discussed in Chapter 2 about objective learning, the students were less engaged when asked to reflect on a topic they had not personally experienced before the program. The data further indicates that experiential coherence occurs within subjective and intersubjective learning experiences, in direct contrast to objective learning. The following section will explore the subjective participant perceptions and the supporting evidence that arose from contemplative practice and reflection during their experiences in Finland.

### *Subjective Experiential Coherence*

This section explores the manifestations of subjective experiential coherence through the students' reflections in Finland, highlighting their perspectives on the synergy of body, mind, and emotions. While not explicitly articulated, the evidence showed that experiential coherence appears to be an inherent component of contemplative practice. When students combine contemplative practices with their lived experiences, they forge a connection between external events and their inner thoughts and emotions. Grace expresses this through her reflective writing in Finland: "What I’ve gathered from this experience is that every time we get to enjoy nature or just take time to relax and have mindful moments, the day gets better.” The connection individuals experience during contemplative education abroad programs is deepened, resulting in stronger memories and positive emotions.

Experiential coherence can also occur during reflective practice when all three aspects of body, mind, and emotions are engaged during reflection. Paige and Annie indicated that reflective journaling was not their favorite activity but that they saw the value in doing it. During

the first focus group, Annie noted that she would not continue journaling after the program concluded but said, “Journaling has been nice because I'm also kind of using it … [to] give a brief synopsis… I do usually kind of feel like, okay, that's all out. …freed up space.” Paige also described using the reflections to memo her experiences; during the second focus group, she explained that the practice “helped me remember. …the whole day, exactly what I did and exactly how I felt. … It really made me try and soak in as much as I could.” Paige’s description illustrates how meaningful it was to reflect on the physical experience (body) and how she felt (emotions) to remember the experience afterward (mind). Requiring daily written reflections also reminded Paige to be present during the experience.

Mya explained during the first focus group that she used her reflections to consider the why behind the experience and to connect with what it meant to her personally. Thoughts on the subjective nature of Mya’s experience in Finland are illustrated as she wrote during her reflection in Finland, “A wondering I have had since being in Finland is how lifestyles I crave—slow life, simple food, small enjoyments—are considered normal and expected in this country.” Mya demonstrates that the depth of reflection leads to a better understanding of her experiences as she continued this line of thought two days later in her written reflection:

> One thing that surprised me about myself was realizing how living in a wellness and sustainable manner does not necessarily have to relate to a specific country. I place Finland, among other countries, on a pedestal of wellness and sustainability--not fully realizing I can (and have) emulate these behaviors and thought patterns anywhere, including the States.

The experience in the Finnish hostess’ home shifted Mya’s perspective on her own life, bridging the experience into her subjective awareness.

Moments of purposeful and non-purposeful contemplative practice can spark experiential coherence. While reflection and contemplative practice generate those moments, the students often describe them as happening during a critical moment of alignment. On the first evening in Finland, the group stayed on a rural farm in cottages. Most students took advantage of the early rise caused by jet lag to explore the natural environment, and many wrote about it in their journals. Kat illustrated her moment of unscripted experiential coherence as she wrote:

> We woke up in the cottages yesterday[,] and I had the opportunity to go for a run in the woods. … I did get to listen to Folklore [by Taylor Swift] while cooling down[,] which was an [out-of-body] experience, especially because it was foggy out. I had to take a second every once [in] a while to cope with the heart-wrenching lyrics. … I would definitely say that morning was what they call a core memory for me.

Jordan also wrote about that morning and how much he enjoyed walking barefoot on the ground. Bella described in her reflection how far removed the farm felt from society, even compared to similar experiences on farms in the United States. Lauren wrote about her insightful morning at the cottages as she spent alone in contemplation of her environment,

> I loved waking up at the cottages, drinking coffee outside with a view of the forest, ducks, chickens, and old buildings. The landscape was foggy, quiet, and perfectly dewy. During this experience, I had many insights – less really is more[,] and nature is the only truth.

During the final focus group, Paige described her moment of unscripted mindfulness while canoeing, “The water was just so peaceful, and it wasn't breezy, and there was a blue sky. … There wasn't really anything drawing your attention. … It's just so relaxing. I just tried to take it in.” In the moments described by the five students above, the feelings of peace, relation, and

calm radiate from their words. Nothing could divert their attention from the present moment, neither external distractions nor the nagging demands of their perpetual to-do lists.

### *Intersubjective Experiential Coherence*

This section discusses intersubjective experiential coherence, which occurs when individuals connect during shared experiences and dialogues. People can experience this resonance with or without words. In both instances, the individuals' body, mind, and emotions converge in shared resonance, experienced through intersubjectivity. Students in the *Growing Green* program depict intersubjective experiential coherence as manifesting during distinctive moments shared with others, conversations centered on common interests, and shared emotional states. While the students do not explicitly articulate experiential coherence, they hint at its existence through the emotions they express when in harmony with others.

Seven of the ten students discussed moments of intersubjective experiential coherence during their free time. Lauren and Mya had a noteworthy encounter at Nukksio National Park midway through the program. Both students considered the experience significant due to their personal and vulnerable dialogue. When asked about unscripted mindfulness during the second focus group, Mya shared the story:

> There was a moment when it was just me and Lauren. … I remember we just laid there and, looked up at the trees. And we just talked very vulnerably. And that was a time I was like, we are in a forest right now. It was fun to connect with someone so vulnerably.

Lauren continued the conversation, discussing how her experience with Mya helped her gain insight into others, saying, “We were talking about our childhoods and how they really shaped us to be the people we are today. … Everyone's just doing their best.” In this situation, the students were removed from all cultural patterns and immersed in nature, enabling them to engage fully

with one another. Mya and Lauren's complete presence in the experience fostered a deep connection, a resonance of souls, on an emotional topic. Both Mya and Lauren emphasized the significance of this moment of experiential coherence, illustrating the beautiful power that can be realized when all elements involved are coherent.

On their free day in Turku, two groups of students picked up lunch to have a picnic in the park. Nine students mentioned the connection they experienced with one another during that outing. Paige summarized the experiential coherence well during the first focus group:

> I also felt very connected. … Just all the sitting there, and we're sharing cheese and trying not to be bit by this duck. … We were all just really comfortable with each other and joking around. … And it was just so peaceful and relaxing that we were in such a safe space with each other that we could really do anything we wanted.

The feelings of peace and safety appear to enhance the sense of intersubjective experiential coherence felt with one another. In her written reflection on the free day, Kat expressed that the picnic was her favorite part and calmed her. During the second focus group, Kat said it was "probably one of my favorite parts of the trip." Scarlet wrote that the picnic in the park was an "uplifting, satisfying moment." In my written reflections about the free day, I noted that the students appeared to have formed stronger bonds with one another, and it is evident now that my observation was accurate.

In the second focus group, Lauren recounted several instances when she experienced a strong connection with her fellow students. These moments included bonding with her roommate in the evenings before bedtime, the picnic in the park, and a conversation during the final group meal with Jordan. Lauren described how she resonated with Jordan, "I remember talking to Jordan a lot about microbes in the soil. … It was something he was really passionate about, that I

was also passionate about, and we didn't know we connected on that." Lauren elucidated that she felt "really connected with people in the group" whenever they engaged in discussions where "both had mutual interests." The sense of connection Lauren described revolved around the feelings of interest and passion both parties experienced during their conversations.

Mya contemplated how effortlessly everyone in the group could spend time together when she wrote, "I've reflected with a few people in our travel group how fluid and willing we are to talk with/be with everyone. It seems just about anyone can hang out with anyone." Mya surmised that it could be attributed to "similar personalities," which might be influenced by the "wellness/sustainable focus" of the course. During the second focus group, held a month after returning to the United States, Mya revisited this topic because it had significance for her as she said:

> I think for me, it was that there were like-minded people there – people who think like me and enjoy similar things. … I think … it was the topic all of us had some interest in … [and were] accepting of what sustainability and wellness is. … I think just knowing that more people think like I do, and it's not just me. And now I've found you all.

Mya's comments highlight the significance of forming connections with individuals with shared interests and how extended periods of intersubjective experiential coherence strengthen the bonds between Self and Others.

Scarlet's experiences in Finland led to a shift in her views on relationships upon return. During the second focus group, Scarlet discussed her new perspective: "What I value more now has changed. Like my relationships now, I don't see the need to have relationships that aren't meaningful and kind of cut some people off, which has been nice and refreshing." During the second focus group, Calli also mentioned that her experience abroad helped her discern which

relationships are significant for her and which ones are not. Calli describes her shift in perception, "…I have started just having more appreciation and realizing that, instead of maybe taking them for granted. Just realizing these are the people … that will matter regardless of where I end up." Scarlet and Calli appeared to have acknowledged the power of connections formed when resonating with Others and recognized where it had been lacking in their past relationships. This realization prompted a shift in their relationship priorities.

The immersion in Finnish culture gave the students various opportunities to interact with Finns during structured and unstructured program activities. The group visited a Finnish woman's home on the third day in Finland. All ten students spoke highly of the entire experience and how much they learned interacting with the Finnish hostess. Three students expressed having initial apprehension about the experience. Jordan verbalized his trepidation when he wrote, "We went to the Finnish household[,] which I actually thought might be a bit awkward[,] but it was probably my favorite thing we did so far." Bella depicted the immersive nature of the experience during the final focus group:

> …We were just kind of, not thrown in in a bad way, but just like INTO [emphasis and does tossing motion] Finland. …. I'm thinking about [the Finnish hostess'] place where … you were in her house. We were baking pies. We're … in a sauna, there was no way [not to] experience it. It was immersive.

The diverse experiences offered by the Finnish hostess captivated each student in unique ways. While Paige was not keen on the sauna, she relished conversing with the hostess and her family while they baked. Four students considered this one of their most memorable unscripted mindfulness experiences, especially when they followed the sauna with a dip in the Baltic Sea. Scarlet commented, "Making those pies and having the lady explain how she picks berries and is

able to use her environment to [benefit] their home life was inspiring." The interaction with the Finnish hostess left a lasting impression because the students were with her in her home environment. During the first focus group, Mya explained, "…we went on a walk, we went out by water, we sauna'd, we baked, we were with people. …I realized I do all those things at home and that I can live a well life back home." Mya realized that many of the experiences at the Finnish hostess' house were things she could easily incorporate into her own life.

Another structured activity in which students had intersubjective coherence was during an afternoon visit to an organic farm. All ten students spoke positively about this experience, and my observations noted the rapt engagement of the students throughout. Bella recalled her impression of the guide in her written reflection: "He was so knowledgeable about nature, even to the bird calls. He was also very charismatic, which I feel is quite rare when someone is talking about a farm. But he was very captivating with what he was saying." As Lauren mentioned, when all participants are passionate about the subject of conversation, the experience becomes more meaningful. One free evening early in the program, a discussion involving Calli, Bella, Mya, Jordan, Paige, and myself revolved around this subject. I documented it in my written reflections:

> The students said that professors who aren't passionate about the topic and are not personable are harder to learn from. This speaks to the need for a connection between the learner and the professor for effective objective and intersubjective learning. Also, the students felt that online learning is much easier to pass, but throughout the discussion, they learned so much more in person and were more engaged. I wondered if the somatic experience of being in person helps one to learn.

Though I did not recognize it then, my reflections on our conversation subtly pointed toward the characteristics of experiential coherence.

I guided students through an intersubjective Power of Eight (McTaggart, 2017) intention meditation in the two focus groups. Scarlet and Mya were the two students who volunteered to receive an intention. As recipients, both expressed their appreciation for receiving positive intentions sent from the group. Scarlet spoke of the intention meditation for her in the first focus group as "an interesting experience for me. The first part was an intention that my moving to my new apartment would go smoothly[.] [It] was very nice to get all [the] positive affirmations." Mya's intention occurred during the second focus group, and she described it as "very peaceful." Mya said, "It felt good to think about what could be and try to manifest it. … It's reassuring that I'm at where I … need to be and that it's possible." The remaining students provided feedback on the intention process, mentioning how they envisioned the intended goal coming to fruition for the recipients. Although the students did not specifically discuss this to offer evidence, the Power of Eight intention meditation constituted a moment of intersubjective experiential coherence.

An example of wordless intersubjective experiential coherence occurred during an incredibly long day walking in Helsinki. Every student, the instructor, and myself either wrote about or discussed the visit to Suomenlinna Island, where this experience culminated. The tour guide insisted on leading the group around the entire island, even though she had taken the group on a walking tour all day. At that point, no one in the group desired to hear more facts or walk briskly in a line. The students made this evident by avoiding eye contact and expressing a desire to relax. Scarlet remarked that she resonated with the group because "we were all kind of miserable together, so it felt like we were all connected in that way." The instructor eventually persuaded the guide to allow the group to explore independently. Half of the group promptly

departed to sit on a rock, gazing at the ocean under the warm sunshine. Every member of the group who settled on a rock expressed a feeling of unscripted, wordless resonance with others, either in their written reflections or during the focus groups.

### *Objective Learning*

A contrasting subtheme in student perspectives on objective learning became evident in the data. Before traveling to Finland, Paige reflected on an assignment she had completed for class, stating, “I learned more about the Finnish culture and how to respect them. I hope that when I am there[,] I treat them properly and don’t mess it up. Overall, doing that assignment helped me learn more about people and culture.” Bella also expressed her concerns that learning about Finnish culture before leaving made her apprehensive about how she would interact. Even during her initial interactions with Finns, Bella was “cautious with not being ‘too much’.” The pre-departure learning aimed to prepare them with knowledge about their upcoming experiences. However, several felt nervous, picturing themselves in the experience, as indicated by Jordan and Bella's thoughts before the Finnish home visit.

As the students grew more confident and started interacting with Finns regularly, they became excited by the meaningful conversations they were having. Bella wrote about a remembered interaction at a restaurant they visited, “She was so nice, and Paige was asking her some questions[,] and the waitress just kept talking, which is the common thing I am seeing. Finns might keep to themselves, but if you are the first person to talk, they will carry the rest of the conversation.” Throughout their written reflections and focus groups, most students explained that conversations with those living in Finland were vital learning moments.

Students articulated a lack of objective learning during the experience abroad and detailed the disparity. Lauren elucidated the distinction between her expectations and her actual learning during the final focus group:

> I thought I would come back and tell everyone … I learned this about this, and this is how they farm there, and 20 percent of their, or you know. I thought I'd have more statistics or whatever to share. … I learned more about just the culture and about culture in general, and how different societies accept things as normal, and it just becomes ingrained and embedded in their society. … it was interesting to experience that and learn more subjectively about culture rather than learning objective facts.

Scarlet echoed Lauren's sentiments when she recounted what she had learned to friends and family: "…it was more like how different the society is there, and their laws, and just the way they treat, the environment, their people, and animals." The students conveyed their learning experience in Finland as a way of being rather than a set of factual information.

Due to the subjective and intersubjective experiential coherence students embodied throughout the experience abroad, they articulated their heightened level of integrated understanding. Mya eloquently conveyed the following in her final Finland reflection:

> Experiencing novelty together is beautiful and somewhat lost in society. I hope to always seek adventure, learning, compassion, and reflection with those I am so fortunate to share space with. This was such a wonderful trip, while allowing connection to others, also connection back to myself—and oh[,] how I missed my inner sacredness.

Mya beautifully depicted what a contemplative education abroad experience can nurture in students. Achieving harmony between one's mind, body, and emotions while engaged in a novel experience abroad enhances connection with Self, Others, and the learning process.

Learning during moments of experiential coherence is integrated consciously and subconsciously. Upon returning, eight students indicated their conscious recognition of the changes they had undergone due to the experience. Scarlet wrote, “One of the biggest [takeaways] I had on this experience was that I want to live more in the present[,] and the best way I’ve found to do so is by making the present more exciting than the future may seem in my head.” Kat concurred as she wrote, “…I will also try to push myself to take care of myself. Take time to slow down every once [in] a while to actually take in what is happening around me.” Annie reflected on how her understanding of wellness has evolved through the course and her interactions with Finns, “This … has motivated me to reconsider my definition of self-care or wellness. Maybe sometimes a long, hot bath is the right medicine[,] but wellness isn’t strictly one thing[,] and it certainly is not a one-time fix.” During the final focus group, Lauren, Scarlet, Paige, and Bella noted adopting mindful eating as a sustained practice. Meanwhile, Calli remarked on the change in her perspective of being in nature:

> I just like going out in the hammocks, and I'll lay there all the time. Now I just feel, instead of being something that's kind of like, crazy, wild, like oh, you're enjoying nature… I feel some sort of shift in that. It just feels more accepted by people, even if they haven't gone on the trip. It just seems the cultural practice that I just bec[a]me more comfortable with.

Calli was not alone in purposely spending mindful moments outdoors; in the final focus group, half the students mentioned they were doing the same upon return.

As the students discussed their shift in behavior, I became aware that I had been dedicating time to be present outside, too. Being in nature after returning from Finland felt so intuitive that I had not consciously noticed the transformation. Two students mentioned similar

realizations of unconscious behavior changes. During the second focus group, Calli shared a story of her phone call with a cousin:

> The first thing she said to me was that [I] sound different. I guess I hadn't really realized or recognized how different I guess I felt. … It was just definitely a growth point that was very subtle … confidence, maybe, or just belief in myself of being able to get around and independence. … We got around a whole different country and a whole different culture, and I think that does leave a sort of impact.

Scarlet also noted an unconscious shift that she described in the final focus group, "I think a lot kind of change[d] in my head; I feel like it altered a little bit." Although Scarlet could not precisely articulate the changes, she sensed something had. Perhaps, in the future, Scarlet will reflect on the experience and recognize it as a "growth point," similar to Calli.

This chapter introduced experiential coherence as the theme that emerged in response to the research question about how students perceive and describe their subjective and intersubjective experiences in the *Growing Green* short-term education abroad program. Experiential coherence involves an individual attuning their mind, body, and emotional awareness solely to the experience happening in the present moment. The students experienced a nearly complete removal of their cultural norms and mental distractions from their travel to Finland. The physical and emotional distance experienced in this new cultural setting facilitated attunement to what was occurring externally and internally.

When combined with experience, contemplative practice and reflection link external events with internal thoughts and emotions, fostering subjective experiential coherence. This connection intensifies one's experience, strengthening memories and positive emotions. Intersubjective experiential coherence happens when individuals resonate with Others during

shared experiences. This resonance may be experienced with words or without, but it unites those involved with their body, mind, and emotions in both cases. Students detailed instances of intersubjective experiential coherence during unique moments shared with Others, dialogue on topics of mutual interest, and shared emotional states. These narratives vividly illustrate the impact of experiential coherence during their time in Finland. Finally, the chapter shows the distinction between objective learning and the insights gained through experiential coherence during the experience abroad. Students articulated integrated understanding, both conscious and unconscious, resulting from their subjective and intersubjective experiential coherence.

## Chapter 6: Individual Perspectives within a Collective Experience Finding

Short-term education abroad programs offer a unique collective experience that allows individuals to explore new cultures and perspectives. In a short-term education abroad program, all participants, including the instructors, collectively experience a location and the program itinerary. Each person in the program forms individual perspectives on their experiences abroad while adding to a group perspective. In the collective experience, personal perspectives are aligned to formulate a consensus reality. For example, viewing the still waters and scenic landscape of the lush Finnish forests from the canoe was an activity everyone in the *Growing Green* program participated in together. A feeling of peace and being immersed in the beauty of nature describes the collective experience. Yet, each individual experienced the moments of canoeing differently, employing the lens of their thoughts, feelings, and personal histories. Additionally, each student reported a feeling of peace and connection with nature at various times and during different activities. An individual's perspective at any given moment tells the story of who one is and hints at the complexity of the patterns that influence one's thoughts, emotions, and actions. Individuals interpret their experiences according to their worldview and social context (Komjathy, 2017). What is unique about a short-term education abroad program is that individuals have been entirely removed from the influences of their regular lives to experience a new country with like-minded others who also opted to participate.

The preceding chapters explored themes within students' collective experiences, while this section presents exemplary depictions of Mya and Paige. The heuristic process involved revisiting the data to select two or three students who exemplify the composite group while emphasizing their unique perspectives to create exemplary depictions (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019). The exemplary depictions illustrated the topic from an individual’s viewpoint while

illuminating the collective experience (Sultan, 2019). The exemplary composite heuristic process revealed the unique perspectives through which each individual viewed the group experiences. Simultaneously, it showcased the collective experience, which bore a resemblance to the coherence with Other and Place but across multiple perspectives.

Mya and Paige's stories were selected due to their alignment with key characteristics observed in other *Growing Green* students, including previous international travel and contemplative practice, childhood city population size, academic level, and Finnish heritage. Although not perfect representations, Mya and Paige embody the full range of aspects of the other students, with the remaining participants falling along a spectrum between them. Mya, with prior international travel, consistent contemplative practice, an urban upbringing, senior academic status, and Finnish heritage, contrasts with Paige, a second-year college student from a small rural town, new to both contemplative practices and international travel. Table 6.1 depicts the characteristics of Mya and Paige.

**Table 6.1**

*Mya and Paige Characteristics*

| Characteristic | Mya | Paige |
|---|---|---|
| Major | Hospitality and Tourism | Civil Engineering |
| Academic Level | Senior | Sophomore |
| Hometown Size | Urban | Small Rural Town |
| Finnish Heritage | Yes | No |
| Previous International Travel | Yes | No |
| Regular Contemplative Practice | Yes | No |

While other students may not precisely mirror Paige or Mya, a mix of these aspects can be found among them. Despite considering other students, I selected Mya and Paige to showcase the spectrum within this group. Both expressed their thoughts extensively, contributing to a comprehensive dataset for theoretical connections. Mya's perspective is presented first, followed by Paige's, and the chapter concludes with an analysis of the lessons learned.

**Mya**

Mya grew up in an urban city in North Dakota and has traveled internationally several times. One of the reasons Mya opted to participate in the *Growing Green* program was due to her Finnish maternal heritage. Mya learned traditional songs and words, used a sauna practice, and ate traditional foods during childhood. Mya was also drawn to the program because it focuses on well-being and sustainability. As a hospitality and tourism major, Mya aspires to become an event manager who incorporates sustainable and well-being practices into her events. In her final project for the course, Mya designed a community supper club to promote social well-being among friends and strangers. Community and connection with others are ongoing themes Mya had in her course assignments, reflections, and focus groups.

Mya developed a fascination with contemplative practices and well-being during her childhood, driven by an experience with Western medicine that, in her opinion, did not address the root of the problem. Discovering the "holistic body" helped Mya to view "the body and medicine in the same light [and] became my guide to being in tune, supportive, and loving to my body." Mya completed all of her coursework to graduate before departing for Finland in May, and her focus on her life transition throughout the reflections and focus groups illustrates the perspectives she held during a collective experience.

### *Contemplative Practice*

Before starting the Finland class, Mya had recently completed an eight-week class project in which she aimed to practice meditation four times weekly. Mya wrote in her initial reflection that her current contemplative and well-being practices were “regularly walking outdoors, indulging in the sauna at NDSU’s wellness center, meditation, yoga, caring for what I give my body for fuel–opting for whole foods as much as possible, and listening to podcasts centered around self-care.” While she had previous experience with meditation, the Finland class introduced her to new mindful practices. During the first focus group, Mya remarked that mindful eating, a method she learned in class, has become a “natural thing I do now.” Mya also expressed how essential mindfulness is, "It’s pivotal to me, as who I am, to integrate it throughout my life.” The last focus group took place a month and a half after the program ended, and Mya's ongoing commitment to contemplative practices implies that the experience may have a lasting impact on her future.

### *Coherence with Others*

One of the critical moments abroad that Mya spoke about during the final focus group was when she and her peer Lauren were alone “just wandering through the woods” in Nukksio National Park. Mya and Lauren found an outdoor play area where they lay down, looked up at the trees, and chatted vulnerably for almost an hour. During the second focus group, Lauren recounted that the conversation was about recognizing similarities in their childhood that “shaped us to be the people we are today. …the way your parents raised you really determines how you act and behave in the world, whether you're compensating for something that they were lacking or something like that.” Mya conveyed that she felt “it was fun to connect with someone

so vulnerably." Mya and Lauren's intimate conversation surrounded by the forest resonated deeply for Mya.

Mya repeatedly highlighted her connection with the other students in her written reflections and the focus groups. After the free day in Turku, Mya reflected on the strength of the bond she felt, even though it had been a short time since she arrived. Mya also mentioned the ongoing connection in an informal conversation with several other students and me two days later in Helsinki. Considering the timing of this conversation with Mya and the other students, we discussed how wonderful it was that the dynamic persisted throughout the program. The instructor and I observed that the students were forming strong connections with one another.

Mya's intense resonance with the other students stems from her feeling alone in pursuing a life centered on well-being and sustainability. For the reflection prompt in the first class, Mya wrote that what she hoped to learn about herself was why she was "drawn to well-being and sustainability." Mya expresses her viewpoint on the student bond during the final focus group:

> …there were like-minded people there. People who think like me and enjoy similar things. … All of us had some interest in [sustainability and wellness] in the first place. I think just knowing that more people think like I do, and it's not just me. And now I've found you all.

Mya's experience with the other students in Finland deepened her understanding of the significance of well-being in her life and allowed her to connect with like-minded individuals.

***Experience with Place***

Mya balanced her time with people while spending time alone because she felt that was just as important. She described the balance during the first focus group, "…when I did spend time with people, it was more purposeful, like I'm going to do this with you. It felt a little bit

connected because it was intentional." In Helsinki, Mya opted to spend an evening alone and intentionally arranged the following free day as a "solo traveler." She wrote about how important being alone is for learning about yourself, "I believe we learn the most about ourselves, our thoughts, our values when we are alone with ourselves. Time moves as we feel ready, the next location chosen with very little decisiveness." During Mya's solo traveler day, her written reflections also indicated a resonance and understanding of Place. Mya reflected on her time in Finland as having helped her find joy in the "mundane." Mya characterized the entire experience as inspiring a desire for "a slow life, though I may not yet know what that is, [it] is something I strive for. Finns don't get up very early[,] as seen with the empty streets at 9 a.m. Places close early[,] as seen with 6 p.m. closure times posted on the door. People don't walk too swiftly, though with purpose." Mya's day of solitude, during which she slowed down and stayed present, enabled her to reflect on her time in Finland and establish a deep connection with herself.

Mya described feeling a bond with Finland that motivated her to adopt the values she learned in her life back home. She pointed out that her experiences in Finland revealed how society systematically molds all aspects of our lives and highlighted "how American we are and how to break it a little bit." Mya conveyed her feelings during the first focus group, "It's slower. It's not so much based on power or money or status. It's more connection. It's more nature. It's more whole foods, growing what you can." Mya continued:

> When we were at [the Finnish home], we went on a walk, we went out by the water, we sauna'd, we baked, we were with people. And I realized I do all those things at home and that I can live a well life back home. But I think I put Finland at this very high pedestal… I'm realizing that I already do that. Kind of gave me confidence that I can continue.

Mya's realization provides evidence of her firm belief that the program's education was experiential, as she reiterated in her written reflection, "We don't often do it in the classroom." During the final focus group, Mya described the experiential learning, including "the mindfulness activities, reflections and things like that," as helping her "think more creatively" and making learning less "objective."

***Individual Perspectives within a Collective Experience***

Mya was undergoing a significant life transition during the Finland class as she prepared for the end of the semester. She wrote about the upcoming shift in her second-to-last class reflection:

> I was able to, for the first time, taste the end of my college career. With today being my last day of classes (besides the Finland class next week), I'm filled with a lot of mixed emotions—excitement for what's to come, the feeling of loss of connections made in my major, and overall just the wonder of how four years can go by so quickly.

In Mya's final class reflection, she consistently addressed the themes of endings and transitions, particularly highlighting the celebration on her last day of campus employment, "I've been reflecting on my time in this position, thinking it would be 12 weeks and how it ended up being fifteen months." These moments of endings and "pending goodbyes" weighed "heavily on my mind—connections and community are what I have come most to value in regard to my own well-being." Mya's awareness of shifting social connections was only part of the impending changes.

The first reflection in Finland continued Mya's theme of transition. As a recent graduate, Mya actively pursued employment in her career field before departure, and her initial

experiences in Finland prompted her to reflect on her values. Mya wrote about her apprehension about securing a job that aligns with her interests:

> I'm scared I won't find a position that will fit with my identity[,] and I will actively participate (out of a need for income) in creating a dull experience for X amount of months or years. A *wondering* [sic] I have had since being in Finland is how lifestyles I crave—slow life, simple food, small enjoyments—are considered normal and expected in this country.

Mya's concern about locating a suitable job continued to weigh on her mind as she spoke about it during the first focus group in Helsinki: "I'm scared I'm going to compromise myself just to find a job that will be enough money. … I'd love to work at an organic farm or something like that, you know. But am I going to have to fail myself to get there?" Mya indicated that she had even started re-evaluating the applications she had submitted as she continued her search for a career that aligns well.

During the first focus group, Scarlet volunteered to have the Power of Eight intention done for her. Scarlet had also been experiencing transitions and would move immediately upon returning from Finland. The group intended for the quick move to go smoothly. Mya felt coherence when the group practiced the Power of Eight intention for Scarlet because Mya also had plans to move upon return, not to another apartment, but across the country to New York. Mya's emotions welled up during the meditation portion, and she described how a tear rolled down her cheek. She shared her thoughts that occurred during the meditation, "It [exhales] is crazy, [voice cracks and gets heavy] [I] rush[ed] through my senior year, and then rushed on this trip, and [I] think about leaving everyone. … [crying while speaking] It's a whole new life." Later that evening, Mya reflected on her experience in the focus group as she wrote:

> With the busyness of wrapping up my final semester, work, graduation festivities, and hopping on a plane immediately after for Finland, I haven't fully realized and pictured what saying goodbye to Fargo in ten days will entail. Sure, factually I was aware when we set the dates, but the meditation helped me be fully present. ... Two tears fell when I finally started to grapple with this coming transition.

Mya felt the emotions rushing forward in that moment of contemplative coherence with Scarlet's intention. Neither of the students fully realized the feelings the other was going through, yet they helped one another through the experience.

During the final focus group, Mya volunteered for the group to do the Power of Eight intention for her. The intention focused on Mya's transition from her initial role as a barista when she first moved to New York to the upcoming event management position set to open in four or five months. Mya desired to move into the promised position quickly and was excited to use the skills she learned from her degree. After the intention meditation, Mya described her experience as feeling very peaceful, "It felt good to think about what could be, and try to manifest it. So I was just trying to picture scenes that could lead me there and what it would be like when I do get there." The other students each took turns explaining how they imagined her achieving her goal. Mya expressed her gratitude and reassured herself that she was in the right place and that transitioning into the event management position could be accomplished quickly.

**Final Contemplative Reflections**

Mya's reflection written on her last day in Finland is powerful and speaks to the bond she felt with Others, herself, and with Place:

> What I reflected upon today was the closeness humanity can get when traveling day and night together. There were goodbyes today, and I was surprised to realize how potent

> they felt. Really, we were all strangers before we landed in Finland[;] now[,] we leave with a shared sense of what our reality was—the immersion into the country—and this connection is sacred to the human bond. Experiencing novelty together is beautiful and somewhat lost in society. I hope to always seek adventure, learning, compassion, and reflection with those I am so fortunate to share space with. This was such a wonderful trip while allowing connection to others, also connection back to myself—and oh[,] how I missed my inner sacredness. Peace and a slow life are two pillars I will take with me moving forward.

Mya continued that thread in her final reflection written upon return, where she said the Finland program allowed her to "recenter myself back to my internal Zen." She hints at the factors that led to her feeling experiential coherence when she describes:

> Stepping out of routine and being able to experience novel situations was like zapping me back to my natural state of curiosity, positivity, and adventure-seeking notions. Being in a country like Finland allowed me to slow down, build connections with the group and with locals, see new sights, eat new dishes, try bits of a new language, and view the world from a broadened landscape.

Mya's perspectives while participating in a collective experience are highlighted by the emotions she described as she bonded with like-minded others, resonated with Place in Finland, and contemplated on herself as she navigated life transitions.

**Paige**

Paige spent her childhood in a small Minnesota town and had only traveled within the United States before participating in the *Growing Green* program. As she had never traveled internationally, Paige expressed her excitement to "explore the world and learn about different cultures" in her first written reflection. As she continued writing, Paige indicated an openness to learn from the class and experience in Finland, "what I want out of my life and the experiences I want to have." Paige's quest to learn about Finnish culture and herself became apparent as recurring themes in her course assignments, reflections, and focus groups.

As a second-year civil engineering major, Paige wanted to learn about sustainable practices in Finland that were "not taught in the Civil Engineering curriculum on the NDSU campus." Paige saw the gap in course offerings as an opportunity to introduce sustainable topics to campus. For her final project, Page designed a student club for civil engineering majors to learn about sustainable practices and materials. Among the outcomes, Paige indicated that the club would "create a culture of students with a special set of skills that give them a step ahead in both their academics and future careers." This outcome reflects Paige's perspective on her role in the world as skills-based and achievement-focused.

Sustainability and well-being were topics that Paige had an interest in for her personal life. Before going abroad, Paige wrote that she believed, "Personal well-being is achieved when the well-being of society is improved, along with the well-being and sustainability of the environment around them." Paige was curious to discover how Finnish culture practiced well-being and sustainability and to "incorporate these practices into my daily life." The desire to learn and integrate additional well-being practices arose from a yearning to balance Paige's achievement mentality with living a happy life. This desire exemplified an individual perspective within the collective experience in Finland.

### *Contemplative Practice*

Paige's initial written reflection described her current contemplative practices as "stitching, walks, watching movies[,] and doing an [at-home] spa day." While these may be practiced contemplatively, the way Paige described the purpose indicates they are more indicative of relaxation techniques. Paige noted that the practices she does assist with getting through stressful times. The practices elicit "a sense of calm and relaxation to feel refreshed" for Paige to return to "work and focus mode, to do the best I can." Paige believes incorporating relaxation practices facilitates living "the happiest and healthiest life that I can."

Each focus group includes a ten-minute meditation as part of the Power of Eight intention group, where everyone closes their eyes in silence. Most students found it new to experience having their eyes closed in a group meditation. Halfway through the meditation during the first focus group in Finland, two students giggled and returned to silence. After the meditation, each of the participants took turns discussing the experience. The giggle was initiated when one participant, Lauren, peeked to see Paige, who also had opened one eye. Paige responded to the group, "If I close my eyes too long, I start to feel weird. [Lauren laughs] … I got to see what everybody else is doing. [group laughter]" Lauren and Paige shared a laugh during the discussion of the discomfort they experienced when having their eyes closed in a group.

Paige often used a joking tone and would describe things in a fun way to cause people to laugh. Even when explaining her preferred contemplative practices during the first focus group, Paige added humor, "For me, it's probably just a simple, everyday shower. And if I really want to get into it more, a full-on spa night. [Paige laughs, followed by group chuckles] Like face masks, eye mask, lip mask, foot mask, butt mask, [everyone laughs] and boob mask." The challenges of

feeling at ease during group meditation and emphasizing more relaxation-oriented practices suggest that contemplation is a newer practice for Paige.

During the first focus group, eight students responded positively when prompted to share what they had learned about themselves from contemplative practice. Paige was the first to voice her discomfort as she said:

> Yeah, so I'm the opposite. When we would sit in class or sitting here meditating, I'm thinking about a bunch of different stuff that I'm not supposed to be thinking about. Because I think just sitting here just gives me the time for, like, my brain to just go crazy. I need a distraction. … I wish that we would have done other mindful activities, like go to a yoga class … or go for a long walk and or something like that. Because for me, sitting and journaling, … I feel like I'm doing it more because it's an assignment. … I also can't just sit there and close my eyes because … I'm not getting anything out of it. [laughs]

Paige's response suggests that she has not yet achieved the level of practice required to bring her mind, body, and emotions into coherence. Lauren reminded Paige that contemplation is a practice and a skill that improves as one continues practicing.

Paige appreciated the slower pace of life and relaxed attitude in Finland, yet spoke about how she wrestled with incorporating it personally. The focus group in Finland is where the contrast was fresh in Paige's mind, "I kind of get, I don't want to say frustrated, but I'm like, you're going so slow! [group chuckles] If there's a person in front of me [she motions walking fast]." After that, Paige touched on the topic of a relaxed attitude when she commented on how Finns get together for drinks before dinner, "I feel like here they're like, okay, beer is good for dinner. [group laughter] … It's just so frustrating to me because I want to be like you, but I

can't.” Paige regularly noted that it was difficult for her to relax or not think about how to accomplish something.

Not all the students felt the same discomfort, so as they voiced their alignment with a mindful and slow way of being, the conversation shifted to appreciation. By the end of the first focus group conversation, Paige had a realization about the Finnish approach to happiness. Paige said, “We just don't … realize that we can look at it a different way. … they literally function just like I do, but I think they're so happy because they do it at such a slower pace.” Despite Paige's struggles with slowing down in the first focus group, the reflective discussion appeared to have shifted her mindset. In her written reflection on day seven out of ten, Paige wrote, “I am connecting well to the lifestyle here. I love how laid back [sic] and slow paced [sic] the culture is here. I find it so relaxing and stress relieving.” When asked during the second focus group if the students remembered experiencing unscripted mindfulness, Paige recounted a time before the first focus group. She described her attempt to embody being Finnish while canoeing in the national park. Paige said, “The water was just so peaceful, and it wasn't really breezy, and there was a blue sky. … The water is like glass … I just tried to … take it in and … be … with nature like the Finns.” Despite the initial challenges Paige faced acclimating to a new way of being, she eventually felt at ease over her time in Finland.

Despite Paige's earlier comments in the first focus group that the written reflections felt more like an assignment, her later reflection upon returning from Finland demonstrates her appreciation for the practice. Paige reflected on their usefulness in the second focus group:

> I think that just basically helped me remember. Because then … I was forced to remember the whole day, exactly what I did and exactly how I felt. It was like, [uses different voice] I have to write this down. So it really made me try and soak in as much as

> I could while I was there. … It would actually really help because there are some days where I didn't really write a lot. I was like, hmm, what did we do? … But then the days where I did write more, I was like … we did this and this. … It's stuck in my memory now.

Paige's increasing appreciation for the written reflections and her effort to slow down and be more present demonstrate that, even though these methods were challenging for her, the regular practice of doing them facilitated personal growth.

***Coherence with Others***

Although she had never traveled outside the United States, Paige still acknowledged the importance of immersing herself in another culture to foster understanding. Paige wrote in her initial reflection, "Everyone is different[,] and I believe that everyone should experience other cultures and lifestyles to understand others." Before going abroad, Paige expressed the concept of difference, but her view changed from her experiences with others in Finland. Before leaving for Finland, a course assignment was creating a respectful traveler plan in which the students researched the culture to consider how they would personally interact respectfully. Paige wrote in her journal that she appreciated the assignment because it helped her learn about the culture she would visit in just over a week. Continuing her journal reflection, Paige hinted at her anxiety about the upcoming travel when she wrote, "I hope that when I am there[,] I treat them properly and don't mess it up." The feelings of being anxious and under judgment seem to be a perspective that Paige internalized because she wrote in one of her reflections that "People are always quick to judge."

Paige's worldview, shaped by her life experiences, was challenged and transformed by her interactions with others in Finland. In the first focus group, Paige described that she had

expected the Finns to be “really mean” and instead “noticed people here are really nice.” Paige continued, extrapolating her perceptions, “I thought they were going to be mean like French people. French people hate America, so hopefully they're not mean.” Paige reaffirmed the sentiment of comparison and judgment later in the same focus group as being tied to the United States culture, “…as a society, that's how we are. One person has to be better than the other.” Paige's perspective reflects her life experiences and the lens through which she viewed her time in Finland.

Once Paige realized the people in Finland were just reserved, she became comfortable initiating conversation. For her first written reflection on-site, Paige excitedly shared that she “learned about how social I really am. I talked to so many Finns today. It was really funny!” Paige continued writing in her journal about how much she was already learning about Place and culture through her interactions with “people in public and our waitress at dinner.” During the first focus group, Paige noted how those experiences had gone, “Granted, there are some that don't respond, but I'm like, that's in America too, or whatever. … Anytime I want to interact with someone … they always interact back. They actually want to interact.” Paige frequently wrote about and discussed her engagement with people in Finland, as she valued the experiences and learning from others. During the second focus group, Paige reflected on how different the learning was in Finland; “It was … a lot of experiencing … and living, rather than just hearing about it.” Paige's continued interactions with Finns played a significant role in reshaping her initial perceptions about judging others. Paige illustrated an awareness of her shift in perspective during her final written reflection:

> What I learned about other people is that no matter what country you're from or what heritage you are, everyone has many similarities and many differences. No one is

> perfect[,] and everyone should be treated fairly [and not] thought less of. Before we left for the trip, I thought the Finns would not be as friendly as they were. I was pleasantly surprised. I talked to many Finns in stores, restaurants[,] and grocery stores. From being on this trip[,] I learned to not judge anyone based on the culture they are from or the stereotypes that are around them.

Paige naturally socialized with people in Finland, which gave her valuable insights about others and helped her become more open to a plurality of perspectives with reduced judgment. In contrast to her thoughts before going to Finland, Paige also learned that people share many commonalities, not only differences.

***Experience with Place***

Paige extensively wrote about learning about the Place after the students had experienced a Helsinki city walking tour, which included visits to the National Library, the National Museum, and Suomenlinna Island. Paige reflected on the day and on what she learned:

> I really got to see the strength of the Finns through the history of gaining their freedom. The children were just as strong as the adults during the wars. Being on the island taught me a lot about Finland. They have had such a rough past, fighting for independence. An exhibit at the museum showed diagrams of Finnish rule and area over the years. There was so much war and so much change.

Paige learned much about the "Finnish ways" by observing people on her free day in Helsinki. Every day of experiencing Finland gave Paige new insights into what it means to be Finnish. In her writing, Paige emphasized the importance of nature to the people of Finland after visiting the National Park on both free days, the organic farm visit, and during foraging with the herbalist. Paige's written reflections consistently convey the experience with Place through statements like:

"Finland really puts money into sustainability and natural resources" and the people "love being one with nature instead of just walking through it." As she wrote her final on-site reflection, Paige recognized the value placed on well-being and nature at the culmination of her time in Finland:

> Going to the saunas and pools, I see why the Finns are so happy and healthy! If I could relax like that everyday, [sic] then I would never be crabby. The culture really cares about happiness of the people and [about] nature. In the [United States,] people only care about themselves and money. If we lived more like the Finns[,] then everyone would be more happy and healthy.

The experience of Place opened up insights for Paige into areas of her life that caused stress by introducing her to a different way of living and being connected with nature. The following section delves deeper into this concept and demonstrates how Paige gained self-awareness.

***Individual Perspectives within a Collective Experience***

In Finland, Paige started noticing a positive shift in her health in just eight days. During the first focus group, Paige mentioned that she was mindful of her health:

> …before I came here, I was always on acid reducers [sic] because I felt really bad acid reflux, like to the point where it's in my esophagus, and it feels like I can't breathe. … Since I've been here, I haven't had to take my medication for it. … I don't know if it's stress, food…

Paige observed that Finnish culture prioritizes healthy and sustainable eating. In the second focus group, she reflected on how foraging for food helped her to understand "how much the earth actually can give us if we utilize it." Paige continued by saying that she learned how sustainability is tied to our eating practices. She described the visit to the organic farm as

enlightening because the guide explained, "…we could all sustainably eat meat if we really cut down on our meat and ate more fruits and veggies and stuff that replenishes a lot faster." Paige wrote that the organic farm visit taught her about sustainable farming and how personal meat consumption is also a sustainable practice.

As the second focus group discussion continued, Paige indicated that being in Finland had changed her eating habits, "I try to incorporate a lot more fruits and vegetables now on my diet. I actually don't eat a ton of meat during the day." Paige described her new diet as more sustainable and making her feel better, "Overall, I just feel like I've been a lot healthier since we got back; more mindful of what I'm actually eating and consuming." Paige said the practice of being more mindful about her eating will continue because she can feel the results of her eating choices in her daily life.

Paige also grappled with the fact that she was in a major that she was struggling with and not happy with, but she decided not to change it due to the financial repercussions. The unhappiness Paige had been wrestling with during the first focus group became evident. Bella had described a situation in which her brother felt outside pressure to be successful, and Paige felt resonance with the story as she responded:

> I've thought about changing my major so many times. Because I'm an expensive person… I am not saying that money's everything, but I grew up with the same thing. Money is the topic of conversation every night. It's not, [lowers to male-sounding voice] oh, we don't have enough money. [returns to normal voice] It's how can we make MORE [emphasis] money? [Mya makes a realization sound] And I'm like, we have a lot of money, you know? You know, we're fine. We don't need to talk about money all the time. But then ... I'm thinking, you know, do I even want to be an engineer? [question tone] But

then I'm like... Well, I don't want to change my major because I have all these scholarships that I'll lose, so then I have to pay to go to school. ... I don't want to do that. That costs money. So then I just reevaluate, ah, do I even want to do this? And I go through this every three weeks. Like, I hate this, I hate this class. [said in an exasperated tone] [others chuckle in response] Do I want to go through this? ... You know, I *think* [emphasis] I want to be an engineer? [question tone] But then I also want to do something where … I can be with plants, kind of have a greenhouse or … some flowers all summer. … But then it comes back to the money. I won't *have* [emphasis] a lot of money if that's what I do, so I feel the exact same way your brother does. [laughs] External pressures.

Paige explained how external factors, such as financial considerations and family influence, compelled her to remain in a major that causes stress and unhappiness. Even her description of being an "expensive person" reflects the externally-driven perspective of a consumer mindset. While hints of Paige's internal awareness of what brings her happiness emerged towards the end of her statement, the predominance of "external pressures" overshadowed them.

Paige's written reflections before traveling to Finland also showed the stress from her major. Paige wrote about how she learned about herself while preparing for finals because she is a “procrastinator when I have an assignment I don’t want to do!” The following week, Paige recognized a pattern when she was stressed: “I tend to stop doing the thing that makes me stressed. So I have struggled to focus on what I need to know for my exam.” Stress from school and focus on achievement were common themes Paige grappled with, which she talked about again during the final focus group: “I was very stressed before we went because of school. And that's really the only reason I was stressed because … final exams and final grades weren't put in. I didn't know how well I was going to do.” Paige experienced a break in the stress while in

Finland and for the two weeks upon her return before she began her summer job. Paige indicated that the "large step away from my problems across the ocean" allowed her to "let go and let things be what they are and not try and change them." This was a valuable lesson for Paige to experience in a culture that prioritizes well-being.

The influence from her family, emphasizing achievement, contrasted with taking time to relax. In the first written reflection, Paige described how quickly she noticed her norm of being active and how different it was for her in Finland. Paige wrote, "Normally on vacation[,] I like to be very active, but I had a relaxing time. Normally[,] I am not like that, but I learned I really like to take a breather once in a while." Connection with other students at the park in Turku was another moment when Paige experienced relaxation. She described how comfortable the group felt with one another during those moments, "Some of us just slept in the sun for a little bit, and it was just so peaceful and relaxing that we were in such a safe space with each other."

Before going to Finland, Paige wrote about relief from stress in two instances; the first was her reflection written during the second class period. Paige noted that, during the previous week, she took time for herself to do hobbies. After commenting that it had been a good week, Paige recognized that she learns about herself "each time I sit back, relax and breathe." The second time Paige felt relief from stress was over Easter break when she spent time with her family. The break from school and time spent bonding with her family allowed Paige to "reflect on my choices and life, and I found it very comforting and relaxing to do it with the others I love." Each time Paige stepped away from school to prioritize herself, relax, and socialize with others, she experienced an increase in her sense of well-being.

In the first focus group, there was a conversation about how people in the United States often have an attitude of making someone feel bad for relaxing in the sun. Resonating with the

discussion, Paige imagined her mom saying she had not done that in a long time because she had things to do. The advice Paige imagined giving to her mom in response was to choose to make time to relax. This advice came immediately after Paige described how she had been living her life until then: "I'm not mindful about … my daily activities. It's like, get up, go to school, come home, do homework, shower, go to bed. That's five days a week. … I'm not mindfully [sic] realizing what I did that day." This realization about the importance of slowing down, being more mindful, and prioritizing well-being over achievement reflected an inverse of the identity Paige had of herself up to that point.

Paige's perspective of what she learned and experienced in Finland reflects her personal lens. The pressures of academic life and her upbringing's achievement mentality weighed heavily on Paige as she prepared to travel to Finland. Taking a step away from her everyday life pushed those influences aside and allowed her to be present and experience coherence in Finland, even when challenging. In her final written reflection, Paige articulated this concept as she explained what she learned about herself during her time in Finland:

> I need to learn to take life in the slow lane sometimes. I kept getting frustrated at first with how slow the Finns are and realized that maybe I need to take a step back and reevaluate myself. I took a step back when I got back from the trip and took it slow. It felt so refreshing and peaceful to take my time in my daily activities. This allowed me to be able to think clearly and function better than normal. I will try to continue this no matter how against it is in America's culture.

Paige became aware of a new way of living and being in the world, contrasting with what she had known her entire life.

Although Paige recognized the need to be more mindful and care for herself in Finland, returning to her everyday life led her to continue her previous patterns. During the second focus group, Paige reported that her acid reflux had returned with her new job and a return to old habits. The discussion helped Paige voice the difference she was feeling:

> …being over there did help. And coming back, I was good for like a week or two, but then … I got into a work routine. I'm not really doing … self-care and relaxation. … Last week, I worked forty hours in three days.

The stress of working long hours during the summer impacted Paige in a way that was similar to her experience during school. Even though Paige had gained awareness and experienced a new way of being in Finland, she reverted to her previous patterns in just a few weeks. As Lauren had advised, contemplation is a practice, and the same goes for prioritizing well-being.

**Conclusion**

As illustrated above, Mya and Paige participated in the same collective experience but had different thoughts and feelings. They experienced the *Growing Green* program through the lenses of their previous patterns. Mya and Paige approached contemplative practice and reflection from their respective subjective viewpoints, resulting in varying levels of critical subjectivity. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive exploration of critical subjectivity. It enables learners to contextualize others and their communities while concurrently self-contextualizing their position concerning the external world (Komjathy, 2017).

The collective group of students entered the same classroom, engaged in the same contemplative practices, completed identical coursework, and followed the same itinerary in Finland. However, it is clear from the data that each student experienced it uniquely. At the same

time, there would be commonalities and connections between the perspectives that would overlap, especially in moments of experiential coherence.

Mya and Paige may not fully recognize the shifts in perspective they experienced while abroad, but their physical, emotional, and mental bodies sensed them. Mya's awareness of Self, Others, and Place was heightened by being experienced with contemplative practice. Mya integrated the changes she experienced abroad into her daily life upon returning, indicating an updated way of being, at least for the first few weeks upon return. For Paige, returning to her regular life and the external pressures caused a shift away from the new form of being she initially could implement. Paige found contemplative practice new and did not at first intend to continue practicing it upon her return. Disrupting previous patterns is challenging, but Paige is now physically, mentally, and emotionally aware of the importance of a healthier lifestyle focused on well-being. Regardless of their chosen paths, each student will continue their life with the *Growing Green* program having had a lasting impact.

# Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the students' perspectives on participating in an education abroad program that incorporated contemplative practices. It drew on insights students gained while participating in a short-term, faculty-led program in Finland. The findings illustrate that incorporating contemplative practices in the course and program abroad nurtured a deeper awareness of Self, Others, and Place. Chapter 7 commences with an overview of the study, followed by a discussion of the three primary findings: experience of Place, experiential coherence, and individual perspectives within a collective experience. In the subsequent section, the researcher's final reflections on the findings are presented, following the heuristic approach. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the conclusions and offers suggestions for future research.

Within the course, students encountered a blend of critical and contemplative pedagogy, merging into what is termed critical contemplative pedagogy. This educational approach integrates inner-directed contemplative practices to deepen knowledge and compassion with critical pedagogy, an outward-focused approach centered on social change with Others (Kaufman, 2017). The course readings covered topics in environmental sociology, with in-class discussions relating these topics to students' personal lives, the community, and the planet. One class period was conducted off-campus in the local community, where students explored local sustainable businesses, learned about their products, and engaged in dialogue with the staff. A significant assignment for the course required students to develop a community project related to sustainability or well-being. Students conceptualized these projects before their trip to Finland and refined them upon their return, synthesizing course concepts and experiences abroad. The

students' engagement with critical contemplative pedagogy aimed to enrich their understanding of the Self in their regular context and expand this understanding to the global context.

In addition to conventional classroom learning, students participated in contemplative and reflective practices throughout the course and experience abroad. While conventional classroom learning often adopts an objective approach, concentrating on generalized truths *about* the external world and Others (Lamb, 2016), contemplative practices encourage subjective learning. Subjective learning considers the learner's internal world crucial for comprehending and exploring the external world (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017). Employing subjective contemplation and reflection nurtures students' consideration of their external conditioning and the influences shaping their identity as they contemplate the identities of Others and communities (Komjathy, 2017). Subjective contemplative practices enhance compassion and connection to the Self, Others, and the natural world (Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

Another crucial element of education abroad and critical contemplative learning involves individuals' relational experiences and dialogues. This intersubjective approach creates a sense of shared meaning and togetherness through interpersonal interactions, fostering critical awareness by uncovering assumptions (Forbes, 2017). Students participating in short-term education abroad programs interact with their peers and instructors, establishing group connections and facilitating learning. Dialogues and discussions guide students in extracting heightened meaning from their experiences (Pasquarelli et al., 2018). Students' sense of Place is enriched through interactions with local community members (Chiocca, 2021).

As proposed in Chapter 2, critical intersubjective pedagogy promotes students' understanding of Place through interactions with local Others, communities, and the natural world. Combining critical pedagogy with the pedagogy of place introduces a distinctive

dimension to social transformation, in which students consider "the contextual, geographical conditions that shape people and the actions people take to shape these conditions" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 4). Developing a sense of Place in an education abroad program can foster transformational learning and enhance cultural awareness (Chiocca, 2021). After engaging with Place and Others, reflection encourages students to consider their positionality and understand perspectives outside their own (Adkins & Messerly, 2019; Chiocca, 2021).

This study delved into the connection between contemplative pedagogy and education abroad, an area with limited exploration in current research (Clancy, 2020; Conboy & Clancy, 2022). The research questions revolved around understanding the connection between subjective, intersubjective, and objective learning within the context of global engagement:

1. What are the students' perspectives on their learning when participating in a short-term education abroad program that incorporates contemplative practices?
2. How do students perceive and describe their subjective and intersubjective experiences in a short-term education abroad program that incorporates contemplative practices?

To address the research questions, I employed spiritual and qualitative methodologies. I also utilized the heuristic approach during a short-term education abroad program, *Growing Green,* at North Dakota State University (NDSU).

**Discussion of Findings**

The overarching theme threaded through the three chapters of findings centered around the transformative influence of incorporating subjective and intersubjective contemplative practices in the *Growing Green* education abroad program in Finland. Contemplative and reflective practices nurtured students' inner awareness, particularly as they were removed from

their usual cultural patterns during the experience abroad. The immersive nature of the program, coupled with the deepening awareness of Self, played a pivotal role in fostering personal growth, evolving perspectives, and establishing profound connections with themselves, Others, and Finland. While each chapter approaches this theme uniquely, collectively, they underscore the substantial learning experiences these students encountered.

***Finding: Experience of Place***

Chapter 4 explored the theme of the experience of Place, examining how participants connected with Finland's local environment and culture. This theme emerged in response to the research question: What are the students' perspectives on their learning when participating in an education abroad program that incorporates contemplative practices? Place emerged as a significant factor for learning that was missing in the Contemplative Education Abroad Conceptual Framework (Figure 2.1). Place is the setting for the lived experience, a fundamental component of understanding the setting and identity of a location. Students better understood themselves, Others, and Place through contemplative and reflective practices and their experiences in Finland. The immersive approach goes beyond objective learning commonly found in conventional classroom education, involving sensory and emotional engagement with local residents and the natural environment of Finland. Additionally, the findings suggested that the experience of Place was reinforced through interactions with local others, connection with nature, and independent exploration.

The concept of critical pedagogy of place, discussed in Chapter 4, examined the intersections of environment, culture, and education through critical dialogue and relationships of care for both human and non-human Others (Gruenewald, 2003). The *Growing Green* program allowed students to integrate learning about a new cultural setting with their personal

experiences, fostering a deeper understanding of themselves. This immersive experience engages the body, mind, and emotions, facilitating critical Place-based learning (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). The findings in Chapter 4 illustrated that the students' learning transcended conventional classroom education, as their embodied experiences evoked emotions and deepened their understanding of culture and society. These experiences were fundamental to their learning of critical pedagogy of place, involving sensory engagement and exploration of subjective experiences.

Learning about Place appears to be enriched by subjective contemplative practices that facilitate students' ability to be present and engaged while experiencing a removal from regular cultural patterns and stressors. Feeling their bodily sensations and emotions while exploring a novel location nurtured openness and curiosity. Emotions played a significant role in the students' experiences, with many describing a sense of peace and relaxation during their time in Finland. This sense of peace aligns with the idea of re-educating people in the art of living well where they are. The students recognized the importance of well-being and sustainability for themselves and their environment, internalizing the felt experience of Place through their bodies and emotions.

Interactions with local Others were critical to the students' experience of Place. The intersubjectivity formed new awareness and understanding *between* the Self and Others represented by We (Gunnlaugson et al., 2017). The students appreciated their interactions with Finns as they deepened their sense of Place and cultural understanding. Connection with Place highlighted how students strengthened their bond with nature through experiences common in Finnish culture. Both guided and independent encounters with Finns, especially within nature,

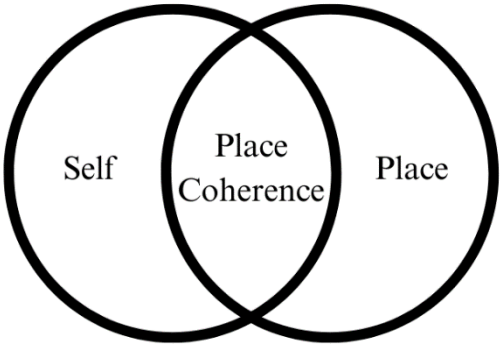
revealed the significance placed on the natural world in Finnish culture. Each experience reinforced previous learning and expanded students' understanding.

The final independent exploration subtheme focused on the students' unguided exploration of Finland alone and in small groups. Their independent exploration engaged students in the present moment, and as they reflected through writing and discussion, it led to insights into Finnish behavior, values, and culture. The students highlighted their most significant periods of learning as having occurred during periods of independent exploration. Rather than being guided through the experience, students took ownership of their learning, allowing them to interact with local Others and Place without assistance. The bonds within the group and Place were reinforced through the intersubjective coherence. As students explored independently, profound learning happened through their social engagement and experiential learning. The students' experience of Place resulted in an updated Self- and Other-awareness committed to replicating Finnish approaches to well-being and sustainability. The experience in Finland taught the students the importance of slowing down, being present, and embracing independent exploration for deeper learning.

The students' experience of Place extends beyond conventional classroom boundaries, emphasizing the significance of embodied experiences, emotions, and engagement with Others. Their experience of Place mirrors the intersubjective learning diagram (Figure 2.4) discussed in Chapter 2, which illustrates the overlap between Self and Other. Figure 7.1 offers a visual depiction of the experience of Place.

**Figure 7.1**

*Experience of Place*




A student's mind/thoughts, body/senses, and heart/emotions resonate with Place through their experience, generating coherence. The descriptors used for Place differ from those used for Self because our words do not personify Place but are specific to locations. The term 'setting' is commonly employed to describe the physical aspect of Place, akin to 'body' for Self. Similarly, the identity of a Place is a mental conceptualization used to describe a location. The word 'ambiance' captures the emotions evoked by a Place. The three aspects of Place contain information that we can objectively comprehend with our minds; however, experiencing Place brings this information into our senses and emotions.

***Finding: Experiential Coherence***

Chapter 5 delved into experiential coherence, in which the students actively engage their minds, bodies, and emotions in the present moment. Contemplative practices, often associated with being present, also facilitate a sense of harmony described as coherence. Psychophysiological coherence is when the body, mind, and emotions synchronize to foster receptiveness and calmness during interactions and experiences (*The Science of HeartMath*, 2023). The students in the program indicated coherence from a subjective perspective and with Others from an intersubjective one. Experiential coherence expands to encompass the sense of

harmony or resonance felt during novel experiences with Self, Others, We, and Place. This thematic exploration addresses the research question: How do students perceive and describe their subjective and intersubjective experiences while participating in an education abroad program that incorporates contemplative practices?

The novel experience abroad meant that the students stepped away from their regular cultural influences and stressors. This study suggests that including contemplative practices facilitated the ability to fully engage in the present moment. Removal from familiar cultural and mental frameworks meant the students could concentrate their minds, bodies, and emotions during subjective and intersubjective experiences. The physical and emotional space allowed them to achieve periods of experiential coherence, establishing a deepened connection with Place and Others. By intertwining contemplative practices with lived experiences, students forged a relationship between external events and their inner thoughts and emotions. Students indicated the presence of intersubjective experiential coherence during shared moments, conversations on mutually stimulating topics, and shared emotional states. This resonance manifested with or without verbal communication, converging the physical senses, minds, and emotions in shared resonance. While students did not explicitly reference experiential coherence, their expressions subtly implied its existence during moments of emotional alignment with Place and Others.

Experiential coherence led to subjective and intersubjective encounters of resonance with each other and the surrounding environment, facilitated by contemplative practices and daily written reflections. Focusing on the present moment, whether through structured or unstructured program activities, permitted students to forge connections with the emotions evoked by their physical experiences. Coherence appeared to be facilitated by engaging in contemplative practices in class, experiencing contemplative moments on-site, and maintaining daily written

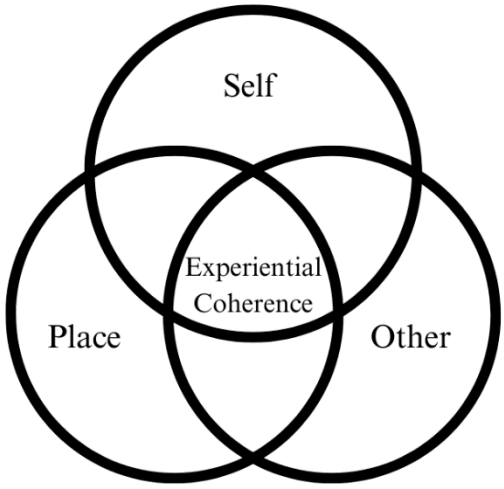
reflections while in Finland. Reflections abroad, written during or shortly after novel learning experiences, included heightened emotional responses due to proximity to the lived experience.

Experiential coherence is distinguished from objective learning, highlighting experiential coherence's impact on conscious and unconscious behavioral changes and students' shifting perceptions. Consistent with the discussion in Chapter 2 regarding objective learning, students demonstrated lower engagement when reflecting on a topic they had not personally experienced. The conversation in the final focus group further indicated that experiential coherence manifests within subjective and intersubjective learning experiences, starkly contrasting with objective learning. Experiential coherence will not always occur in a contemplative abroad program, but the opportunity is more attainable due to having an embodied presence that sparks moments of alignment.

The conceptual model in Figure 2.1 that guided this research considered objective, subjective, and intersubjective learning in contemplative education abroad. The integrative model below incorporates the findings on the experience of Place and experiential coherence with the original elements of the conceptual model.

**Figure 7.2**

*Contemplative Education Abroad: Individual Perspective*




The revised contemplative education abroad model encompasses three key components that reflect an individual's holistic perspective, encompassing their entire Self: body, mind, and heart. This conceptualization is visually depicted through overlapping circles representing the Self, Other, and Place. Figure 7.2 integrates intersubjective learning, Figure 2.4, where We is positioned between the Self and Other circles. Furthermore, the experience of Place, Figure 7.1, is situated where the circles representing Self and Place intersect. The central convergence of Self, Place, and Other lies experiential coherence. The individual perspective model creates a building block for the model in the next section, exploring individual perspectives within a collective experience.

***Finding: Individual Perspectives within a Collective Experience***

Chapter 6 introduced the theme of individual perspectives within a collective experience. Individuals interpret their experiences based on their worldview and social context (Komjathy, 2017). While previous chapters explored themes that emerged from the students' collective experience, this chapter presents exemplary depictions of two participants according to the

heuristic research approach. To illustrate this, the chapter portrays the personal growth and evolving perspectives of the participants, Mya and Paige, during their experience in Finland. The experiences offered through Mya and Paige's eyes illustrate how this program brought individuals together, fostering collective yet individually distinct experiences. Each student interprets their experiences through their worldview and social context, with their perspective revealing who they are and the patterns guiding their thoughts, emotions, and actions.

Mya and Paige participated in the identical collective experience in Finland but had significantly different thoughts and feelings due to their previous patterns. They approached contemplative practice and reflection from their particular subjective viewpoints, resulting in differing levels of critical subjectivity. Critical subjectivity enables learners to contextualize Others and their respective societies while simultaneously self-contextualizing their position in relation to the external world (Komjathy, 2017). Although Mya had previous contemplative experience, she integrated the new perspectives she gained abroad into her life upon return, updating her way of being. On the contrary, when Paige returned to her life back home, she found herself immersed in external pressures and stressors, leading her to deviate from the new way of being she had initially intended to implement. The chapter emphasizes the impact of contemplative experiences abroad, indicating that students come back with a heightened awareness of Self and Others and a motivation to incorporate their newfound insights into their lives.

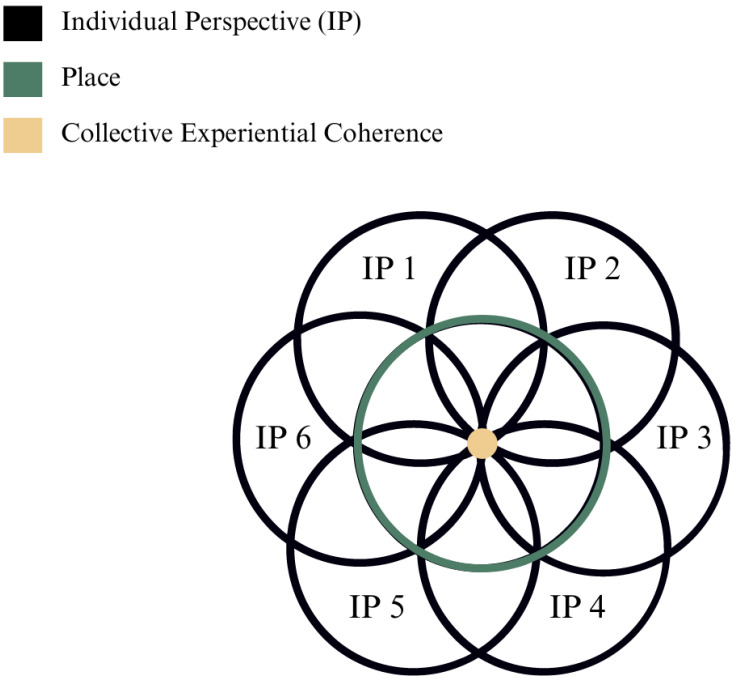
Short-term education abroad programs provide a group of individuals with shared experiences that begin with the initial classroom meeting and continue throughout the on-site itinerary. All participants, including the instructors, collectively explore a unique set of experiences, forming a consensus reality. The collective experience cannot be replicated again,

as the individual perspectives and experiences of Place during a specific timeframe are unique due to the ever-changing nature of existence. An individual's perspective at any given moment reflects who they are and hints at the complexity of the patterns influencing their thoughts, emotions, and actions. This snapshot in time encapsulates not only each individual's perspective and experience but also the alignment at the collective experience level. Each person in the program develops individual perspectives on their experiences abroad while experiencing it collectively. Periods of experiential coherence foster commonalities between the personal experiences that lend to the collective one while bonding them at a group level.

To illustrate the individual perspectives within a collective experience, the model below builds upon the one in Figure 7.2 to include multiple individual perspectives.

**Figure 7.3**

*Contemplative Education Abroad: Individual Perspectives within a Collective Experience*



In the figure above, each student is represented using the term Individual Perspective (IP), corresponding to the Contemplative Education Abroad: Individual Perspective model (Figure 7.2). The Individual Perspective model consisted of Self, Other, and Place, converging to create experiential coherence. The depiction of individual perspectives within a collective experience encompasses all aspects of multiple individual perspectives, with overlap occurring with Place, denoted in green. The manifestation of collective experiential coherence is depicted in the center, illustrated in yellow, where the shared boundaries between individuals and Place intersect. This model expands the concept of the individual perspective to encapsulate the collective experience. While the students in the above model maintain their unique perspectives, the alignment through shared experience constitutes the collective experience.

**Researcher Final Reflections**

I maintained ongoing reflections in line with the heuristic process, in which the researcher is integral to the research. The following represents the synthesis of my thoughts regarding the study's findings. Through an analysis of student perspectives on their learning and subjective and intersubjective experiences in a short-term education abroad program in Finland that integrated contemplative practice, this study revealed that most students enhanced their awareness of Self, Other, We, and Place.

The findings highlight that each learner occupies the center of a unique perspective, carrying patterns and beliefs that shape how one experiences the world. Internal and external influences collected throughout one’s lifetime shape the structure of one's internal self-perception and external projection of Self. Constructions of one’s internal and external reality are multifaceted, akin to a musical chord symbolizing one's identity. Misalignment is felt when external influences heavily impact the patterns or chords, jeopardizing the authenticity of one’s

unique chord. Illustrated in the exemplary depiction of a student, Paige, external pressures led to the manifestation of stress-related physical symptoms, prompting contemplation on a life aligned with well-being. The education abroad experience in Finland, disrupting regular patterns, grounded Paige and the other students in the present moment. The combination of factors alleviated Paige's stress-induced symptoms and nurtured reflections on a life centered around well-being.

When learners acquire knowledge through objective approaches, it primarily involves cognitive or mind-based processes. Just as each individual is multifaceted, learning requires subjective and intersubjective approaches to encompass the entire spectrum. Learning is fundamentally rooted in experience, enriched by the essential human elements of the heart, which involve emotion and intuition, and the body that engages the senses. Mind, heart, and body synergy is why experiential learning is so impactful. Five students conversed in the first focus group on their perceptions of conventional versus experiential learning. Objective approaches were characterized as mentally dull and disengaging. Offered as a contrast, Lauren vividly described the depth of understanding and interest derived from an experience in Finland:

> You can learn all about sustainable agriculture … It doesn't really come to life until you're on the farm. … [the farmer's] cattle have so much room to graze. … They're not just destroying one area of land; they have room so the forests can still flourish. … It really brings the material to life and makes it real.

Lauren's account underscores the significance of engaging the physical body in learning, aiding in the conceptualization and animation beyond the confines of the mind.

As previously mentioned, the Self is multifaceted and dynamic. One's experience of the subjective Self enlightens knowledge within and without. Individuals who accompany learning

with contemplation bring awareness to their subjectivities and patterns previously unseen. Contemplation encourages experiencing the present moment with the mind, body, and heart – the greatest teacher of the Self. Resonance and harmony among the three aspects bring one into a state of coherence, thereby opening awareness to the chord of one's authentic Self. In her final reflection, Mya wrote about the impact of contemplative experience abroad, stating that she recentered to her "internal Zen." Contemplation and reflection nurtured students' awareness of a new way of being and fostered a centering of the Self.

Beyond the Self lies intersubjective experiential learning with Other and Place. The complexity of the patterns of the Self cannot truly be understood or experienced by Others. However, as each perspective aligns and resonates through joint experiences, coherence is formed. Coherence does not fully illuminate individual perspectives to one another, but it forms something greater, uniting them in the moment. Moreover, the Self needs interactions with other perspectives and Places to illuminate unrecognized aspects for deeper awareness and learning.

Experiences of intersubjective coherence with Other and Place expand learning exponentially as new insight is generated between perspectives and merged within each to update one's understanding of Self. Lauren and Mya shared a story illustrating intersubjective experiential coherence during the second focus group. Alone in the forest at Nuuksio National Park, they lay down to look up at the trees and conversed vulnerably about their childhoods. Mya and Lauren were immersed in nature, removed from external cultural patterns, and fully engaged with one another. Their presence in the experience nurtured a resonance of souls on an emotional topic. Alignment with Self, Other, and Place brings critical awareness that empowers individuals to recognize connections, understand other perspectives, and think, act, and feel in updated ways. One of the deepest recognitions many students had was that each person lives according to their

personal and cultural influences in the best way they know how. This recognition shines awareness on the sacredness of the Other.

A passage from Thoreau's (2017) work that I encountered upon returning from Finland prompted me to reflect on the deep connection between Finnish culture and nature. A particular phrase caught my attention – where people have been “condemned to their peck of dirt” (Thoreau, 2017, p. 9). I reflected on the students’ experiences with nature in Finland, specifically Paige’s written reflection in which she noted, "Finns love being one with nature instead of just walking through it.” I considered how our separation from nature in the United States causes us to perceive experiences in nature as indulgent, reserved for vacations instead of integral to our daily lives. In contrast, Finnish culture is profoundly intertwined with nature, emphasizing the significance of this subtheme within the experience of Place finding. In many ways, technology has supplanted nature as the focal point of our lives. However, as reported in the second focus group, the students' perspectives shifted from their time in Finland, inspiring them to set aside their devices and regularly embrace the practice of being present in nature.

Wisdom is forged in the coherent engagement of the mind, body, and heart through experiences with Other and Place, forming a continuous and iterative cycle. Immersing oneself in the present moment intensifies the connection with the emotional and sensory dimensions of an experience. Experiential coherence can emerge when practicing presence in a Place and with Others. While reflections have proven instrumental in facilitating learning, they often remain primarily cognitive, lacking a robust connection with the body, emotions, and lived experience. Reflection, confined to the mind, creates separation from the experience. Contemplation transcends traditional reflection, enriching the learning experience by incorporating critical components of the body and heart. Contemplative practice propels learning beyond the cognitive,

delving into the realms within – senses and emotions – and without – Others and Place. Dialogue and interactions with Others offer intersubjective learning experiences that expand awareness of perspectives beyond the Self, fostering connection and compassion. Being physically present in a novel environment while attuning to one's senses and emotions nurtures learning about Place and culture.

Objective learning, coupled with subjective and intersubjective experiential coherence, harmonizes individual chords through compassion and understanding, culminating in the formulation of a collective experience. Deep learning emanates from experiential coherence, embedding itself in the conscious and unconscious realms of Self, influencing thoughts, emotions, and actions. Thus, it perpetuates an authentic harmony of the Self, continually tuning to the music of life without diminishing or creating discord but rather enhancing the concord of sound represented by the orchestra of the collective experience.

**Conclusions**

Integrating contemplative practice into the curriculum of a short-term education abroad program enriched students' connection with Self, Other, and Place, thereby enhancing their learning experiences and altering their perspectives. While the process of constructing updated meanings through reflection is a common aspect of education abroad programs (Brewer & Cunningham, 2009; Brewer & Ogden, 2019; Pasquarelli et al., 2018; Savicki & Priestley, 2019), the salient nature of the transformed perspectives described by the students on the *Growing Green* program seemed to invite a new way of living and being. The ongoing contemplation throughout the course before departure cultivated a sense of presence and awareness among the students, evident in their written reflections and focus group discussions. The significance of

these evolved perceptions and ways of being is that they could promote socially active students with heightened compassion for Place and Others (Clancy & Conboy, 2023).

Contemplative practices and reflection enriched students' subjective and intersubjective learning, enhancing their experience of Place. Participants' interactions with local Others, dedicated time for independent exploration, and the practice of being present with their mind, body, and emotions during their experiences contributed to their deepened learning of Place. Prioritizing the experience of Place is essential in designing education abroad curricula and programs. Meaningful engagement with the local environment, including replicating local practices and authentic interactions with local Others, is crucial for fostering deep understanding. These engagements should extend beyond guided experiences. Program itineraries must allow for independent exploration to empower students to take ownership of their learning and experiences, strengthening their connection with Place. Integrating contemplative practices serves as the bridge connecting all these learning components through the experience of Place. These practices facilitate mental awareness, physical embodiment, and emotional connection, thus imbuing understanding throughout the Self.

While reflections are commonly incorporated into education abroad curricula (Brewer & Cunningham, 2009; Brewer & Ogden, 2019; Savicki & Brewer, 2015; Savicki & Priestley, 2019), this study underscores the advantages of integrating contemplative practice. Continuous contemplative practice and reflection nurtured awareness of Self, Other, We, and Place, encouraging harmony among the facets referred to as experiential coherence. While the various aspects of experiential coherence were not consistently present throughout the entire education abroad experience, they played a crucial role in facilitating learning through connection. Experiential coherence manifested during the visit to the Finnish home, independent group

picnics in the park, and deep conversations between two students in the forest. The iterative cycle of experiential coherence during the lived experience continuously updated students' perceptions and ways of being, both consciously and unconsciously. This combination nurtures experiential coherence, supports awareness, and facilitates the integration of learning from subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and experience of Place. Such integration enables learners to establish compassionate connections, empowering them to perpetuate relationships of care for Self, Others, and Place upon return.

Coherence extends beyond the facets of Self, Other, We, and Place; it also occurs collectively. Although each student maintains their individual perspective throughout the experience, the alignment among these perspectives constitutes a collective experience. Each perspective contributes during shared moments and experiences, bonding the group through collective encounters. This study did not encounter any issues with group dynamics; however, such problems can arise, potentially leading to dissonance rather than coherence. Each of the findings underscores the importance of contemplation in aligning and bringing presence throughout the experience abroad to facilitate transformational learning. The coherence of Self in students' bodies, minds, and emotions is foundational to coherence with Others, We, and Place, ultimately formulating a collective experience. These connections and resonance permeate throughout, fostering wisdom through engaged learning experiences. Education abroad practitioners and educators should recognize the significance of individual contemplative practice and engage with it at a group level. The compassion, understanding, and awareness that emerge offer an opportunity for this new generation of learners to collaborate in healing the separation and Othering that occurs across individuals, societies, and the natural world.

**Suggestions for Future Education Abroad Programs**

The findings suggest that the inclusion of contemplative approaches in critical education abroad can promote profound student learning by fostering greater compassion, open-mindedness, and understanding towards themselves and others. The following offers several recommendations for future education abroad programs based on the findings of this research:

- Integrate Contemplative Practices: Incorporate contemplative practices throughout the program to enhance subjective and intersubjective learning. These practices appear to facilitate mental awareness, physical embodiment, and emotional connection, contributing to a deeper understanding of Self, Other, and Place.
- Prioritize Place-Based Learning: Emphasize meaningful engagement with the local environment, including authentic interactions with local people and replicating local practices. The findings indicate it is essential to go beyond guided experiences and allow for independent exploration, empowering students to take ownership of their learning and fostering a deeper connection with the Place.
- Foster Experiential Coherence: Nurture awareness of Self, Other, We, and Place through continuous contemplative practice and reflection. The findings indicate that this encourages harmony among these facets and facilitates transformative learning experiences. Recognize the importance of integrating contemplative practice to support experiential coherence and the integration of objective, subjective, intersubjective, and place-based learning.
- Acknowledge Collective Experience: While each student maintains an individual perspective, the results indicate a collective experience that emerges from shared moments and encounters. Encourage group-level engagement through intersubjective

contemplative practices to foster coherence during several points in the educational experience.

- Promote Compassionate Connections: Recognize the potential of contemplative practices to cultivate compassion, understanding, and awareness among students. This offers learners the opportunity to collaborate in healing societal divisions and fostering relationships of care for Self, Others, and Place.

Future education abroad programs can benefit from integrating contemplative practices, prioritizing place-based learning, and fostering experiential coherence to create transformative learning experiences that promote compassionate connections and collective wisdom. As more programs integrate contemplative practices and combine objective, subjective, and intersubjective learning experiences, further research will help develop best practices for contemplative education abroad.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Generally, this study highlights the need for additional studies on contemplative education abroad. Researchers could explore the long-term effects of contemplative practices on students' personal development, academic performance, and cross-cultural understanding. Moreover, examining the role of contemplative education in promoting sustainable and ethical global citizenship could provide valuable insights for shaping future education abroad programs.

Given the study's small sample size and scope, additional research could encompass locations outside of the Global North and include a diversity of student demographics and perspectives. Exploring the cultural and subcultural influences that impact each facet of the exchange, from the students to the location, would be an intriguing avenue for study. The *Growing Green* course focused on well-being and sustainability, and delving into programs with

different themes may yield unique results since students may not be predisposed to learning via contemplative intersubjective practices. Finish culture inspires wellbeing and connection with nature, whereas other locations could invoke alternative sentiments. Similarly, an itinerary primarily based in an urban or rural setting would influence student perspectives and their experience of Place. Additional studies integrating contemplative practices in long-term education abroad programs can begin to shape a comprehensive understanding of broader themes across programs.

Subsequent research can delve further into the intersubjective nature of contemplative education abroad, explicitly focusing on group meditative experiences, such as the Power of Eight practice (McTaggart, 2017). This study held only two intersubjective meditation sessions; however, regular practice may offer additional insights. While students in the *Growing Green* program experienced an intersubjective group meditation near the end of their experience abroad and after return, incorporating it before departure could nurture intersubjectivity and connection earlier. Research questions probing student perspectives on contemplative intersubjective experiences could enhance the resulting data on the topic, leading to additional areas of consideration.

Additionally, research investigating the relationship between contemplative practice and the experience of Place would offer an opportunity to explore the topic with greater nuance. Subjective and intersubjective contemplative practices conducted in diverse areas within a location may influence the experience of Place. The findings suggest examining the learning that occurs during independent exploration with its connection to the experience of Place. Studies that develop greater insight into the experience of Place across various disciplines and settings will contribute to the body of knowledge on this topic.

Finally, subsequent research exploring contemplative, experiential coherence among the Self, We, Others, and Place, especially concerning the collective experience, can potentially push the boundaries of current knowledge on education abroad. Investigations into student perspectives on experiential coherence could broaden prospects for additional study. Research aiming to understand how experiential coherence enhances learning can augment previous research on experiential learning. Further investigation may yield insights not represented in the current research, leading to greater comprehension and expanding the body of knowledge.

## Conclusion

Distinguishing between the influential neoliberal paradigm in education abroad and the one proposed in this study, grounded in critical contemplative pedagogy, signifies a departure in the approach to global learning experiences. While the neoliberal model often diminishes education abroad by prioritizing economic goals and objective learning, critical contemplative education emphasizes a compassionate understanding of Self, Other, and Place. This shift is evidenced by the integration of contemplative subjective and intersubjective learning experiences, which the findings suggest nurture transformative learning. The findings propose that when students engage in contemplative practices to foster somatic and emotional awareness with cognitive understanding, it augments intercultural learning. By promoting meaningful engagement with local contexts, a deepened engagement with Place and Others appears to foster experiential coherence. Complementing education abroad experiences with contemplative practices encourages students to develop compassionate connections and collective wisdom. As more programs embrace these principles, further research will refine best practices, ultimately propelling the advancement of this new paradigm in global education.

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# Appendix A: Syllabus

## Growing Green: Exploring Finland's Sustainable Culture

Instructor: Tasha Cary-Waselk
Email: natasha.cary@ndsu.edu
Phone: 701.231.5818
Office: MU 116
Office Hours: TBD

UNIV 379, 3-credits
Preq: None
Term: Spring & Summer 2023
Class Meeting Time: TBD
Classroom: TBD

**Bulletin Description**

Sustainable practices and wellbeing are values embedded in the Finish culture from birth and has contributed to this country being one of the world's leaders in sustainability. This course will take a sociological approach to understand how the Finnish use and act within their environment, in both nature and urban settings. Students will learn how Finland's focus on wellbeing and healthy habits have lead it to be the happiest country in the world and what we can learn from their practices.

**Course Objectives**

This course has been approved for the Social Behavioral Sciences (B) category in general education because students will "use scientific methods to analyze the behaviors, structures, and processes of individuals and groups." In addition, this course has also been approved to meet the Global Perspectives category in general education because students will "focus on analysis of worldwide issues illustrating the interdependence of the world and its people." There will be eight two-hour classes scheduled prior to departure that will outline the course topics, what you will be seeing in Finland, and health and safety. There will be two classes held upon return to debrief the experience and to give final project presentations.

Students will:

- Identify and understand basic components of Finnish identity, history and culture.
- Analyze how values and contributions of Finnish societies provide contexts for individual experiences, values, ideas, artistic expressions, and identities while examining their own values, ideas, and biases.
- Demonstrate appropriate conventions and communication skills in an international setting. In particular, students should be able to demonstrate an understanding of how cultural context shapes individual experiences and values.
- Analyze the interplay of self and society, particularly how social structures shape human experiences in the environment, and how humans shape social structures and the environment.
- Examine the importance of sustainability, human impact, and social wellbeing in the Finnish culture while applying environmental social theories and concepts to examine how Finland interacts with its environment.
- Apply what they have learned about sustainability, human impact, and social wellbeing into their lives, career, and final project using the logic model.

**Required Resources**

Laptop or Tablet (if you do not have access to one, please let me know so I can make arrangements)

Journal/notebook (bonus if it is sustainably made!)

Select Chapters: Culture Smart Finland! The essential Guide to Customs & Culture, by Terttu Leney and Elena Barrett.

Article Readings: Students will read various articles throughout the semester, which will be provided by the instructor in Blackboard.

Sustainablity Note: Since one of the focuses of the course is sustainability, I will not provide any printed materials or resources. Instead, you will find the syllabus, course readings and e-book in BlackBoard. You will need to be sure to bring an electronic device each class period to access these materials. You are encouraged to have a sustainable focus throughout the program and to choose sustainable options when available.

**Assignments/In-class Activities**

*Pre-departure Assignments*: This course will consist of three assignments that will be due prior to travel. These assignments will contribute to deeper learning of the Finnish identity, culture, and what you will be experiencing on-ground.

1. **Reflection Paper (10 points).** For this paper, you will write about what you know about Finland, wellbeing, and sustainability. What are your current wellbeing and sustainable practices? What to you hope to learn about or what would you like to work towards in your sustainable journey? What organizations, resources, businesses, etc. do you know of in the F-M area? Be prepared to discuss this in class. **(2-3 pages)**
2. **Site Visit Brochure (10 points).** Each of you present on one of the site visits we will be doing on-ground. You will work in teams of two and will chose a site visit we will be seeing, a brief historical and cultural overview, develop a travel brochure, and give a short presentation on ground before we visit. Get as creative as you would like with your brochure. The more creative the better!
3. **Cultural awareness and respectful traveler plan (10 points)**. Being a respectful traveler is important and preparing yourself is key. We will have many opportunities to interact with locals and understanding the local culture prior to travel will prepare you for respectful immersion. You will use what we have learned from our readings to develop a plan to be a culturally sensitive and respectful traveler. Using the readings we have done throughout the semester and your own research, you will develop a respectful traveler plan that you will implement while we are abroad. For this, you must be able to articulate Finnish culture and identity. As a class, we will discuss each travel plan and identify group norms for our on-ground experience. **(2-3 pages)**
4. **Free Time Research (5 points).** You will have free time to explore on your own in Turku, Helsinki, and Porvoo. Research what you would like to do and make a plan on how you can structure your time, transportation, food, costs, etc. This will help you be prepared for your free time. **(1-2 pages in your notebook)**

*Reflective Practice (1 point each, 20 points total)*: Throughout the pre-departure course, you will have weekly in-class reflections. Before we start each class, you will have prompts that will relate to the topic for that day and you will also write about how you are feeling about the course and upcoming travel. These will be graded on completion, not content. I want you to be honest and write what you are feeling. I will not be reading your journals, but I will be grading if you have them completed. We will continue to have reflective practice while in Finland.

*Community Social Engagement Project and Presentations (30 points)*: This project will be the focus of the semester. You will choose a topic in sustainability or wellbeing that you are interested in learning more about. You will develop a community engagement project surrounding your selected topic. You will use the logic model to develop said program. The program can be anything you want, whether it pertains to the F-M area, NDSU, or your hometown. You will give a 5 minute presentation on the project prior to travel, write up an outline of your project using the logic model, and give a final presentation on what you learned and what your program will be. **(Program proposal presentation – 5 min, Final presentation – 10 min, Research paper 5-7 pages)**

*In-class Activities and Participation (10 points)*: Throughout the semester, there will be numerous in-class activities that will relate to the topic of that class. You will work on your own or in small groups on activities such as understanding human-environment interaction, ecolabels, environmental suggestion pitch, and more. This course is heavily dependent on class interaction and discussion. You will be responsible to show up to class having read the required readings and ready to have intellectual conversations with your classmates. I

want to you think deeply about the readings to determine how this relates to the overall theme of the class as well as how this has changed your mindset on sustainability and wellbeing.

**On-Site Assignments**

*Program Participation (10 points)*: You will be expected to participate on all program activities, group debriefing sessions, site/cultural visits, drop-off activities, and homestay events. You will also be expected to be on time and respectful of the local communities we will be interacting. We will be doing/seeing some very exciting things and participation is key to a successful group dynamic and experience.

**Grading Criteria and Scale**

| | |
|---|---|
| Reflection Paper | 10 points |
| Site Visit Brochure | 10 points |
| Cultural Awareness Travel Plan | 10 points |
| Reflective Practice | 20 points |
| Free Time Research | 5 points |
| In-Class Participation | 10 points |
| On Location Participation | 10 points |
| Final Project/Presentation | 25 points |
| | 100 points |

| | |
|---|---|
| A = | > 90% |
| B = | 80 to < 90% |
| C = | 70 to < 80% |
| D = | 60 to < 70% |
| F = | < 60% |

**Attendance Statement**
According to NDSU Policy 333 (www.ndsu.edu/fileadmin/policy/333.pdf), attendance in classes is expected.

Veterans and student service members with special circumstances or who are activated are encouraged to notify the instructor as soon as possible and are encouraged to provide Activation Orders.

**Americans with Disabilities Act for Students with Special Needs**
Any students with disabilities or other special needs, who need special accommodations in this course, are invited to share these concerns or requests with the instructor and contact the Disability Services Office (www.ndsu.edu/disabilityservices) as soon as possible.

**Academic Honesty Statement**
The academic community is operated on the basis of honesty, integrity, and fair play. NDSU Policy 335: Code of Academic Responsibility and Conduct applies to cases in which cheating, plagiarism, or other academic misconduct have occurred in an instructional context. Students found guilty of academic misconduct are subject to penalties, up to and possibly including suspension and/or expulsion. Student academic misconduct records are maintained by the Office of Registration and Records. Informational resources about academic honesty for students and instructional staff members can be found at www.ndsu.edu/academichonesty.

**Course Schedule**

| *Date* | Course Topic | Class Activities | Assignments Due | Readings |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Week 1*** | Intro to course/ Environmental Sociolgy | Introductions, icebreaker, course overview, course norms, Mindfulness activity, HEI activity | • In-class Reflective Journal 1 | -*An Environmental Sociology for the Twenty-First Century* |
| ***Week 2*** | Finland History/Culture | Icebreaker, group discussion on readings and jam board first paper, | • Assignment 1: What do you know about Finland, | -*The Sami: A Disappearing* |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | lecture, Mindfulness activity, videos | Wellbeing, and Sustainability?<br>• In-class Reflective Journal 2 | *Indigenous Minority in Scandinavia*<br>*-Sisu: The Finnish Art of Inner Strength*<br>*-Culture Smart Ch. 1* |
| ***Week 3*** | The Nordic Model: Wellbeing, Health, and Equality | Group discussion on readings, lecture/videos, Mindfulness activity | • In-class Reflective Journal 3 | *-The Nordic Model: existence, emergence & sustainability*<br>*-Culture Smart Ch. 2 & 5* |
| ***Week 4*** | The Power of Nature | Group discussion on readings, lecture, Mindfulness activity, video | • Project proposal presentation<br>• Reflective Journal 4 | *-Happiness in Nature?*<br>*-Culture Smart Ch. 6 pg. 127-130* |
| ***Week 5*** | Smart Cities: the future of sustainability | Group discussion on readings, lecture/videos, Mindfulness activity, ecolabel/ sustainable suggestion activity | • In-class Reflective Journal 5 | *-Smart Cities in Finland*<br>*-The Finland we want by 2050: Society's Commitment to Sustainable Development*<br>*- Climate Programme of the City of Porvoo for 2019–2030* |
| ***Week 6*** | Slow Movements in Finland | slow movement group research/presentation activity, video/lecture, Mindfulness activity | • Reflective Journal 6<br>• Assignment 2: Create brochure for on-ground excursion presentation | |
| ***Week 7*** | Social Environmental Movements and Logic Model for Community Engagement Overview | Group discussion on readings, lecture, activity, group environmental movement activity, Mindfulness activity | • In-class Reflective Journal 7 | *-The long and Winding Road: Charting the Course of American Conservation*<br>*-The Evolution Of Environmental Movements*<br>*-Logic Model Readings* |
| ***Week 8*** | Interacting in host community/cultural differences, Pre-departure | Guest Lecture, Group discussion on readings, lecture, group travel norms activity, video, Mindfulness activity, Health and safety, packing, travel, etc. | • Assignment 3: Cultural Awareness and Respectful traveler plan<br>• In-class Reflective Journal 8 | *-View from the Veranda* |
| ***Week 9-10*** | Travel to Finland – Assignment 4: Research free time activities for Turku and Helsinki | | | |
| ***Week 11*** | Debrief/Final presentations | | | |
| ***Week 12*** | Final presentations | | | |

# Appendix B: Itinerary

| Prepared for North Dakota State University<br>May 15-25, 2023 | |
|---|---|
| **COVID TRAVEL NOTES** | • As of the time of this proposal submission, Finland does not have a Covid test entry requirement, although vaccination or proof of recovery is required. This is subject to change between now and the group's arrival in-country. |
| **MON MAY 15:**<br>**DEPART USA**<br>**[-/-/-]** | • Flight details TBD; airfare quoted separately |
| **TUE MAY 16:**<br>**ARRIVE HELSINKI –**<br>**FISKARS – NAANALI**<br>**[-/-/D]**<br>✓ Full Day Coordinator<br>✓ Full day private coach | • Upon arrival, go through customs, meet your local coordinator, and transfer to Fiskars via private coach<br>• Upon arrival in **Fiskars Village**, take a guided tour to learn about its history and present-day life; Fiskars Village was named one of the best sustainable travel destinations in Europe<br>• Continue to **Naantali**; arrive and check-in to your hotel<br>• **Welcome dinner** at a local restaurant (3 courses with table water)<br>• Overnight at Taallisten Tila – Taallinen Farm and Cottages or similar |
| **WED MAY 17:**<br>**NAANTALI – TURKU**<br>**[B/-/-]**<br>✓ Full Day Coordinator<br>✓ Half day private coach | • Breakfast at hotel<br>• After breakfast, visit a **local farm** and learn about traditional, sustainable Finnish farming practices<br>• Lunch on your own<br>• Transfer to **Turku** and take a **guided walking tour** of the old town<br>• Rest of afternoon free to explore and get dinner on your own<br>• Overnight at Forenom Aparthotel Turku or similar |
| **THU MAY 18:**<br>**TURKU**<br>**[B/-/D]**<br>✓ Full Day Coordinator<br>✓ Half day private coach | • Breakfast at hotel<br>• After breakfast, visit the **Turku University of Applied Sciences** for an **Introduction to Sustainable Wellness Tourism** (4 hours)<br>• Lunch on your own<br>• After lunch, visit a typical local home to **experience Finnish family life and culture first-hand**; try **"forest bathing,"** or a nature walk in the woods; help bake a **berry pie**, **swim** and enjoy a **sauna**<br>• Return to Turku<br>• Dinner at a local restaurant (2-courses with table water)<br>• Overnight at Forenom Aparthotel Turku or similar |
| **FRI MAY 19:**<br>**TURKU**<br>**[B/-/-]**<br>✓ Full day Coordinator | • Breakfast at hotel<br>• **Free day to explore and get lunch on your own**<br>• Dinner at a local restaurant (2 courses with table water)<br>• Overnight at Forenom Aparthotel Turku or similar |

| | |
|---|---|
| **SAT MAY 20:**<br>**TURKU – NUUKSIO NATIONAL PARK – HELSINKI**<br>**[B/-/-]**<br><br>✓ Full day Coordinator<br>✓ Full day private coach | • Breakfast at hotel, followed by check-out<br>• After breakfast, head via private coach to **Nuuksio National Park**<br>• Begin your visit at the **Haltia Nature Centre** with a guided tour on Finnish Nature (1hr)<br>• Lunch on your own<br>• After lunch, head out for a **canoe trip on Lake Pitkäjärvi** (2hrs)<br>• Enjoy an afternoon **tea or coffee and bun** (included)<br>• **Free time to try forest bathing** or work on projects before heading to Helsinki (2hrs)<br>• Head to your hotel and check-in<br>• Dinner on your own<br>• Overnight at Eurohostel or similar |
| **SUN MAY 21:**<br>**HELSINKI**<br>**[B/-/-]**<br><br>✓ Full day Coordinator<br>✓ 48 hour Helsinki Public Transport ticket | • Breakfast at hostel<br>• Receive your 48-hour Helsinki public transport ticket (Zone AB) and head out via public transport for a **Helsinki Bike Tour;** view the main sights of the city<br>• Lunch on your own<br>• After lunch, visit the **National Museum of Finland**<br>• Take the ferry (included in public transport ticket) to **Suomenlinna Fortress** and explore<br>• Dinner on your own<br>• Overnight at Eurohostel or similar |
| **MON MAY 22:**<br>**HELSINKI**<br>**[B/-/-]**<br><br>✓ Full day Coordinator<br>✓ 48-hour Helsinki Public Transport ticket | • Breakfast at hostel<br>• **Free day to explore on your own** with public transport ticket (Zone AB)<br>• Today you can explore local clothing shops that focus on sustainability, recycling fabrics and slow fashion (Nudge, Lumoan, Pure Waste, etc.)<br>• Explore Wood City or Kalasatama on your own<br>• Lunch and dinner on your own<br>• Overnight at Eurohostel or similar |
| **TUE MAY 23:**<br>**HELSINKI – PORVOO – HELSINKI**<br>**[B/L/-]**<br><br>✓ Full day Coordinator<br>✓ Full day private coach | • Breakfast at hostel<br>• After breakfast, transfer via private coach to **Porvoo**<br>• Learn about climate-friendly Porvoo in a presentation from Sustainable Development expert **Sanna Päivärinta** (includes coffee, tea, and water)<br>• Afterwards, visit **Bosgård Organic Farm** to learn about their environmental and agricultural principles<br>• Enjoy lunch at the farm (3-courses with tea and coffee)<br>• **Free time to explore the local town**<br>• Head back to Helsinki via private coach<br>• Dinner on your own<br>• Overnight at Eurohostel or similar |
| **WED MAY 24:** | • Breakfast at hostel |

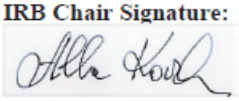
| | |
|---|---|
| **HELSINKI**<br>**[B/-/D]**<br><br>✓ Full day Coordinator<br>✓ 5-day Helsinki Public Transport ticket | • Receive 5-day Helsinki public transport ticket (Zone AB)<br>• Head out for a **foraging workshop in the countryside** near Helsinki that includes:<br>  • Foraging walk to identify wild edible and medicinal plants<br>  • Introducing the local ecology and nature around Helsinki<br>  • Learning to identify and use the most common Finnish wild herbs and vegetables safely<br>  • Learning about the importance of sustainable foraging<br>• Lunch on your own<br>• In the afternoon, head to **Allas Pool** for a traditional **sauna experience**<br>• **Farewell dinner** at a local restaurant (3-courses with table water)<br>• Overnight at Eurohostel or similar |
| **THU MAY 25:**<br>**HELSINKI**<br>**[B/-/-]**<br><br>✓ One private coach group airport transfer | • Breakfast at the hostel, followed by check-out<br>• Transfer via private coach to the airport to catch your flight home |
| **COVID TESTING REQUIREMENT** | • The CDC currently requires all travelers returning to the U.S. to provide proof of a negative Covid-19 viral test (regardless of vaccination status) in order to re-enter the country.<br>• Please stay informed regarding the CDC's re-entry requirements by referring **here** and **here**. |

***** No bookings have been made and rooms are subject to availability. Other hotels may be substituted if any of these are unavailable at time of deposit**

## Appendix C: Human Subjects Review Approval

SIT SCHOOL FOR INTERNATIONAL TRAINING GRADUATE INSTITUTE

**Human Subjects Review IRB ACTION FORM**

| | |
|---|---|
| **IRB Application Number:** 0000209<br><br>**Name of Applicant:** Tanya Kramer<br><br>**Project Title:** A Global Journey Inward: Contemplative Education Abroad<br><br>**Date Submitted:** 4/24/2023<br><br>**Date Revisions Submitted:** 5/5/2023<br><br>**Program/Department:** EDD.GE<br><br>**Type of review:** Full | **Institution:** World Learning Inc.<br>**IRB organization number:** IORG0004408<br>**IRB registration number**: IRB00005219<br>**Expires:** 27 September 2024<br><br>**IRB members:**<br>Alla Korzh, Ed.D.<br>Deepa Srikantaiah, Ph.D.<br>Isabelle Onians, Ph.D.<br>Juan Alex Alvarez del Castillo, Ph.D.<br>Victor Tricot, Ph.D.<br>Peter Weinberger, Ph.D.<br>Melissa Whatley, Ph.D.<br>Wendi Carman, M.Ed.<br><br>**IRB REVIEW BOARD ACTION:**<br><br>___ Approved as submitted<br>__X_ Revise and resubmit<br>__X__ Revisions approved<br>____ Disapproved<br><br>**IRB Chair Signature:**<br>  <br><br>**Date:** 5/9/2023 |

5/9/2023
Congratulations and best of luck with your research.