



Qualitative Research Reports in Communication

Uncertainty Management and Sensemaking as Precursors to Transformative Learning in an International Immersion Service-Learning Experience

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This study is based on an international immersion service-learning/research experience in a remote village in Moldova that provided faculty and students an opportunity to teach journalism and help local students and community representatives create their own online news outlet. Students' existing conceptions were challenged; they experienced uncertainty and struggled to make sense of both their environment and experience. Those were the processes through which we observed transformative learning occur. Using a phenomenological approach, this research grounds the IISL experience in varied disciplines that reveal possible approaches to helping students manage uncertainty, make sense of their circumstances and achieve transformative learning outcomes when facing unexpected challenges beyond student experience.

INTRODUCTION

After nearly 20 hours of travel on four different flights, we were making our last approach above Chisinau, the capitol of Moldova, and our starting point for a three-week international immersion experience in the former Soviet Republic. Despite four months of preparation for our work in a country the students had never heard of the questions came fast and furious.

Student: "Will M (our translator) be waiting for us?"
 Teacher: "Yes."
 Student: "What if she's late?"
 Teacher: "We'll wait for her."
 Student: "What if she doesn't come?"
 Teacher: "She'll be there."
 Student: "But what if...?"
 Teacher: "We'll figure it out!"

And so it went. Whatever the situation, whatever the concern, the fallback response became: "We'll figure it out." All of us had embarked on an endeavor unlike anything we had attempted before. As group leaders we relied on years of traveling off the beaten paths and a resolve that whatever new obstacle fell out of the sky, we'd figure a way over, around, under or through it. By the end of the trip it became a running joke. Whenever this inquisitive student would begin to question our response to unforeseen calamity, she'd stop herself and answer her own query, "I know... we'll figure it out!"

Managing student uncertainty and helping students make sense of the unfamiliar in the relative safety of the classroom can be difficult enough. Transplant that task to another country, another culture, another language, and the unexpected can be paralyzing whether faculty or student. As universities progressively embrace and actively encourage international immersion and service learning experiences, guiding students as they encounter uncertainty and the unfamiliar demands greater attention, whether the context is the local community or a locale halfway across the world.

This qualitative study examines an international immersion service-learning (IISL)/research experience in a village in the Eastern European Post-Soviet nation of Moldova. Faculty and students taught journalism and helped create an online news outlet. Students' conceptions were challenged; they experienced uncertainty and struggled to make sense of their environment and experience. Using a phenomenological approach, this research grounds the IISL experience in varied disciplines revealing possible approaches to

managing uncertainty, making sense of circumstances and achieving transformative learning outcomes while facing unexpected challenges.

BACKGROUND

Moldova, a former Soviet Republic, is a young democracy with an emerging free press that ranked as "partly free" in 2014, according to Freedom House (2014). Political independence came in 1991 with the fall of the Soviet Union. Since then, the country has taken one step back for every two forward in its attempts to build an independent press, a democratic government and an economy that will support its roughly 5 million citizens. As an example, in November of 2014, the Moldovan people elected a pro-European parliament intent on aligning itself with European Union powers. But by May of 2015, just months after news that roughly 20 percent of the nation's assets had vanished from Moldovan banks, backlash evidenced a shift in allegiance back to Russia (Higgins, 2015).

Indeed, the country is one of many contradictions. When it comes to food, its rural residents are self-reliant, laboring long hours farming by hand to grow the crops needed to feed themselves and their families year-round. But given generations of living under communist rule, where the state exercised great control over daily life, there has been little sense of self-agency in much of the population.

Our observations coincide with the research of scholars of Eastern European Post-Soviet democracies and opinions of Moldovans themselves. Lusaevich (2013) maintains that "Citizens acquiesce in corruption in order to receive services from the state and accept these practices because they feel powerless to change the system." In a study of philanthropic behavior in Moldova, researchers found that volunteerism and public participation is extremely low – only 4 percent participated in a social organization or volunteered within the previous year (as cited in EveryChild Moldova, 2010).

Rather, there is an implicit expectation that someone, somewhere else, should fix the problem. Although these were among our observations, Moldovans also can be their own harshest critics. "We know we are a constellation of the absurd," wrote Moldovan journalist Vladimir Lerdorhtov (2013) in a *New York Times* op-ed piece: "Like America, Moldova is a young nation. The difference is, we act like one. In contrast to Americans, who strive toward their

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Our research is based on an international immersion service-learning/research (IISL) experience in a remote village in Moldova. Faculty and students taught journalism and helped local students and community representatives create an online news outlet. Students' existing conceptions were challenged; we studied how they processed cultural differences through sensemaking. Through it all, we observed transformative learning occur. The IISL experience is grounded in varied disciplines that reveal possible approaches to helping students manage uncertainty, make sense of their circumstances, and achieve transformative learning outcomes when facing challenges beyond student experience.