

How international students describe their transformation: A photovoice study

by

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MA, University of Arak, 2011
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We acknowledge with respect the Lekwungen peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

International students come to graduate school with diverse backgrounds and differing perspectives. Research shows that tertiary education is a different experience for them with distinctive, longitudinal impacts on their lives. When individuals are presented with alternative ways of engaging with and understanding social issues, they have the opportunity to make critical assessments that have an impact on their thinking and lives. Having experienced a fundamental transformation regarding my understandings of LGBTQ2S+ issues, Indigenous peoples, and gender inequalities as result of coming to UVic, my study explored how other graduate international students described and experienced their own coming to consciousness. Using photovoice, six international graduate students, including myself as a researcher- participant, this study explored the contributions an academic institution - in this case UVic - had made on their thinking and particularly, how the visuals (e.g. signs, symbols, films, etc.) of the campus, and their own photographs, encouraged students' transformation.

The results showed that these international students became 'agent- learners', taking charge of their own learning as a result of their exposure on the UVic campus and beyond. As they negotiated the cultural differences they encountered - not always something that was easy - their lack of consciousness about inequality and had to think through its implications for when they returned home. Findings also show that for this small group of participants it was the combination of signs and symbols on campus with all levels of education and learning - formal, nonformal, and informal that had the most impact. In addition, the power of storytelling and the imaginative and symbolic language of arts, specifically photography, were significant means for transformation and change.

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Dedication

To John, the dearest in my life;

To my little son, who I carried with me along the way...

&

To those wonderful people who perished in Iran's plane crash, those talented students and researchers who had bright futures ahead of them...

Chapter 1: Introduction

International students like myself come to graduate school in universities with diverse backgrounds and differing perspectives. Research shows that tertiary education is a different experience from most previous educational experiences, and it has distinctive, longitudinal impacts on students' lives (e.g., Adewale, D'Amico, & Salas, 2018; Bang, & Montgomery, 2013; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Wang, Noltemeyer, Wang, Zhang & Shaw, 2018). Some reasons are that graduate experiences can take place within different contexts than the one the student was raised in or that experience provides new learning processes and types of experience. In those different contexts, students may also encounter different discourses that adhere to their previous understandings and experiences of the world, but more importantly, the discourses that oppose or challenge and thus expand their views. Diverse encounters with very new ideas and ways of seeing the world and people within it can disrupt and thus allow students to reflect critically upon their existing assumptions about other people who are not members of their or another dominant group and the types of oppressions individuals may encounter in the society. Diverse encounters can also act to destabilize students' own privileges as members of the dominant group. Higher and adult education scholars know that as individuals are presented with alternative ways of being in and understanding the world, they may make critical assessments of contradictions encountered and may adjust their ways of thinking (Stenklammer, 2012).

This is, of course, my own case as an international student. When I came to the University of Victoria (UVic), I found a very different discussion taking place about, for

example, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Two Spirited (LGBTQ2S+) people. This new discourse made me feel uncomfortable because it challenged my own assumptions and encouraged me to think more critically about what I had been taught about humanity. As an international student coming from a Middle Eastern background, I had witnessed the discrimination and stigmatization of LGBTQ2S+ people, although I realize this also takes place in Canada and other parts of the world. Nevertheless, what was taking place at UVic was a challenge to both homo and transphobia. I came to realize that intolerance and bigotry are learnt and therefore they can be unlearned. In particular, in one of my university classes, I found out the meaning of the rainbow sidewalk across the Ring Road as a sign of diversity and inclusion. Throughout the campus, I began to see other visual signs of inclusivity and respect, including non-gendered washrooms. In addition, I had the opportunity to work with a number of LGBTQ2S+ people on campus as colleagues. We talked about homophobia and other social injustices and challenges in other classroom discussions within pedagogical and leadership contexts. I also read further on my own about these issues. In short, I experienced a journey that shifted my own landscape of thinking and feeling about this population.

Having experienced a fundamental transformation regarding my understandings of LGBTQ2S+ individuals and issues, and having come to greater awareness regarding other social issues such as challenges experienced by Indigenous peoples and gender inequalities, I wondered how other graduate students too were coming to a new awareness as a result of studying and/or working on UVIC campus. However, ideology critique, undermining socially constructed assumptions, power relations, and critical consciousness seem to be sensitive subjects that may not fit comfortably in any easily

defined space, and might not be shared with other people smoothly. A growing number of adult education and arts-based research scholars argue that art, although not without its challenges, can offer an important medium through which we can explore ‘uncomfortable’ issues (Clover & Stalker, 2007; Cumez, 2012). For this reason, my study explored how a small group of international students came to consciousness through living, working and studying on campus, by using an arts-based methodology. My aim in this study is to use photos and photography with a group of international students, including myself, to explore the complexities and potentials of our coming to consciousness. As I come from a very authoritarian country and fear repercussions, I weave my own reflections into this study as if I were simply a participant and do not ‘name’ myself or use “I”.

Statement of the Problem

There exists a great deal of literature on the experiences of international graduate students when they come to universities in the west (e.g., Adewale, 2018; Park, 2017; Tavakoli, Lumley, Hijazi, Slavin-Spenny, & Parris, 2009; Xiong & Zhou, 2018). They tackle a diversity of issues including international students who are developing new identities in the host country, violence against international students, international students’ acculturation, and socio-cultural and psychological adjustments. While most of the studies on the experiences of international graduate students have focused on the international students’ challenges at the graduate school, there is a paucity of studies that look at how international students come to new forms of consciousness about social issues while living, working and studying on campus. But looking at this is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, studies such as mine can tell us what is working well within

the different spheres of studying, engaging, and seeing how more positive attitudes are developed. These studies not only include international students' voice in the academia, but also help academic institutions adopt multiple perspectives regarding their initiatives and students' needs. International students' experience at graduate school has multiple aspects, but often positive aspects of this experience such as informal and non-formal learning are neglected, and this calls for attention (Dogus, 2013). I think taking this research focus is important because by including positive experiences of international students in the research we might help to present a more holistic picture of what goes on at graduate school for international students.

There is also a paucity of studies using arts-based methods with international students in research. One of the few studies is Dogus's (2013) master thesis work. She explored female international graduate students' experiences in the Graduate Students' Society (GSS) using collage and photography. Etmanski's (2007) doctoral study also used popular theatre as a methodology. However, neither of these studies focused on the international students' experiences of change regarding social issues in the host country. This is a gap my study fills.

Studies show that arts-based research gives a different access to imagination that can help researchers expand possibilities of having a more authentic life story when it comes to the complexity of one's experience in the intersection of living in another culture and still having roots in their home country, in its traditions, learnings and values (e.g., Amos & Lordly, 2014; Cooper & Yarbrough, 2016). Additionally, arts-based educators and researchers argue this is a powerful form on its own of consciousness making (e.g. McGregor, 2012; Wang & Hannes, 2014). As an international student who

has dealt with the challenges of expressing myself in another language, I think when English is spoken as a second language, arts, as a universal language, might overcome the limitation of words as being the sole legitimate language of research.

Research Questions and Objectives of the Study

The research questions that guide this study are: 1) How do international students on UVic campus come to consciousness about social issues?; 2) What implications this will have when they return to their home countries or in their future work in Canada?; and 3) What has enabled them to newly or differently understand social issues and what difference it will make in their lives?

This study aims at discovering how the visuals and activities on UVic campus have led to a different consciousness and transformation in international students. My intention was to explore the possible contributions an academic institution - in this case UVic - makes to the fostering of a new critical consciousness and as a result a transformation of ideas of international graduate students. An important objective of this study was to use and explore together with the participants, how an arts-based method, specifically photovoice, could facilitate conversations about what may be difficult, comings to consciousness about social issues (LGBTQ2S+ issues, gender inequality, or Indigenous reconciliation) and experiencing a transformation of ideas as a result of being a graduate student at UVic. Although there are definitely challenges and I will take these up in Chapter Three, photovoice is positioned as a means to encourage critical dialogue and self and social reflection (Wang & Burris, 1994). In Chapter Five I think through how the process of photovoice helped my participants to discuss difficult topics like their

transformations regarding the aforementioned social issues and whether the art process enabled a deepening of consciousness.

Internationalization and the UVic Context

As internationalization becomes a global enterprise, the landscape of higher education has undergone significant changes. Internationalization is defined as “the inclusion of an international, intercultural, and/or global dimension into the curriculum and teaching learning process” (Knight, 2004, p. 6). According to this definition, internationalization has a developmental quality and addresses the relationship between and among countries as well as diversity of cultures. Therefore, considering international students as merely “subject learners” underestimates the intercultural dimension of this definition. That is why Spurling (2007) highlights the significance of considering international students as “cultural and language learners” as well (p.114).

According to a report by the Government of Canada, Canada’s International Education has been aiming at doubling the number of international students by 2022 (2014, as cited in Moore, Rutherford, & Crawford, 2016). UVic also takes this commitment by creating an International Plan for 2017-2022. According to this international plan, internationalization at UVic has been defined as:

The process of integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions and perspectives into the purpose, functions and delivery of education. It shapes our institutional values, influences external relations and partnerships, and impacts upon the entire educational enterprise.

Internationalization aims to educate students as global citizens, including attributes of openness to and understanding of other worldviews, empathy

for people with different backgrounds and experience, and the capacity to value diversity. (p. 7)

According to the UVic's International Plan 2017-2022, student mobility, enhancing international student experience, creating international curricula, having international engagement, and establishing an international environment are the key categories in this plan. In line with Canada's international objectives, UVic has also worked to establish strong intercultural connections on its campus.

International students make up more than 20 percent of graduate students at UVic (UVic, 2019). It seems that UVic is trying to provide a safe and inclusive space for all students to study at this university. As a graduate student studying at UVic and an employee working campus, I have felt the culture of inclusiveness which is promoted through the university. I see this diversity on campus. I also see different visuals in developing this inclusive culture on campus and have witnessed multiple actions in this regard. For instance, there is a safe space sign for LGBTQ2S+ students, faculty and staff; several actions have been taken regarding familiarizing students and all the individuals on campus with the indigenous culture; there are also some services for assisting the students with disabilities.

I studied and worked in a safe space at UVic. I was familiarized with minorities' rights. I learnt about the LGBTQ2S+ individuals and their need for inclusion. I felt the Indigenous people's presence and culture on campus. As a result of studying at the department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies (EPLS), I learnt how to familiarize myself with respecting minorities in the way they might prefer. I heard their voices. Finally, being inspired by my own experience of working and studying at UVic, I

decided to explore other international students' experiences and stories of transformative learning.

Design of the Study

In chapter two, I focus on four areas of literature: studies on internationalization in higher education and graduate international students, graduate international students' transformation of ideas after studying abroad, and arts, consciousness, and transformation.

In chapter three, I outline my methodology and methods. Specifically, I used the arts-based approach of photovoice. I also used focus group and semi-structured interviews. In chapter three, I also explain the photovoice ethics and how I analyzed both the written and visual data.

Chapter four outlines the findings of my study and includes images from the photovoice activity. They are grouped under the role of UVic in promoting social awareness, participants' process of coming to consciousness, and self-directed learning and its role in raising critical consciousness. The final section of this chapter is devoted to the implementation of employing photographs in my research and what emerged from that creative process vis-à-vis consciousness and social issues.

In chapter five I discuss the findings and focus on transformative learning, speak about disorienting dilemmas, and explain how participants negotiated their cultural differences and ended up revising their previous beliefs. This section will be followed by a discussion of arts-based methodology and the role of images in research with international students.

Chapter six outlines a number of recommendations for academic institutions in general and UVic in particular, and further research. Conclusions and recommendations are followed by my reflections on this study.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study can add to the body of literature on social issues and critical adult education. Educating socially-conscious citizens can lead to valuing social justice and develop a more democratic society, in which individuals are aware of the role of diversity in the health of their society. This critical lens can help individuals achieve this goal by raising their awareness of the minorities' challenges and deprivation of their citizen rights. Critical education can help individuals consider all minorities as full citizens who deserve the full protection of law. This research might enlighten adult education by highlighting the critical awareness of the existing assumptions, and the fact that education has the potential to transfer hatred to love, empathy, and inclusion.

The findings might be appealing to academic institutions which are seeking an inclusive culture for all minorities on campus, specifically the LGBTQ2S+ population and Indigenous people. Academic institutions can be informed of what contributes to experiencing a change of viewpoint in those students who may come to the university with ignorance, stigmatizations, and discriminatory ideas. These institutions can be apprised of the reactions to all the signs, agendas, and discourses which are in practice on campus regarding a greater understanding of social issues.

The results might be contributory to the research about international students as there is a paucity of research on international student allies and the new identities that they might form after being exposed to a different culture while they are studying abroad.

This study also benefits the research on arts-based approach by employing an imaged-based method in collecting and analyzing the data. The study might be an evidence of the contribution of arts-based approach to the understanding of embodied knowledge in adult education. It can highlight the significance of photography in increasing the credibility of research by its power in clarification and amplification of social and individuals' realities of life.

This study was an empowering, consciousness-raising, and transforming experience for myself as the researcher and participants as well. It equipped us with the ability to have a critical self-reflection on our own experiences, and learn how to release ourselves from the dominant discriminatory discourses that had occupied our minds for years. We were empowered to choose our own way of perceiving the world rather than being told (consciously or unconsciously) how to perceive it. Finally, the findings and the awareness that it raises about what is working and what is not on this campus may encourage other universities to create a more inclusive, formal, nonformal and informal learning climate.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter outlines the three key areas of literature and the conceptual and analytical frameworks that provide the background to my topic. The first section is a discussion of internationalization and studies of international students that look at both the problem and the potential of internationalization. I follow this with a discussion of transformative learning, reviewing how multiple scholars define and take this up through studies, particularly those that focus on arts-based methods and more particularly, photography and photovoice. I conclude the chapter with a focus on understandings of critical consciousness, studies that employ arts and creative expressions and again particularly, photovoice and photography.

Internationalization

Internationalization is now a trend, an intense process of the past decade that few institutions can escape (Wit, Gacel-Avila, Jones, & Jooste, 2017). For Knight, internationalization is “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education (Knight, 2003, p. 2). Central to this is both potential and problem. There are issues of economic profit and the imposition of the English language on one hand, but an expanding curriculum to the world and new cultural immersion learning opportunities on the other.

Studies pertaining to international students tend to focus on three areas which in fact have much overlap. The first is acculturations, the second socio-cultural adjustments and adaptations, and the third cross-cultural values (e.g. Bang & Montgomery, 2013;

Hirai, Frazier, & Syed, 2015; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Constantine, Kindaichi, Okazaki, Gainor, & Baden, 2005; Shafaei, Nejati, Quazi, & Von der Heide, 2016).

Acculturation

Moving to a foreign country is a life change for international students. It may involve experiences of acculturation and cross-cultural interactions, intense anxiety and distress, or negotiating distinct cultural values in the host country. Experiencing acculturation can change students' life styles, habits, perspectives, and develop their cross-cultural understandings and awareness.

Acculturation is defined as “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (Berry, 2005, p. 698). Smith and Khawaja (2011) reviewed the acculturation models that have been applied to international students, and reported that Multidimensional Individual Difference Acculturation is the only acculturation model that has directly been applied to international students while most of acculturative models have been studied with immigrants. After reviewing the previous research, Smith and Khawaja concluded that international students may experience some life changes in the host country when they encounter the new culture. If the students considered these changes as being a difficulty, these life changes took the role of acculturative stressors in the students' life. These researchers assert that there are four attitudes of integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization towards acculturation process (Berry, 2006, as cited in Smith & Khawaja). They continue to say that according to the Interactive Acculturation model, the interaction of immigrants' acculturative attitudes with the host society can produce “consensual, problematic, or conflicting relational outcomes” (p.

700). International students also experience multiple stressors in their challenging experiences of acculturation. These stressors might be educational, sociocultural, practical, or related to language and discrimination. These authors further illustrated the scarcity of acculturative perspectives which considered these variations in the cognitive appraisal of life changes, rather often depicting all changes for international students as stressors.

Socio-Cultural Adjustments

Socio-cultural adjustment is defined by Searle and Ward (1990) as the “ability to fit in and to negotiate interactive aspects of the new culture” (p.450). In a study with first-year international students, Hirai et al. (2015) examined the students’ multiple paths of psychological and sociocultural adjustments. In this research, students initially experienced the highest levels of sociocultural difficulties, which was later decreased as students improved their skills of functioning in the host country.

In a qualitative study with 15 Asian international college women, Constantine et al. (2005) explored the students’ cultural adjustment experiences. In their review of literature, these researchers acknowledged the conflicts that Asian international female students experience in the cultural and value systems between their country of origin and the host country. In this study, Constantine et al., considered these conflicts as “negative affect and cognitive contradictions” (p. 164) and focused on the problematic aspects of these mismatches. They finally identified six themes related to these women’s cultural experiences: feelings and thoughts about living in the United States, perceived differences between their country of origin and the United States, English language acquisition and use, prejudicial or discriminatory experiences in the United States, peer

and family networks, and strategies for coping with cultural adjustment problems. Their findings confirmed the literature on the highlight of different gender role socialization norms in these female international students' cultural experiences. These female students' cross-cultural experiences exposed them to a different approach to gender roles. In Brown and Brown's (2009) study with postgraduate international students also, new insights into gender norms was a strong theme. Some of the female participants of this study reported different gendered behavior while living in the host country. These findings shift the focus from the problematic aspects of international students' experience in the host countries to a more positive aspect, providing an opening for my study.

Cross-Cultural Values

In another qualitative study, Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) sought to unravel the complexity in the adjustment experiences of Saudi women international students. This research was one of the few studies which presented a multi-dimensional perspective of international students' cultural experiences in the host country; it included both the transformative potential and acculturation stressors in its analysis of the students' experiences. Apart from the difficulties and challenges of living as an international Saudi female student in the US, the authors reported a positive experience of intellectual growth in the life changes that these students had undertaken, including "increased independence, confidence, and openness to other cultures" (p. 423).

Brown and Brown's (2009) findings explored the transformative opportunities or potentials that removal from the normative home environment can offer international students. These authors found that the participants of their study gained new identities resulting from self-reconstruction in their sojourns. Distancing from the constraints of

home countries' established norms helped the international students experience resocialization, reflect on their self-understanding, and discover their "authentic self" (p. 356). In this study, displacement offered international students both discomfort and/or freedom; their sojourns involved "the unlearning of old social patterns and their substitution by new ways of thinking and behaving" (p. 345).

According to the literature, most of the previous research has focused on international students' adjustments and adaptations concerning the challenges associated with this major change in international students' lives, only very few studies regarded the transformative potential of international students' life changes in the host country. Therefore, there is a need to employ a more explicit perspective that considers the opportunities that cross-cultural encounters may produce in the students' lives, and provide empirical evidence (Brown & Brown, 2009). My study contributes to these studies of international students by bringing in a new perspective through the lenses of transformation and critical consciousness.

Transformative Learning

As noted, my study is also grounded in transformative learning theory and studies. Transformative learning was an idea first formulated by scholars Mezirow and Marsick who believed that individuals experience a deep, structural shift in their mindsets, feelings, and behavior and come to critical assessment of their assumptions as a result of experiencing disorienting dilemmas, conflicts and discomforts (Mezirow, 2000). According to Mezirow (2009), transformative learning may be defined as "*learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, indiscriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change*" (italics in original, p.

22). Mezirow speaks to what he calls a ‘disorienting dilemma’ which he defines as a disconnect between one’s meaning structure and the new contexts. This happens when one’s existing frame of reference (assumptions, beliefs, and experiences) is incapable of fitting the new reality that is felt, seen, heard, and experienced.

Mezirow (2000) in fact drew from Paulo Freire’s (1993) notion of ‘emancipatory knowledge’ in his thinking about the potentials of transformative learning. For both Freire and Mezirow, knowledge is something that can liberate us from the constraints of norms, habits, and values that we have uncritically incorporated from our environment. Interesting in terms of arts and creativity, Greene (1995) also takes this up when she argues that arts can “encourage young people to express social imagination in ways that create both personal space and consciousness of others while raising awareness of subjectivity” (p. 61). Lake and Kress (2017) note that for Greene, the imagination is what “enables us to enter a ‘dialogue; with text in ways that give centrality to personal meaning through critical questioning and the discovery of connections to one’s own and other’s lived experience” (p. 62). In tune with Freire’s vision of creative education, critical consciousness, and radical hope, in Greene’s philosophy of aesthetic education, wide-awakeness and social imagination are the main pillars of social transformation.

While it has been argued that all learning causes some sort of change (Howie & Bagnal, 2013), transformative learning is a perspective that assumes a critical reflective change around taken-for-granted assumptions and considers alternate points of view. In an overview of transformative learning theory, Howie and Bagnal (2013) for example, argue that critical reflection and rational discourse contribute significantly to the modification of the individual’s current meaning schema; by this they mean that

education of this type can engage learners in critical questioning of their current widely-held beliefs and assist them in discovering the hegemonic interests underlying these taken-for-granted values. This modified meaning schema moves learners towards subjectivity by bringing them an awareness of injustice and a responsibility for creating a more ethical world. Cranton (1998) argues that people hold many unquestioned perspectives and assumptions based on their unique experience or “habitual expectations” (meaning schemes), which form their expectations (p. 189). These assumptions are “distorted or undeveloped” in a sense that they do not include other viewpoints and limit the person’s reality. When an individual has an experience in another community or context, the external situation, concerns, or event may trigger a disorienting dilemma in the person, as a result he/she may become critical of their previous beliefs. Therefore, “questioning our assumptions is a process of critical reflection and forms the heart of transformative learning” (p.190). Mezirow has of course been challenged on his theory for being too linear, individualist, ‘event-centered’, and not really taking into account ‘social’ change. He later revised his ideas, for example, of transformation as not a linear process nor something that takes place in simply ‘one moment’ of disorientation, but rather, over a period of time with exposure to new ideas, images and so forth (e.g., Kitchenham, 2008). He also modified his theory and acknowledged the importance of cultural orientations and emotional aspects of learning in how people interpret or reinterpret their experience.

In terms of social transformation, scholars in adult education began to draw upon the work of Habermas (1971) who spoke about different kinds of knowledge and in particular, knowledge as an ‘emancipatory interest’. This opened up transformative

learning to theorizations around more socially-justice orientated knowledge and learning. For Mezirow, as noted above, critical reflection also needed to think in terms of emancipatory interest positioned as freeing oneself from all the forces that limit one's vision and exclude other ways of seeing and thus knowing the world and 'the other'. For Cranton (1998) emancipatory knowledge is how we come to "understand ourselves, others, our culture or knowledge itself" (p.192). O'Sullivan, Morrell, and O'Connor (2002, p. 164) would define transformative learning as:

Experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy.

O'Sullivan et al.'s conceptualization of transformative learning is focused on an understanding of hegemony, awareness of possibilities in the world, and openness to alternative perspectives which is in line with my own study.

Also from a more critical or emancipatory perspective, Scott (1998) provides four criteria to assess the experience of transformation which I will take up in my study. The first is that it must involve a fundamental transformation (personal, social or both), that is a basic change in the individual's value system.

Secondly, the individual must struggle for an ideal just social system in which equity, freedom, and democracy are dominant. Third, transformation is not rooted in adaptation but rather because of a conflict in our meaning schemes. Finally, this change must redefine the individual's epistemology. Although scholars' definitions of transformative learning vary, they all agree that "transformative learning is a substantive perspective change based upon learning from life experiences" (Hoggan, Simpson, & Stuckey, 2009, p. 10). I looked for these issues of conflict, different definitions of transformation and struggle in my own study.

Critical Consciousness

Central to transformative learning, although elaborated more fully by adult education scholars, is the notion of critical consciousness or what Freire (1993) called 'conscientization'. Freire (1993) believes in a liberating, problem-posing education, one which involves a "critical intervention in the world" (p.62) and in one's context, what he refers to as critical consciousness. In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), Freire refers to the method of teaching employed by the oppressor as a method which "controls thinking and action, leads women and men to adjust to the world, and inhabits their creative power" (p. 20). He supports learners to be agents, transformers, creators and re-creators of social reality in this world rather than adjusting to the world. Challenging one's own assumptions, being receptive to alternative viewpoints, and the willingness to change one's assumptions for a better alternative are key components of critical consciousness (Brookfield, 2015). So too, he claims, is "the ability to think critically about one's assumptions, beliefs, and actions is a survival necessity" (Brookfield, 2015, p.13). In an article where Brookfield actually talks about his own process of coming to

critical consciousness, he confirms that “complexity and contextually” (p. 6) lay the groundwork for the mind to be programmed to think critically. Brookfield believes that “striving for a critical consciousness is just what it means to be human, it’s not a choice” (p. 4). He defines “critical” as a deliberate departure from routinized, habitual thinking, asserting that every thought cannot be considered critical. Brookfield believes that critical consciousness is informed by three intellectual traditions: analytic philosophy, pragmatism, and critical theory. It draws from analytic philosophy and how it understands efforts that one makes to “think better” by identifying false beliefs and being able to distinguish between evidence and opinion, and ‘thinking better’ brings us to a central aspect - critical thinking.

Critical Thinking

The first contribution to the conceptualization of critical thinking comes from Socrates who developed “a dialogue that used reasoning to examine opinions, beliefs, and authoritative statements” (Horvath & Fort, 2011, p. 3). For Paul (1990), critical thinking can have two forms - one he calls weak and the other, strong. In the weak sense, it resembles mere rationalizing and proper reasoning. In the strong sense, which is more Socratic/dialogic, an individual seeks to find the conflicts in their personal experience and the society and develops a sense of “emancipatory reason” (p. 290). In another model of critical thinking, Garisson (1991) asserts that the first step in the cyclical process of critical thinking is an identification of the problem, which causes “a sense of inner discomfort” or dilemma for the individual (p. 293). He continues to say that the individual begins to challenge their assumptions as exploring other perspectives to resolve the dilemma. Finally, the new viewpoints might be desegregated into their

personal life if they passed the validity step. Withdrawal of the objective world (Garrison, 1991) and intentionality (Brookfield, 2015) in exploring alternatives are other significant features of a critical thought. Critical thinking grounded in pragmatism is about developing the skill of questioning one's assumptions and being open to the alternatives. Closely related to critical thinking is critical theory which, as the last tradition, is about the identification and unravelling of hegemonies and power relations that shape how we understand the world. Coming to a critical consciousness in this tradition is about encouraging people to 'see' their own hegemonic assumptions and to come to new alternatives that challenge these widespread manipulated beliefs.

Arts, Critical Consciousness and Transformation

Today, there is an abundance of research on the use of arts and imagination in transformative learning and the raising of critical consciousness/thinking (e.g., Dirkx, 2001, Hoggan et al., 2009). Transformative learning and adult education have taken what some scholars call a 'creative turn' which includes many elements that I will take up in my own study. One of these is the role of the imagination and emotions in learning. Dirkx (2001) calls this soul-based learning, where "imaginative and extra-rational" accompany rational discourse in making the meaning of an experience. He brought into light the role of symbols and images which are highly emotional in providing "the opportunity for a more profound access to the world by inviting a deeper understanding of ourselves in relationship to it" (p. 64). Imagination and emotions liberate us from the hegemony of words. "Imagination plays a key role in connecting our inner, subjective experiences of emotions and feelings with the outer, objective dimensions of our learning experience" (Dirkx, 2001, p. 68). For Greene, (1995, 2001) critical imagination, which raises

questions and wonders of the group-like, wide- spread interpretation of the world, is the thing that matters in education. Imagination brings personal meanings and perspectives into our conversation with the world. “Through imagination we are enabled to bring the “severed parts” of our own personal perspective and that which is expressed in a wide range of “text” including culture, music, media, dance, poetry and subject matter content in education (Lake & Kress, 2017, p. 63). Freire (1993) also believes in the presence of self in understanding the world. Greene’s social imagination and Freire’s radical hope are the same concepts that invite people to subjectively participate in transforming their own world and the world, by imagining a more humane, democratic and justice alternative of the world (Lake & Kress, 2017). Lake and Kress assert that in Freire’s call for imagining the new possibilities of the future of humanity, “the very act of daring to envision an alternative future that is not bound by the present conditions of human suffering is in itself a political and moral practice that hold potential for self/ other/world transformation” (p.70).

In their book about transformative learning in adult education, Hoggan et al. (2009) emphasized the role of creative expressions in the process of transformative learning and introduced multiple cases of research in which creative expression was used as a transformative technique in the service of adult educators. “Creative expression is a powerful tool to access knowledge that resides deep within us and allows our conscious thinking to interact with our subconscious knowledge, thus yielding a more holistic understanding of ourselves, our experience, and the world in which we live” (p.16). Alternative and creative ways of knowing help us to know the world and our inner worlds

better by touching our unconscious and foster transformation by helping us to remain open to new understandings.

Lawrence (2012) highlighted the role of intuitive knowledge as an alternative way of knowing to logic in transformative learning. He asserted that under the privilege of rational empiricism, intuition has been underestimated. Lawrence invokes Jung in describing intuition as “the only way to gain access to certain experiences or events that are not part of our conscious awareness” (p. 129). According to Lawrence (2012), spoken language is unable to touch the nature of intuition. Therefore, for him, it is the symbolic language of arts and imagery which can help to describe intuition. He further described how intuitive painting workshops have helped him and the participants to have access to the inaccessible levels of their consciousness and provided them with deeper understandings and new perspectives of their experience. Lawrence suggested that intuitive art work serves as a tool for individual and collective transformation since it allows exploration of images from one’s unconscious, and provides space to reflect upon and interrogate images and their hidden meanings.

Klein (2018) specified three features aesthetic experiences offered by transformative education and learning: “imaginative mind”, “qualitative thought” (p.11), and “mindful awareness” (p. 4). These qualities of aesthetic experience harmonize one’s inner and outer experience. Arts work assist individuals to pay attention to the subtle meanings, and increase one’s sensitivity in seeing and interpreting the experience. Klein further stated that it is the value of “integration” and “wholeness” of aesthetic experience that supports educators to resist positivist-informed methods of representation of experience (p.4). She proposed a three-step model to illustrate the mindfulness of an

interpretation which aesthetic work allows, including beholding, immersion, and reflection paths. Beholding can be referred to as the wonder and fascination which drives one's attentive gaze at the first moment of encounter with a work of art. Immersion includes one's prolonged engagement with the art work through a constant discovery of details, relationships, and subtle delicateness. The last phase is "reflective interpretation" (p. 6) and is directly related to one's analysis of aesthetic work; it is a "conceptualization of themes" (Klein, 2018, p. 6). Through these processes, one appreciates the transformative significance of aesthetic work in providing a site for cumulative interpretations and gradually raising awareness in a transformative pedagogy.

In her study, Simpson (2002) described her personal transformative experience of working with photography and collage. In this article, Simpson provided multiple examples of how expressing oneself through creative expression has helped adults to adjust themselves with major crisis in their lives, or shift their views towards these incidents and be able to reinterpret them from a different perspective. Simpson believed that these experiences with creative expression had helped these individuals to access new meanings and experience a holistic, authentic transformational learning experience. Simpson argued that "this expression in the arts can serve as a catalyst to processing through the stages of transformational learning and/or assist the adult learner in adopting a new view of the world one where the world will never appear to be the same again" (p.79).

In 2012, McGregor undertook a self-study on the role of arts-based approaches to teaching in a leadership program with her graduate students at the University of Victoria. In this work, she uncovered the capacity of art-informed tools in teaching and learning a

transformational leadership which seeks social justice. McGregor elaborated the ways in which arts-based instruction has enabled deepened learning of social justice issues in her graduate students. According to McGregor, the essence of having an inclusive society is understanding ourselves as transformational agents, and one way to achieve this agency is aesthetic work. For her, arts-based approaches offer a means of both creation and recreation of meaning and reader/viewer's deeper involvement in the complexity of experience. Specifically, she states that the arts can help us to achieve different learnings because they allow for differentiated readings that evoke personal reflections and situate the individual within her or his own context. In addition, arts-informed approaches, particularly participatory photography, invite an enriched understanding of social issues as:

Image has enormous potential for creating and evoking multiple readings, using dominant and resistant narratives and creating hybrid forms to re-frame an issue. Images can be juxtaposed to create binaries, to elicit ironic readings, to symbolically capture a value, belief, or position, to direct or redirect a gaze in a particular direction, to problematize or challenge conformity, to magnify the small or diminish the powerful. (McGregor, 2012, p. 319)

Another scholar who has studied extensively the role of arts in developing critical consciousness and transformation is Clover. In 2006, she undertook a study to examine participatory photography projects in Canada. She affirmed the significance of arts-based approaches in a transformational pedagogy, and proposed participatory photography as an educational tool which has a transforming role and promotes activism. "Images have remarkable abilities to particularize an abstract concept and provide a new platform for

self and social reflection” (Clover, 2006, p. 281). In alignment with McGregor (2012), Clover highlighted multiple potentials of images in provoking transformation. She acknowledged imagination as a powerful function of photography that apart from its symbolic, ironic, and metaphoric attributes, adds credibility to the employments of visuals in transforming pedagogy.

There are also a number of studies that use photography as I have used in my own study. One illustrates how art can be used in longitudinal studies. Working with migrant/refugee women, Brigham, Baillie-Abidi, and Calatayud, (2018) explored their learning processes through participatory photography and storytelling. Through the study, participants learned the skill of photography to narrate their stories of settlement, and reflect upon their own and others’ photostories and interpretations. The authors believed that a critical feminist and intersectional arts-based approach and analysis sheds light on the power relationships embedded in emigration policies and gendered realities of migration in the participants’ experiences. They oriented the research toward social impact and social justice that is embedded in adult education and critical thinking and consciousness. The authors identified topics such as separation and loneliness, risks and constraints of migration, sociocultural adjustments, transformation in migration, solidarity, and loss of place and self-representation among the key themes that participants narrated and displayed in their photo-stories. Participants’ photos and explanations were integrated into the authors’ gender analysis of the research. These photovoice projects were contributing to the participants’ sense of empowerment in different ways. Narrating stories through photos helped participants to feel a sense of control and authority over their lives, as photos generated more stories for them and

helped them remember the lost and forgotten pieces in their lives (one of the main themes in findings). The photos also helped them to conserve the past moments and to capture their environment. Furthermore, discussing photos in groups created possibilities to build relationships and maintain them through shared experiences. The critical discussions and reflections accompanying the photography process fostered a sense of collective agency and solidarity for the participants as they realized that they were not alone in experiencing these challenges. This finding signified the role of collective dialogues in photostories. Finally, public photograph displays and sharing the photos with outsiders created opportunities for individual and social transformation.

Desyllas (2014) spelled out the power of photos as creative representations in sex workers' identities and lived experiences. It particularly highlighted the significance of arts-based methods (photography in this case) in creating resistance, self-agency, and social activism. This study, claiming to be different from the other studies in being done "with" sex workers instead of "on" sex workers, is aimed at capturing the complexity of female sex workers' lived experiences. Desyllas pointed out the role of arts as various representational media, with the power to create various types of knowledge. The findings of the study created four main themes: 1) diverse experiences of sex work; (2) shared experiences of stigma and stereotyping related to working in the sex industry; (3) the use of art as activism and as a form of resistance; and (4) empowerment through the arts. This study exemplified how an arts-based methodology could be empowering, transforming, and advocate social change. Through the dialogues, several participants stated their satisfaction of working with photography as a creative medium, giving them the power to represent their own version of their stories as opposed to the stories'

publicly assumed versions (being a victim), and finding meanings in their lives. They expressed their transformative identities after attending this project. The results of the thematic analysis revealed how participants practiced resistance to public stigmatizations through their photos. Some of them also claimed a learning experience of being advocates of change in the lives of other sex workers by voicing the realities of sex workers' experiences and identities, and by educating the public. They seemed to be empowered after imaging their artistic identities while working with creative representational tools. This article also illustrated the direct relationship between arts-formed methods as a form of empowerment education and social change. These participants could explicitly state their political missions while talking about their photos and narrating their stories.

Finally, Bardhoshi, Grieve, Swanston, Suing, and Booth's (2018) study with eight undergraduate LGBTQ students from a rural, public university aimed at exploring the on-campus experiences of LGBTQ students in a photovoice project. Two main negative themes which emerged from data analysis were feeling categorized, and being engaged in self-censorship. There were also two main positive themes identified as finding safe-zones, and engaging in advocacy. The authors also explained the contribution of a safe campus climate to the exploratory stage of identity development, a significant stage in which individuals gather information and need support before coming out. This study unfolded the complex experiences of LGBTQ students on campus using photography. It also exemplified the potential of photographs to facilitate discussions on difficult subjects.

Arts-Based Research and International Students

There are only a few art orientated studies conducted with international students in the literature which adds importance to the knowledge gap my study fills. In a PhD dissertation with graduate international students and immigrants on UVic campus, Etmanski (2007) used theatre to explore the contradictory relationship between Canada's welcoming discourse and these international students' experiences of racism and cultural discomfort. Perspective transformation was one of the main findings of this research. Through this participatory action research, theatre, Etmanski (2007) and the participants of her study discovered the personal growth and transformative learnings that these international students gained from their struggles in Canada as a host country. Affirming that not all racial struggles may result in transformative learnings, Etmanski acknowledged these international students' mental work, emotional pain, resilience and capacity for transformation. Through theatre, the researcher and these international students unveiled their own and each other's struggling stories of racism and how they turned these negative experiences into learning opportunities. This study demonstrated how arts could empower these diverse group of international students to pass their painful memories of struggles in Canada, laugh at these memories, find growth, raise their voices and gain further insights into their own unique stories of transformation.

In another example, Dogus (2013) conducted an arts-based research with female international graduate students on UVic campus, using photography and collage. Dogus explored how these students' involvement with campus activities, particularly the Graduate Students' society, could result in learning opportunities for them. Dogus acknowledged the key role of arts and how it eased approaching difficult conversations in

this study. She further admitted that photography and collage had helped her and these international female students to gain deeper understandings of their experience, not only because it could ease communications when English was a second language, but also because of the students' embodiment learning and the empowering effects that arts could have in deepening conversations about complex ideas.

Wang, Leen, and Hannes (2018) conducted a photovoice study with five South American students to explore how these students visualize their adjustment challenges in pictures. The results of this study contradicted the previous research, which assumed that there are three phases in the international students' adjustment process: Arrival, adjustment, and adaptation. These authors asserted that adaptation is not necessarily the final phase of adjustment process, and multiple factors variate this process. They mentioned cultural discomfort as one of the variables in the student's sociocultural adjustments to the host society. The results of this photovoice project pictured these students' challenges as well as opportunities in adjusting to the new culture. For instance, one of the participants' encounter with different values as an "openness towards minorities, specially the gay population" illustrated an example of self-discovery and transformative potential of cross-cultural understandings in this research. Wang et.al believed that these results echo Boler and Zembylas's (2003) perspective of 'pedagogies of discomfort'. This perspective encourages a transformative process of re-evaluating and criticizing one's own beliefs as a result of experiencing cultural discomfort.

In this review, I discussed issues concerning international students' experiences of acculturation, socio-cultural adjustments, and cross-cultural values. It can be concluded that most of the previous research has often depicted the challenges and problematic

aspects of international students' life changes in the host countries. There were however, only a few studies which considered the cognitive appraisal of these major changes in the international students' lives. Therefore, my study contributes to the literature pertaining to international students by considering the transformative potentials of international students' life changes while studying abroad.

As my study looks at the international students' life changes through a transformative lens and on a university campus, transformative learning and critical consciousness provided the conceptual and analytical lens that I now apply to my own research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I outline the methodology, my position as a researcher and the methods I used in this study. Specifically, I employed an arts-based research approach, photovoice, and also a focus- group and a semi-structured interview. I describe how I used arts-based research and address a few of the challenges with photovoice which I encountered using visuals in this research. I conclude with a discussion of how I analyzed the data.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) conceptualize qualitative research as “an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals and groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). I employed qualitative methodology in this research as I was interested in the participants’ life experiences and focused on the “participants’ meanings” in the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 182).

The research questions which guided this study were 1) How did international students on UVic campus come to consciousness about social issues?; 2) What implications will this have when they return to their home countries or in their future work in Canada?; and 3) What has enabled them to newly or differently understand social issues and what difference will it make in their lives? As the research process in qualitative research is quite emergent and cannot be prescribed from the beginning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), I, as the researcher, focused on the issues from the participants’ perspectives. However, I discuss the findings of my study in light of these questions in chapter four and chapter five.

Once more, I admit my possible bias as a researcher in this research because I was driven by this research due to my personal experience of transformation regarding social

issues through my experiences on UVic campus as an international student. However, as feminist and arts-based researchers and scholars have long argued, all research is biased and bias does not always mean ‘wrong’. In fact, bias is what enables us to illuminate issues and knowledge that has for too long been left under-studied and discovered for ideological and political reasons (e.g. Cornel, Ratele, & Kessi, 2016; Knowles & Cole, 2008; Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). My position in this research is best defined by being a researcher-participant and an interpreter of the participants’ experiences as well as someone who engaged in a process of transformation.

While there is no one specific definition of arts-based research, for the purposes of this study I used this definition by McNiff (2008) who describe it as:

The systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies. (p. 29)

I worked with four participants using an arts-based medium, but also I included myself in the study since I had experienced a major transformation, the focus of my research.

There are a variety of methods used in arts-based research such as theatre and poetry, but I chose the visual method of photovoice. Visual methods are understood to be powerful ways to illuminate past and present lives of specific communities, elicit memories (but equally important for me, to be important creative interview device (e.g., Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). There are multiple layers of meaning in an image which can cover a wide range of abstract thoughts, messages, ambiguities, (Knowles & Cole,

2008) and things which are “ineffable, hard-to-put- into-words” (Dogus, 2013, p. 29).

How can we capture the full meaning of the complex and contextualized experiences of transformation while avoiding oversimplifications? How could have the participants in this study explained their complex, contextualized stories better than visualizing them to help understandings of people from other contexts?

The participants of my study could convey their emotions alongside their words in their talks and they succeeded in transferring the hidden aspects of their culture and contexts. Therefore, this study benefited from employing images as images have the ability to elicit emotional and intellectual responses, make the research findings accessible to a wider range of audience (as they can see what one means), share someone else’s point of view and lived experience, and encourage reflexivity (Knowles & Cole, 2007; 2008). Images can equip the reader with an appropriate tool to reflect on participants’ experiences of change and awareness in this study.

Further, Knowles and Cole (2007; 2008) argue that “an image reveals at least as much about the person who took or chose or produced it as it does about the people or objects who are figured in it” (p. 46). Therefore, I think images helped unravelling the complex experiences of the participants’ change of ideas, how they came to critically revisit their learnt mindsets, and how they became aware of the drawbacks in their beliefs, thoughts, or/and behavior. Images revealed some traces of unconsciousness in their stories that are unknown even to themselves.

Central to arts-based methods is the activation of creativity and imagination in the research process, the two fundamental elements which can differentiate art-based methods from the other forms of qualitative research (Dogus, 2013; McNiff, 2008). Van

Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001) consider visual records as powerful ways to illuminate past and present lives of specific communities and elicit memories in visual anthropology. There are multiple layers of meaning in an image which can cover a wide range of abstract thoughts, messages, and ambiguities (Knowles & Cole, 2008). Images have the ability to elicit emotional and intellectual responses, make the research findings accessible to a wider range of audience (as the audience can see what the photographer/participant mean), share someone else's point of view and lived experience, and encourage reflexivity (Knowles & Cole, 2007; 2008). The participants of this study had complex and contextualized stories of transformation which did not fit any regular conversations easily. As alluded to above, arts-based methods could ease these talks and developed further reflection on those experiences in this study.

Methods

Photovoice

The specific visual method I used was photovoice. Photovoice is defined as “a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique” (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 1). It involves taking or collecting photos that one believes can capture their experience and provide the reader with a caption/story attached to the photo. In this study, I gave the instructions to the participants and used their photos to further the interview questions.

By giving cameras to the participants, they document their lives, and we as the readers can borrow their knowledge, lived experience, and points of view. Wang and Burris (1997) state that photovoice has the ability to record individuals' lives, enhance critical dialogues, and foster reflection. It was in these critical dialogues and reflections

that participants of this study had the chance of discovering the hegemonic assumptions in theirs and others' stories of the past and came to further consciousness about these issues.

Photovoice can promote social change by setting the ground for individual and social transformations (Wang & Burris, 1994). In my study, the discussions which were involved in this photovoice project helped participants to be involved in critical discussions of the social issues and multiple stories in different contexts; they could recognize the power of hegemony and its multiple manifestations in different societies. They had the opportunity to take it further and critically depict the hidden hands of hegemony in weaving of the events in their experiences, and consciously resist it later, in their lives.

There are always several layers of meaning folded in an experience and one can never claim to be able to depict all these layers in his/her own experience. When the participants of my study shared their stories in the group, they could borrow each other's eyes and look at their own experience from a different perspective. Other pairs of eyes can see things in one's story which are hidden from one's own consciousness. Listening to others' stories created space for the participants and me to discover other aspects of our own experience through others' stories. Photovoice involves a process of discovery for the participants (Janzen, Perry, & Edwards, 2011), a discovery of the self, others, and their world. Therefore, this photovoice project not only provided space for the participants to talk about their coming to consciousness, but also it had the potential for them to develop their social consciousness through these discoveries. They could further

discover the depth of their own transformations as they were engaged with these images and dialogues (Cornel, Ratele, & Kessi, 2016).

These international students who were participants of my study were authorized to be potential agents of awareness and change in their societies, since photovoice and its follow-up discussions “awaken in people the collective capacity for self-discovery and critical reflection on problems and possible solutions through collective action” (Migliorini & Rania, 2017, p.135). As showcasing one’s personal life and experience might be considered a direct threat to the self, and expose the participants of my study to vulnerabilities, images could provide the avenue for these students to take the risk and picture their lives for each other. Images can help the self to encounter the things which are “ineffable, hard-to-put- into-words” (Dogus, 2013, p. 29). As Perry, Edwards, and Janzen (2019) state and the process of this research revealed, the participants of my study could share their personal stories in photos without being censored. Trust is cultivated in these self-exposures when one can disclose him/herself in respect and safety, without the fear of being judged, the expectation of being understood, or the pressure to fit one’s experience in others’ templates. As the participants of my study were international students whose first language was not English, images could also free them from the limitations of translating themselves and their experiences into another language and culture. Arts is a common language which can overcome the limitations of speaking a second or foreign language (Dogus, 2013). This capacity of photovoice in empowering participants to survive engagement in complex discussions in a second language was one of my main reasons in employing photovoice. Additionally, scholars argue from their studies that visualizing stories helped participants feel a sense of control and authority

over their lives and the environment, when they recalled the forgotten pieces of their lives through the further stories that photos generate (Brigham, Baillie-Abidi, & Calatayud, 2018). During the interviews of my study, the photos proved to be very effective in enabling the participants to remember the stories of the past.

Additionally, the participants of my study had the chance of experiencing authenticity in their own stories as well as in the others'. Photos cannot hide anything; they reveal the essence of an experience and help individuals be honest and face the real self (Perry et al., 2019). Perry et al. call this quality of photos "spontaneous play"; it is this uncertainty of arts which makes arts open to the unknown, unexpected, and authentic. In my study, images helped the participants to step out of their habitual responses and be open to their inner voice. They engaged in genuine dialogues and faced true selves, without being influenced by their original context in the form of an unconscious or sometimes a deliberate self-censorship.

Finally, in my research, photovoice had a learning outcome for the participants. According to Perry et al. (2019) participants can develop their consciousness because of photovoice's capacity in raising critical thinking skills in the individuals who are involved in this process. Perry et al. suggest that despite having a simplistic view of arts-based methods in our first perceptions, the truth is that these methods involve high levels of intellectual challenge. In this photovoice project, participants were engaged in reflective thought and gained deep understanding of these stories when they tried to resolve the complexities that arose from their diverse experiences. Photovoice eased the students' talks about their stories of transformation by offering them deep insights into such a complex topic.

Semi-Structured and Focus Group Interviews

A second method I employed in for my study was semi-structured interview, primarily because it suits most of the study purposes and research questions in this qualitative research (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). Semi structured interviews benefit the researcher by raising a wide range of follow-up questions based on previous responses, increasing reciprocal interactions between researcher and participants and allowing participants to express their ideas (Kallio et al., 2016). When combined with photography, interviews can help researchers to get participants' reflections on photos (Heidelberger & Smith, 2016), elicit deeper memories, evoke their feelings, and give them the space to verbally express their reflections.

I also used focus groups. Focus groups, also known as group interviews, create emergent topics for group inquiry when participants have the opportunity to comment and build on each other's ideas (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Group interaction is an important feature of focus group interviews. Ravitch and Carl believe that group engagement allows for the exploration of topics which are important to participants. Focus group benefitted my study by providing the space to explore the common experience among the participants.

Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality

Creswell and Creswell (2018) advise researchers to reflect on the issues of personal privacy and protecting participants in the research process. I worked with a small group of graduate international students at UVic. It was impossible to recruit more participants because in the summer when I was recruiting the participants most of students are not often available on campus. Having fewer participants than I expected and holding the focus group interview made confidentiality difficult. As there were some challenges around confidentiality in my study, I asked each participant to choose a pseudonym they wanted me to use in this study and in the focus group interview. I also reread the transcripts and made sure that there was not any information that could identify them, for instance, their country of origin or working place.

Photovoice Ethics

Aside from the aforementioned potentials of employing visual methods, specifically photography in research, photography as a cultural practice involves negotiating ethical issues of power and representation. Switzer (2018) invites researchers to avoid “over celebrating” the potentials of participatory visual methods and challenge their assumptions regarding the empowering role of participatory visual methods (p.189). Switzer warns researchers against the problematics of generalizations. Generalization may happen when a photograph is interpreted or reinterpreted outside of its particular context. It may further involve issues of representation, stigmatization, and consent. She further expresses her concern of overestimating the empowering promise of photography for participants. Another challenge in using photography is around the role of researcher

who may end up directing the conversation towards the research objectives rather than listening to what participants intend to say (Sandelin, Quiroga, & Hammerand, 2018). As a researcher and a participant in this study, I was really concerned with the ethics of interfering in the other participants' flow of ideas and the danger of ignoring what they intended to say rather than what I wanted to hear. Fortunately, in this case, photos proved to be efficient in directing and redirecting the conversations with minimizing my interference. I realized that whenever the conversation was distancing from the main points of this research, photos were a good reminder and helped the participants focus on the main points the photo was about.

What I found in this study is that it is not the photograph itself, but how it is used and interpreted that matters in confronting ethical dilemmas. The ethical issues of confidentiality, copyright, representation specifically when it comes to stigmatized communities, and disclosure are all challenges that must come into consideration before using visuals in research. During the interviews, data analysis, and afterwards, I was diligent to consider these ethical issues by reflecting on the process, and considering musts and must nots.

There are other significant considerations which researchers must also be cautious about before applying this visual method. According to Hannes and Parylo (2014), there are some general ethical considerations using visual images: for instance, privacy, identity protection, and the use of sensitive information. While these are of great concern, arguments around recognizability and anonymity create more challenges in working with visual rather than textual data. Researchers must be able to predict the potential consequences of sharing photographs in the participants' lives while the "informed"

consensus is achieved or claimed to be achieved. Hannes and Parylo (2014) also advise researchers working with photovoice to take into account the ethical considerations that participants should make, for instance, asking for informed consent when taking an individual's photograph or collecting images of identifiable people as well as participants' strategies in dealing with these challenges.

To avoid the ethical issues around anonymity and recognizability, in the introductory sessions which I held before interviews, the participants were instructed to only take photos which were either metaphoric or of objects and to avoid taking photos of individuals and even themselves. In terms of including the images in this text, I had to remove one. Although this photo was intended to show only a place, and the participant's discussion of this place is included in this study, the image contained an identifiable individual.

According to the discussion of ethical dilemmas in using photography in research, I, as a researcher, tried to avoid overestimating the merits of using photography in my study. Considering the benefits of photography as possibilities rather than promises makes researchers more conscious in avoiding the ethical pitfalls. Taking up the uncertainty and the unknown in research, it is a necessity for researchers to acknowledge their struggles in dealing with visuals in research (Sandlin et. al, 2018). In writing findings of this study, I address some of the struggles I faced during this research.

Study Participants

The participants were graduate international students at the University of Victoria (UVic) who self-identified themselves to be participants in this study. They were from different continents such as Asia, Africa, and Middle East. Except for one participant

who was in the Department of Engineering, the other ones were studying at the Department of Education at UVic. They were all consenting adults.

There were other criteria I used for the selection of these participants. The first was that they self-identified their countries as ones in which heteronormativity, gender inequality, or violation of indigenous people's rights is practised. This is significant to this study as the normalizing discourse in communities contributes to the people's presuppositions. Secondly, they had studied at least for one year at UVic, since one of the objectives of the study was to explore the effects of the campus climate on shaping the participants' new identities and shifting their viewpoints. Finally, the students noted some form of experienced change of viewpoint towards LGBTQ2S+ individuals and gained awareness about gender inequalities, or Indigenous oppression after studying at UVic. This mattered because this study was aimed at exploring the participants' experiences of transformation of possibly, beginning by knowing little about an issue, to becoming more conscious, or even perhaps knowledgeable about it.

Recruiting Graduate International Students

Recruiting for the participants of my study was difficult as most of the students are usually away in July. I began recruiting for potential participants by asking two of my professors to send their international students my research's invitation letter. I also distributed posters of the invitation letter on campus. Five students replied to me and expressed their interest in participating in my study; however, one of them could not make it at the end. I also included myself in the study as my initial inspiration for this research was my own experience of change. Therefore, I and four other international graduate students attended all the sessions. Among these students four were female and

one was a male student. The participants all self-reported as heterosexual and came from different countries in the world, Vietnam, Malaysia, Tanzania and two from Iran. Four of the participants were studying in the department of Education and one was studying in the department of Engineering at UVic.

Data Collection

I collected the data in three steps. First the participants attended a session on photovoice guidelines and its ethics individually and they gained some insights about the study and its objectives. Then they had two weeks to collect or take six photos representing their change of mind regarding one of these social issues. The participants could use photos from public sites which were filtered by license (labeled for reuse with modifications). They were asked to add a caption or a theme to their photos. I emphasized collecting their photos from public sites or taking the photographs rather than limiting the participants to just taking the photographs to make it more convenient for them. But I encouraged them to take their own photographs from the UVic campus rather than off campus environment. This is important since one of the objectives of this study is revealing the possible contributory role of UVic campus climate in experiencing this transformation and practicing a new identity regarding social issues.

Before the focus group interview, I sent the participants a list of questions to gain some information about their background. The questions of this ranged from some demographic information about their countries and their previous academic experiences to their ideas regarding their transformation and the possible contributions of UVic to this awareness. The full list of questions can be found in Appendix B of this study. I also sent them the list of interview questions as I thought they might need time to reflect on

questions and link them to their experience. The full list of interview questions is Appendix C. Setting a time for the focus group interview was very difficult, because graduate students are usually very busy with their studying and most of the participants were working and studying at the same time. Finally, the focus group interview was held in late July. Unfortunately, one of the participants could not attend the focus group interview and I held an individual semi-structured interview for him one week later.

Focus Group Interview

I started the focus group interview by giving some background information about myself and my experience. Then, each participant introduced themselves and explained why they had been interested in participating in this study. To have a more comfortable atmosphere, I did not directly ask the participants all the interview questions one by one. The format of the interview was more as a conversation. Therefore, everyone who was comfortable started talking about their photos. If they did not cover one of the questions, I raised the question and sometimes all of us answered that question.

Individual Interview

The individual interview lasted for about an hour and a half. It was held with the only male participant of this study because he couldn't attend the focus group. As we had been familiar with each other's background in the first session, he started by saying why he was interested in participating in this study and talking about his country. Then, I went through some of my photos for him and talked about them briefly. He continued by showing his photos which he had sent me before so we could discuss them further. The questions that were covered in this interviews were the same as the questions in the focus

group interviews, as my aim was to build upon these and illicit individual and group reactions.

Data Analysis

While researchers have approached analyzing their data from multiple methods, I decided to employ coding and thematic analysis. The themes I uncovered were accompanied by the creative themes which participants of my study had proposed for their own photographs.

When I began transcribing the data, I kept in mind my research questions because my mind was also involved in the primary analysis of the data. By the time I had finished transcribing the data, I had a rough idea about the sentences, phrases, and the words that were related to my research questions. In the next step, I started with coding the focus group transcripts. Codes are described as:

Tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes are usually attached to “chunks” of varying size- words, phrases, sentences, or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting. They can take the form of a straightforward category label or a more complex one (e.g. metaphor). (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56)

As I was reading each part (according to the definition of codes sometimes a sentence, sometimes a few sentences, or the whole paragraph), I tried to categorize it in a way to be related to my research questions. Mason (1997) advises researchers to consider “what counts as data or evidence in relation to research questions” (p. 108). I composed a phrase that best summarized that idea and noted it on the margins. I intended to read all

the transcripts first, find similar ideas, and discover the links to be able to code them homogeneously. Using pencil allowed me to come back and revisit my codes. By doing this, I could better identify the recurring themes.

As I was coding the data, I kept in my mind what Coffey and Atkinson (1996) say about distinguishing between coding and data analysis when they highlight the importance of considering coding as a part of data analysis rather than analysis in itself. These authors continue to say that while coding can refer to multiple approaches and ways of organizing qualitative data, it should not be simply recognized only as a way to simplify and reduce data. These researchers refer to coding as “data complication” (p.99) meaning expanding the data so as to accelerate further inquiry. “Coding here is going beyond the data, thinking creatively with the data, asking the data questions, and generating theories and frameworks” (p.100). These points made me more mindful in coding the data and discovering the themes that I could identify later. Then I read the individual interview and followed the same coding procedure with the transcripts of the individual interview. In the next step, I tried to code the other piece of data that was in the form of the questionnaire’s response. I reviewed the questionnaires’ responses and combined all the participants’ responses under the relevant question. This helped me to be able to compare the responses and identify the recurring themes in this piece of data. The third piece of data which I had was the participants’ photographs and the themes or captions that the participants had attached to their photos in regards to my study’s research questions. Therefore, the interpretations of the photographs were informed by the participants. Finally, I analyzed the photographs by first coding them and then finding out the themes.

Chapter 4: Findings

As mentioned in the previous chapter, I used a focus group interview, an individual semi structured interview, a short questionnaire, and a series of photos taken by participants to collect data for this study. In this chapter, I outline the major findings that emerged from the data analysis. The first I title 'UVic Is Doing Well'. In this section, I look at the role UVic is playing in promoting awareness of social issues in the classroom, through images and symbols, through lectures and conversation series, and through research opportunities. The second category I title 'My Eyes Are Open Now (My Eyes Were Different Then)'. This section outlines participants' processes of coming to consciousness and the contributors (outside UVic) to this consciousness. The fourth category is 'Self-Directed Learning' which focuses on how participants have taken initiative to raise their own consciousness. As I was also interested in photography as a 'method', the final section centres specifically on the effect of using photography in research by discussing its role in sharing experience. Specifically, this section includes triggering memory, reflection and discussions of the powerful self-explanatory nature of this medium. I include photographs in each section as a way to also illustrate the ideas.

UVic Is Doing Well

Almost all the participants agreed that UVic has been an important initiatory space and successful in promoting their awareness of social issues on campus, especially awareness of Indigenous issues and LGBTQ2S+ rights. The participants stated that in fact there were multiple avenues offered by UVic. Sana expressed this as "so many things." She went on to list them as "the courses I've taken, the people I met, the talks,

workshops, conferences I attended, volunteered, through my own readings and research, just getting to know the campus and city as a whole.” In her questionnaire responses, Maria added academic talks, presentations and lectures as contributing actively to her awareness.

The Classroom

Formal learning was a fundamental contributor of awareness for most of the participants in this study. Classroom discussions, presentation topics, course syllabi, and the professors’ teaching approaches were some of the important consciousness-raising means discussed in the interviews. For example, Judi stated that she had been provided with a lot of opportunities in the classroom to discuss inclusion and LGBTQ issues, and to reflect upon them. In addition, formal assignments on these topics were also offered as options for those who wished to explore them further. For Judi and Jongo, it was in fact the courses and classroom discussions at UVic that had been especially effective in their coming to consciousness about social issues. Jongo had talked about how he had been “kind of judgmental... in the sense that you have been judgmental simply because of lack of awareness.” He went on to say the following:

The effect that just the very first day [of class] had, it would be my lecturer. He [the professor] chose [the topic] on LGBTQ. . . . It was a presentation. It was the very first moment that I was in the class since I came from Tanzania, from there I came to realize that okay, there is what they call LGBTQ. Oh, I have no idea. From there we had a discussion with the teacher plus my fellow colleagues, my fellow students, and then from there I realized that okay, there are different ways when it comes to seeing, to looking at things.

What Jongo is drawing attention to here is something fundamental to critical and transformative practices of education and what adult educators like Brookfield (1987) call a lack of opportunity to get exposure to alternative ways of being, as was the case of his past experience, and how UVic had provided that opportunity immediately. Jongo added that classroom conversations had been augmented by further discussions with friends beyond the classroom, showing that engagement with students is critical to a pedagogy of transformation and consciousness. However, Jongo also talked about how the professor's teaching approach had allowed for this active discussion and challenged him to reflect upon the complexity of multiple perspectives on any given issue, including his own perspective:

I think the teaching approach used, and how to discuss issues can be one of the things which made me realize what now standing for what maybe I believe to be. Because the professor would give a chance for each of you to express what you think of an idea. So, from that point of view, you could also hear what other people say. Then from there, you confirmed that maybe you had some conflicting ideas...So, from there, from the teaching we received, from the discussion we had, you find that okay you redefine, you rethink about your assumptions you had before. You come up with just a new understanding.

Jongo, Judy, Maria, and Sana all acknowledged the importance of classroom discussions on Indigenous issues. Judy noted that in fact, the syllabus of one of the courses she had taken had been designed around social issues. For Maria, the inclusion of film in the classroom had the most powerful impact. As part of the course requirement she had to attend a screening at the cinema of a film about Indigenous people in Canada. She noted that what she had learned from the film was the “unfairness and discrimination about Indigenous people and about

social justice, actually social injustice!” The film had focused on “the death of an Indigenous youth who was shot by a white man, but the court called it an accident, the family has been fighting for justice.” One photograph she brought to the study was of the actual cinema where she had experienced this very meaningful and transformative encounter, referring to what she had learned as “non-justice in Canada” (see Figure.1).

Not in My Classroom

Although most of the participants agreed that the UVic classroom was playing an extremely positive role in raising their awareness about diverse social issues, Maya had a contradictory experience, which illustrates that not all faculties are equal in terms of ‘raising consciousness’. While four of the participants were studying in the Faculty of Education, Maya was in the Faculty of Engineering. She directly expressed a deep dissatisfaction with UVic’s role in raising her awareness of social issues throughout the



Figure 1: Cinecenta. Photograph by Maria

focus group interview. She stated that in none of her classes had she been involved in any discussions about Indigenous, LGBTQ2S+ or even gender issues. When Judy and the other participants spoke of their positive and often very deep transformative experiences, Maya pointed out that this was due to the nature of the courses they had been taking, and also “because of your background, and because of your research [topic] . . . because this is what that is happening in your department.” She was adamant that this was “not like engineering, I mean that UVic in general is all the people in the campus, not only the people in Education.” While this speaks volumes about Engineering, Maya’s point was also crucial in our discussions because it helped us to think about ‘generalizations’ of learning experiences across faculties on the campus.

Signs and Images on Campus

The signs and images that exist on the UVic campus cover a wide range of issues from Indigenous history represented by Totem poles to awareness of sexual violence and safe zone signs for LGBTQ2S+ individuals. These proved to be important representations that provoked new thoughts and reflections. First Peoples House, for example, was an extremely important symbol, and it was captured in two photos, one by Maria (Figure 2) and another one by Sana.

Both Maria and Sana agreed that there was a great deal of meaning in having a First Peoples House on campus. They considered this building to be a sign or symbol that UVic was truly trying to promote education about and for Indigenous people. For Marie, it was also a sign of UVic's attempts to highlight Indigenous knowledge as opposed to accepting Western knowledge as the only legitimate knowledge in academia. Sana spoke to the metaphor of the building, arguing that it was "intentionally" located in the middle of campus, which for her "is the heart of campus". She compared the setting to "a human heart which is right in the middle, right?"



Figure 2: First Peoples House.
Photograph by Maria and Sana

Another sign or symbol that caught Jongo's attention was a Society for Students with a Disability sign on campus (Figure 3). When describing his photo, he said:

I may say that they [signs] are one of the ways which have contributed to my awareness. The signs like...disability picture. To me this picture communicates a lot of ideas. First of all, it's just the question of acknowledging that people are different. But also acknowledging that disability doesn't mean inability. So, it means that university has taken a step further by



Figure 3: Social justice. Photograph by Jongo.

acknowledging that disability is not inability, how can we accommodate these people?

He went on to speak about the power of signs and how they communicated to him “that UVic . . . is just doing a very good job to create awareness on different social matters,” which he suggested ranged from indigenization to social justice.

I Hear Their Authentic Stories; I Learn

Stories matter because they are powerful ways to educate and to communicate. Feminists in particular speak about telling our own stories as having a voice to speak, but also, as listening, and how this enables us to overcome differences; stories are “what we use to try to make sense of things difficult to see or comprehend” (Clover, 2012, p. 95). This includes the notion of ‘authentic’ stories, and participants spoke to this in a number of ways. Some participants expressed their excitement about listening to the life stories of Indigenous people told by an individual from an Indigenous community. They all agreed that as the stories were told by Indigenous people, they felt more realistic, effective, tangible, and appealing than if they had been told by a non-Indigenous person. For example, Judy explained how she was emotionally involved in a life story which one of her Indigenous classmates had shared with the class. She continued to say that “nothing could be more effective for me in understanding the impacts of boarding schools on Indigenous communities than a real, simple story narrated by a person who has been involved in it.” Sana had a similar experience of being in a classroom with Indigenous classmates. She stated that when someone hears a story from an authentic source, they cannot simply consider it as part of distant history and ignore it, because it is still ongoing. Further, she talked about the proximity and realism of the stories:

So, then I got to hear the experiences that personally their ancestors went through. You know, close relatives, as close as grandmothers. That's not so far if you are someone's grandmother, it means the person is alive, the person has survived, lived through and had the opportunity to tell what it was like...So then the story became more and more not personal but realistic.

Jongo had experienced listening to the Indigenous people's authentic stories as well. He recalled a seminar by an Indigenous professor and how very enlightening for him this had been in terms of opening up a different perspective on knowledge and considering multiple ways of knowing. Further, he learned about the Indigenous perspective on knowledge production, and this new learning had an impact on how Jongo began to think about and develop his research.

Reflecting on the legacy of colonialism, Jongo took a photo (Figure 4) to represent a possible future for Canada's Indigenous population. He acknowledged that change does not come easily. For things to change, there must be sacrifice. Sacrifice, according to the online Oxford English Dictionary means "giving up something that is valuable or important, you give it up, usually to obtain something else for yourself or for other people". In his photo, Jongo put the concepts of reconciliation and sacrifice together. The image is of two species of tree existing together; however, the larger tree's presence has over-shadowed the smaller one and kept it from growing. For Jongo, this was a metaphor for colonialism. Considering the reconciliation of the Indigenous people in Canada and colonization, Jongo stated that both Canada and Indigenous communities should sacrifice something to achieve reconciliation. He insisted that "if reconciliation is to take place, it needs to be a sacrifice internally. First of all, you must sacrifice

internally.” He explained how Indigenous communities should sacrifice by forgetting what has happened to them and forgiving those who have done this to them: “you forget



Figure 4: Reconciliation involves sacrifice.
Photograph by Jongo.

and you forgive, then from there, you can start a new beginning.” Illustrating this concept with a photo, he explained,

“when I took this one [the photo], I said okay, we grow together because nobody can exist in isolation...we need to grow

together.” According to Jongo, both

Canadians and Indigenous communities

should come to the understanding that their lives are tied together, and they need to cooperate with each other in order to achieve peace and reconciliation.

Research Opportunities

Building on the above, having research opportunities at UVic was also a critical means of learning about Indigenous justice/injustice. Maya told a story of being part of a research team that was working on housing projects in Indigenous communities. This, she noted, had given her a first-hand view of what Indigenous people are facing in Canada. This involvement challenged her false assumptions about Indigenous people and had helped her to form a better understanding of Indigenous communities’ problems and diversities. When we probed this further, Maya admitted how her previous assumptions had been mistakenly shaped by some of her Canadian classmates and her own observations of Indigenous homeless people since she had come to Canada. She further referred to her lack of knowledge about Indigenous communities and their culture before

coming to consciousness about Indigenous issues and ended her talk by invalidating the stereotype of the unemployed or homeless Indigenous person with the rhetorical question, “why [concepts of] homeless and indigenous [people] should be equal for me?”

My Eyes Are Open Now (My Eyes Were Different Then)

Judy had also felt the impact of Indigenous students and voices through an exposure that she would never have had otherwise. One of her class assignments had in fact been to participate in a conference, *Women and Power: Leadership for Transformation and Possibility*, at St Ann’s Academy. Through panel discussions and workshops, she had the chance to really listen to Indigenous women sharing their own experience, challenges, but also potentials. At this conference, she was also exposed to LGBTQ2S+ individuals who openly shared their experiences, challenges, and achievements.

From what all the participants stated and what was shown in their photos, I inferred that the visibility of LGBTQ2S+ individuals on campus has directly contributed to the participants’ awareness regarding LGBTQ2S+ issues. In fact, almost all participants admitted their first reactions to their exposure to LGBTQ2S+ people who were out publicly as “being shocked”. For instance, Judy said: “My eyes were not used to it. Although it was not my fault, I am kind of ashamed of myself when I remember my own curiosity [when encountering LGBTQ2S+ individuals] in the first days.”

Although each participant had a different and unique story of their first encounters with LGBTQ issues on the UVic campus, they all shared the point that in their previous experiences in home countries, they had been aware of LGBTQ2S+ issues to different extents. Maya’s first photo was about her memory of welcoming orientations at

UVic for international students and graduate students (Figure 4). She explained how cultural differences had shaped her first reaction to encountering two queer individuals:

In one of [my] orientations two years ago when I came here, it was one walk and there was this rotating game...at the time that a girl won [the game], she came down and kissed another girl. It was so weird for me [laugh]. I had lots of knowledge about them [LGBTQ individuals], and also when I was in my country, I had seen many gay people but never seen lesbians, because the thing is that because we are a religious country, people never kiss each other in public [affectionately], even men and women. So, when you see two men you can understand that they are partners, but when you see two girls, you say Ok they are friends, you never understand that maybe they are in a relationship. For me it was kind of OH! That's another version [laughs].

One of Judy's photos also illustrated the same 'shocked' reaction when she had encountered a publicly-out LGBTQ individual on campus (Figure 5):

This photo represents one of those transformative moments for me...the first time that I saw a male's hairy hand with pink nail polish, it was like something that my eyes were not used to. I am used to seeing a very fine white female hand with pink nail polish. It was like very feminine for me.... In my country, I hadn't seen these things and it is because of those binary lines that exist, there's a bold boundary between male and female in my country!

Maria shared a similar story about the first time she encountered lesbians. She had taken a photo through which she tried to illustrate her surprise:

Imagine the day when I saw two lesbian students in the library. They were just sitting next to each other and holding hands... it seemed like very publicly open, and publicly accepted by everyone in the library. I was shocked because I told you it's not in my culture. In Vietnam, if you are lesbian or gay, you try to hide so that no one recognize.

Jongo had a related but different experience of encountering LGBTQ issues in the welcoming orientations when he first came to

Canada. He explained how he had been surprised by one of the tour leaders asking him about his preferred pronoun. For him, in his home country a person's sex organs at birth determined their gender, and

masculine and feminine were definitely defined with 'she' and 'he'. Judy added to this by explaining how she is now ashamed of herself for insisting on

categorizing every individual as 'gendered', either in the male or female category. In her early days at UVic, she was sometimes "confused" "when noticing that certain individuals did not conform to typical gender norms and found herself "trying to figure out if they were a man or a woman [laughs]."

As illustrated in Figures 5 and 6, participants very creatively captured images they felt spoke to LGBTQ issues. As mentioned before, in Figure 5, Maya tried to recall her memory of UVic's welcoming orientations and the game in which she encountered two lesbians who were publicly out. In Figure 6, Judy captured the shocking moment in which she encountered a gay who was out publicly in her work place on UVic campus.



Figure 5: UVic welcoming orientation.
Photograph by Maya.

Coming to consciousness, as adult educators argue, or having one's eyes opened means never again being able to see things in the same way (Stenklammer, 2012). And in this study, after participants had become aware of social issues and come to consciousness about Indigenous and LGBTQ issues, their eyes could never again see things in the way they had before. Judy referred to this as a "holistic consciousness" which she defined as a "dramatically" changed perspective towards life. Most of the participants admitted to now seeing things totally differently, although some had in fact had a consciousness about certain issues before



Figure 6: Eyes must be washed; it should be seen in another way. Photography by Judy.

coming to UVic. For instance, when Jongo was talking about gender issues, he drew attention to his understanding of his male-dominated or masculinized context: "I would say yes, I was living a little bit traditionally." However, he talked about now having "changed a lot. I have taken a feminist perspective when looking at the things and I prefer that." He went on to argue that we all needed "to change the things by taking a feminist perspective when we look at things like social issues." Maya added that now she could "say that people are more equal for me regardless of their gender, their religion, their background, if they are Indigenous, from Europe, from Middle East, or Canada. The thing is that we are all alike once we live." While this sentiment is important because she has acknowledged that the way people had been categorized in her past as superior (men) or inferior (women, LGBTQ and Indigenous), this too is problematic because we are not

all equal, and this is why education – formal, informal, and non-formal – remains so important.

Self-Directed Learning and Informal Learning: Beyond the Classroom Walls

Self-directed learning or learning beyond the classroom is a concept central to adult education. De Beer and Gravett (2016) draw upon Knowles and define Self-directed learning as:

A process by which individuals take the initiative, with or without the assistance of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. (p. 36)

Van der Walt (2016) takes this concept further by defining the self-learner as someone in charge of their own learning path:

The origins of self-directed learning lie somewhere in a moment in the distant past when a human being experienced a sense of self-awareness or self-consciousness in the process of trying to master a particular chunk of knowledge or a necessary skill – and then systematically began steering or managing the learning process. (p.1)

There were a number of instances of this in my study. For example, Judy showed signs of self-directed learning when she said the following:

Now, I am more interested in these things [social issues]. I am unintentionally attracted by these things. For example, the book that I choose to read in my free time. Okay, the last book that I read was about women in Afghanistan under

Taliban's violence. It is not a topic that I would have chosen before. Now, I like to learn more about women and their experiences. If I come across a book about life stories of queer people, I would love to read it. I want to educate myself.

Judy described one of the transformative moments in her classroom: "One of my classroom discussions was around diversity and inclusion. It was in that discussion that I realized how much I don't know!" She further added that her learning did not stop after she left the classroom: "At home, I reflected on those topics and tried to link them to my context." Then, she explained how this transformative moment that she had experienced in her classroom had propelled her into self-directed learning:

From there, I found out how ignorant I have been about some issues in my country, about minorities and their problems. From there, from my readings and assignments, I started educating myself.

Maya too talked about taking opportunities to learn about social issues using the rest of the community of Victoria. She discussed with the group some of her informal learning experiences and the kind of exposure they gave her to the different social issues. For example, she spoke about attending the Pride Parade which for both her and her mother, who accompanied her, "was very interesting. We were at a moment of knowledge and experience." Her attendance of the Pride Parade was not pre-planned since she recalls that "last year we didn't have any information about this event....My mum and I just decided to walk outside and we saw these people, followed them, and ended up in the square." She noted that one of the most interesting aspects of the parade for her was the many heterosexual allies. She had been touched by what one of the couples in the parade had told her, "even if you don't have this feeling [being non-

heterosexual], you can understand these people [LGBTQ2S+] and you have to respect them, you have to hang out with them.”

A Journey: Continual Growth and Change

All the participants referred to their coming to consciousness as a process that had started at some point in their lives before coming to UVic and had been fostered by experiencing transformative moments while being in UVic. However, Sana’s metaphoric photo could capture the concept of a “continuous self-growth” artistically. In a photograph (Figure 7), Sana used a combination of metaphors to convey her ideas and feelings. She explained the road as representational of her “never-ending journey” of consciousness:

It’s kind of representative when you cannot see the end of the road. It means that when you keep on even more and I’m going to keep on and come to more issues I’m going to be aware of. So, it’s kind of a never-ending journey. That you know there’s always more to learn, more to see kind of thing. So, it’s more kind of exploration.

When referring to the second metaphor that was employed in her photograph (Figure 7), she added, “These flags represent the numerous social issues I am aware of through the learning, conversations and other activities that took place throughout my life.”



Figure 7: The road to change. Photograph by Sana.

On the Effects of Photography

I conclude this section with a discussion of the effects of photography, firstly, because photography is the basis of my research as an arts-based methodology. The second reason is that one of my research questions is about the effects of photography in having conversations about difficult issues such as coming to consciousness and revising previous assumptions.

Triggering Memories

Most of the participants concluded that photos had helped them to recall memories from the past. Maya explained how looking at a photo from UVic's welcoming orientation in her phone's gallery had helped her to remember her first encounters with LGBTQ people who were publicly out. In other words, the images kept her remembering what she had learned and how she has changed her previous beliefs and assumptions about LGBTQ people. The participants were excited that the photographs have been very effective in helping them retain a vivid memory of an event that had taken place a few years ago, such as UVic's welcoming orientation. In another part of the interview, when Judy was showing one of her photos, the photo made Maya recall having the same experience and seeing the same scene in the past.

Critical Reflection

Participants spoke about how photos provided them with moments of reflection on experience. The theme of reflection on past events and on the experience was repeated in different parts of data collection in this research. For instance, Maya expressed the idea that the method facilitates greater engagement with the topic: "For me choosing and

taking the photos according to the subject leads me to think about this topic deeper. I think the reason of that is that it is a process of thinking and analyzing.” Judy had also written about how the process of taking her photos had helped her organize her mind and reflect about her past experiences. Sana admitted her bias in using photography in research because of having previous experienced with photography in some of her courses and because of her study that used photovoice. For her, reflection meant “thinking critically . . . it makes me reflect on my own experience and how I can transform that into images as opposed to [writing in] an essay or a paper.”

Photos as Self-Explanatory

While some participants felt that symbols and signs on campus often needed explanation and conversations to contextualize them, most considered photos to be ‘self-explanatory’. What was most critical was that with photos, the participants did not need words. Jongo remarked that the self-explanatory elements of the photos “make easy the presentation of information rather than using abstract words.” Judy also felt that she has been successful in conveying what she has experienced in one of the transformative moments in her life, just by showing the other participants a photo (Figure 6). This photo was of a male’s hand with pink nail polish. When looking at the same photo, Jongo agreed that “through photos you come to understand the concept more easily, rather than waiting for explanation. It’s like this photo, I got it directly.” In the questionnaire, Judy had expressed a similar sentiment:

I think there are some feelings in the photos that cannot be communicated otherwise. Sometimes words are not enough for what you mean...Sometimes

because of lack of proficiency in English, I may not understand a concept deeply, but when other participants showed their photos I could understand them better.

The concluding paragraph about main findings. What are they? What are responses to your research questions?

There is no doubt that studying at UVic, and in Victoria, has had a profound effect on this small group of international students. I turn now to why this matters and how it relates to past studies.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this chapter, I discuss the findings of my research in terms of how UVic acted as a site of consciousness-raising for my five participants. The central concern of my study was how these five students had come to consciousness around diverse social issues/injustices through their time at UVic. I focus on the transformative learning elements of my findings, what I see as the cultural challenges, disorienting dilemmas, and discuss the value of participants' revising their previous assumptions and reconstructing their frames of reference with this higher education context. I discuss the significance of participants' formal and informal learnings alongside formal learning and why visuals are important to raising consciousness. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the arts-based methodology I used and the role of images in research with international students. I was inspired by the unexpected results coming from each participant's unique experience. My involvement in the study helped me to understand and welcome the diverse experiences of each participant, and I speak to how they resonated with my own coming to consciousness. Furthermore, using an arts-based methodology allowed me to let the conversations go where the participants wished instead of directing them more rigidly in terms of the study's research questions. Before I move to the discussion, however, let me acknowledge what I see as a limitation of this study. I was only able to find a small number of participants who fit the criteria for my study. This means the sample size was small, and therefore the results cannot be generalized. However, having said this, generalization was not my intent. My interest was in these five people, consciousness and the arts.

(Re)Negotiating Cultural Values

As noted in chapter two, studies of international students focus predominantly on the challenges and problems international students' face in adjusting to studying abroad. According to the literature, encountering intercultural differences can result in problematic and conflicting outcomes (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). As Smith and Khawaja found possible acculturative stressors that international students encounter are: language barriers, academic, sociocultural, and lifestyle stressors, and a feeling of discrimination. Shin (2011) argues that mere attendance at a diverse university increases the interactions between diverse people although it may not necessarily guarantee that these interactions are meaningful; it is the active engagement with this diverse context that matters.

The findings of this study were very clear in revealing that life on campus for the majority of the participants had played a positive role in varying ways in elevating consciousness. While the international student participant did experience challenges, the results of my study support Brown and Brown's (2009) argument that studying abroad holds a very transformative potential. One of these transformations was evident in the way the participants re-negotiated their cultural values by studying abroad at UVic. Participants spoke at length about how they had learnt to negotiate cultural differences by revisiting and interrogating their previous beliefs, which they had taken for granted as true and therefore too often unquestionably accepted. This was certainly my case vis-à-vis LGBTQ2S+ issues. The campus was a place for them to learn and to embrace new ideas, to assess critically the differences in values they had been taught and to come to accept alternative values and ways of being. For these international students, UVic was a location to appraise the past through cross-cultural interactions. In my study, participants'

active engagement with UVic's diversity of symbols such as totems, practices of classroom teaching, nonformal activities including an on-campus cinema all contributed to thinking more critically about past cultural values. Returning to Shin's idea of 'active' participation, participants played an active role in their own learning on the UVic campus that went beyond the classroom, engaging actively in what Lawrence and Cranton (2009) would call a process of "increasing self-awareness" and this is of course a "central facet of transformative learning" (p. 328). Later, these reflections were expanded in discussions with their peers within or outside their classrooms and as people "receive validation by talking with others regarding their new perspective" (Mezirow cited in Hoggan, et al., 2009, p.11), they are better able to evaluate critically their experiences and come to new understandings about the role of cultural values in either reproducing or challenging social injustices. It was by reflecting upon their experience that the participants were able to experience what adult educators call perspective transformation (e.g., Lawrence & Cranton, 2009). Perspective transformation is understood as bracketing "all preconceived assumptions.... getting rid of labels", and extending "the transformative process to really getting to know and understand other people and even ideologies" (Lawrence & Cranton, 2009, p. 329). This allows us to look beyond the surface, get outside of oneself to see others' worldviews, and to see afresh.

Disorienting Dilemmas

Mezirow (2000) spoke of 'disorienting dilemmas' when one's existing frame of reference is challenged by new experiences. He argued that a dilemma was an 'at once' powerful happening that created immediate transformation. In Mezirow's theory, "transformative learning is often triggered by a situation, concern, or event that is

typically external and outside of the individual's control" (in Hoggan et al., 2009, p.8).

There certainly was one case of this, particularly Maya's encounter with the two lesbians could be called a pivotal or transformative moment. Although this was a very 'transformative 'moment' that arose from an experience of cultural discomfort, the majority of my results support the idea of gradual learning regarding social injustices. Immersion overtime brought about transformative learning in the majority of the participant's structures of knowing and meaning and this made them more open to further learning. Adult educators such as Dirkx (2001) and Cranton (2006) indeed argued that this is the case and transformative learning is more of a process. Cranton sees transformative learning as a process of questioning our ideology, perspectives, and values and becoming open to alternative possibilities. There were in fact several instances of what I would call journeys of gradual learning for these international students regarding coming to consciousness about social issues in Canada. However, disorientating dilemmas are also about an inner discomfort and that was clear in the study (Brookfield, 1987). In one case a participant experienced a feeling of discomfort with their beliefs when a particular behaviour in the new context provoked their discomfort, but also curiosity. This was a behaviour that would seem ordinary to a Canadian student but appeared unusual to the participant and thus disquieting. In another case, a participant felt a mismatch in meaning structures when discovering their lack of knowledge and care regarding certain groups of people in the community. From the results, it is clear that even minor, day-to-day experiences at UVic campus could be a potential transformative learning for the international students who find themselves open to new possibilities in

the world. This result, however, does not provide any hints about those who hold tightly to the ideas they were taught in the non-democratic contexts of their countries of origin.

Findings about these international students' experiences also hints of inner discomforts or disorienting dilemmas that do not automatically lead an individual to challenge their problematic frames of reference. If an individual does not have access to the resources of awareness, it seems unrealistic to expect them to link their inner discomforts to further learnings. Following the recognition of dilemma, "individual searches for an explanation by exploring alternative ideas to resolve the issue or dilemma" (Garrison, 1991, p. 294). All the participants of my study spoke in one way or another to their own disorienting dilemmas which they argued were gained, save for one, through all three levels of learning: formal, nonformal and informal learning.

We can conclude that transformative moments assisted in pointing to deficiencies in the participants' frames of reference and beliefs, and showed them what they needed to learn, while the subsequent gradual learnings encouraged them to commit to following this constant transformative path and build upon what they have learnt.

The Importance of Experiential Learning

Hoggan et al. (2009, p. 14) suggest that "in order to critically reflect, one must be able to be both an active participant in and an observer of an experience." Many other adult education scholars also believe that experience is essential to the transformative process (e.g., Cranton, 2006; Kolb, 1984; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) as transformative learning is questioning the assumptions behind our reactions to experiences. Experiential learning recognizes "involvement of the whole person - intellect, feelings, and senses" (Anderson, Boud, & Cohen, 2000, p. 226). The participants had experiences of

encountering new ideas and new people on UVic campus that engaged their whole beings. It was this exposure to marginalized individuals and social issues that was central to the new and transformative learnings of the participants, including myself. The continuous presence of Indigenous and LGBTQ2S+ people on campus, for example, was what educated this group of international students and myself about these people and about the central issues surrounding these people's rights, their experiences as members of an oppressed group, and what can be done to support them. For instance, Judy described how the presence of LGBTQ2S+ colleagues had educated her about this group of people in her work place at UVic. She explained that working with these people has made her sensitive to their needs and now, she has learnt how to treat LGBTQ2S+ individuals with care. Like me, the participants of my study come from countries in which only selected groups of people have the right to be seen and heard and this discrimination has a powerful impact. Thus, their new experience exposed them to individuals whom they would have previously marginalized, ignored or even, feared or hated. What is powerful about what UVic does is to integrate Indigenous peoples and LGBTQ2S+ individuals and issues into the dominant discourse of society (classroom teaching) and the campus, normalizing and centralizing what was often seen as 'alternative' or 'different'. Exposure to a different culture's approach towards minorities that is unconstrained by marginalization offers thought-provoking insight into our own life experience (an International student) as minorities in Canada. The participants and I were changed because of our experience and it was through the reflective process that we were able to make new meaning out of our experience. As Merriam and Caffarella (1999)

state “it is through engaging with the life experience to make meaning that there is an opportunity for change in perspective” (p.320).

Combining Formal, Nonformal and Informal Learning

This study shows the power of the combinations of formal, non-formal, and informal learning coming together for most participants. Formal learning happens when the objectives and means of learning are structured by a training institution and from the learner’s perspective it is intentional; learners do not have control over the objectives of learning whereas in non-formal learning which is still intentional, learners control the objectives but they do not have control over the means of learning as it is structured by a training institution (Rogers, 2014). The participants had active engagement in class and peer discussions, research topics, research projects, conferences, and talks on campus. By having access to these, participants could find what they needed to further their explorations of social justice.

Although classroom discussions, peer discussions, talks on campus, and familiarity with possibility of research on oppressed groups of individuals accounted for much in raising participants’ consciousness, their learning experience was not limited to formal and non-formal learning. As noted in chapter four and alluded to above, self-directed learning was also central to the participants’ learnings, enabling connections across non-formal and informal learning (Rogers, 2014). In fact, much of what the participants described was informal and nonformal learning. Facilitated workshops, social media, and events like Pride parade all became sites of learning for those who had become open to learning more. By definition, informal learning is “unorganized, unsystematic and even unintentional” (Shin 2011, p.74). The results showed that

parades, demonstrations, and news surrounding us encouraged reflection once the spark has been lit in an open curious mind. In my and the participants' case, when the spark was lit through formal and non-formal learning in a formal setting, it sent us out to learn more. In this study, formal, non-formal, and informal learning are best viewed in terms of a continuum. It is difficult to distinguish between them as they are closely related and all of them are of the same importance.

Not all Formal Learning Makes a Difference

In formal education, the teaching reflects institution's objectives, it also includes the subtle informal education which follows the same path (LaBelle, 1982; Rogers, 2014). For most of the participants, the formal mode of education was a dominant space of influence on raising their awareness of social issues. However, while "all education is learning, but not all learning is education" (Rogers, 2014, p.12). I take this up to mean that not all the departments on campus provide a critical education. Based on one of the participants' observations, the Department of Engineering is failing in terms of providing access to more inclusive cultural learning within its instructional objectives. However, although for this participant the formal education classroom was not particularly influential in raising her critical consciousness, there is not such thing as a 'non-learner' and she learned both unconsciously (Rogers, 2014) but also in a conscious self-directed manner by attending, for example, the Pride Parade. I would also argue that volunteering to participate in this study that had the requirement of experiencing a perspective transformation illustrates that something was going on in the life of this student and she had learnt something new.

The Power of Storytelling

As noted in chapter four, stories are significant in participatory, community, and arts-based methodologies. They have the potential to be sites to analyze and challenge power (Sonn, Stevens, & Duncan, 2013), to raise critical consciousness and promote social transformation (Temple, 2017), and to empower oppressed and racialized individuals by giving them a voice (Grey & Williams-Farrier, 2017).

The participants of this study described how stories have raised their social awareness and encouraged their transformation of ideas regarding Indigenous people. From what participants stated, it was implied that the voice of Indigenous people has been marginalized in the dominant discourse of Canada, a country that had been introduced to participants mainly as White before they arrived there. However, stories helped participants to know the alternative history and be introduced to Canada as a settler country.

The role of storytelling in promoting empowerment has been discussed at length in literature (e.g., Grey & Williams-Farrier, 2017; Smith, 2012; Temple, 2017). The results of this study illustrate the power of stories in promoting social transformation, supporting what other researchers such as Temple (2017) have proposed, that “stories act as a sort of social glue that binds people together and can lead to social transformation” (p.195). Through listening to Indigenous people’s stories, the participants and I opened “a window onto ignored or alternative realities” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9), familiarized ourselves with the history of oppression, and learnt to evaluate social issues critically. When the participants and I came to Canada, we had no hint of a history of decolonization in this country; however, we had the chance to have access to an

alternative narration of history and to be able to look critically at the past. Now, after living, working, and studying on UVic campus, there is a possibility for us to be advocates of social justice by spreading what we have heard, learnt, and experienced here. The participants were able to raise their own awareness of Indigenous issues because Indigenous people have employed the method of “telling stories from the past, reclaiming the past, giving testimony to the injustice of the past” to spread the influence of their voice and struggle against injustice (Smith, 1999, p. 34), and the fact that we have been so actively exposed to these stories.

Signs and Symbols

In Hall's (1997) definition of representation, meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture through the use of language, signs and images which stand for or represent things. Culture that is a shared conceptual map must be translated into signs to make a system which is capable of making meaning. Hall considers signs as words, sounds, or images that carry and express meaning through representation. In order to understand a culture, an individual must discover the cultural codes which lie at the heart of this representational system.

In fact, what my study showed was that after the seeds of cultural awareness were planted in the classroom, students began to see more clearly and use the signs, symbols, and artefacts around the campus to discover new cultures. As I noted, the totem poles told them stories of the distinctive culture of the local Indigenous people; the First Peoples House came to symbolize oppression and Canada's colonial identity but also hope for changes. In addition, the gender-neutral washrooms and safe zone signs, all gave voice and image to the diverse groups on campus, and these voices reinforced each other. This

is reflected in Klein's (2018) notion that aesthetics can be unsettling and help people along a pathway for transformative change. I would argue the participants of this study just needed the seed that art experiences provided, and then they watered these seed themselves.

Aesthetic experiences can support development of critical consciousness by involving "mindful awareness", "prolonged engagement with the experience", and "reflective interpretations" (Klein, 2018, p.6). In this study, the participants' active engagement with signs, symbols and artefacts on campus was driven by their curiosity and eventually enlightened their transformative experiences of social issues. As Klein (2018) argues, learning can happen in a variety of contexts and is not limited to conventional learning spaces.

Arts as a Transformative/Experiential Methodology

Scholars argue that images can provide opportunities for creating or fostering individual and social transformation (Clover, 2006; Hoggan et. al, 2009; McGregor, 2012). I spoke in one way to this above when I discussed the power of signs and symbols. However, my study also used photographs so it is to this methodology I now turn.

For scholars, photography as a method is powerful. Photographs unfold one's experiences and allow the viewers to reflect upon their own lives and experiences. These reflections can be further heightened in a group setting (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004, p. 1511). Although "for interviewees, the addition of photographs may mean an additional layer of intimacy than regular face-to-face interviews" (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004, p.1518), photographs created a friendly atmosphere for us and assisted the participants and me in overcoming our inhibiting feelings. Images had also the potential to look under the individuals' social

masks, pass through their prohibiting feelings of fear, shame, and conservatism, and be able to feel another person's essence of experience without judging them. These experiences are important because they reframe how we think about what it means to belong as a member of a multicultural Canadian society.

There were several occasions in this research when images had the power to "direct a gaze in a particular direction and to problematize" (McGregor, 2012). One key example is Maya's photo that captured the 'shocking' moment she encountered two lesbians who were publicly out and Judy's photo of her gay colleague with feminine features. For Clover (2006), images are a platform for self and social reflection and there were many instances of this in my study. The images allowed the participants to reflect not only on the issues, but also to have the chance to carry these critical reflections into their daily journeys of transformative learning.

Another merit of using images to emerge from this study was their ability to help the participant present a deeper, holistic understanding of their experience. As noted in the literature review, the role of imagination and emotions is highlighted in research using images (Clover, 2006; Dirkx, 2001; Hoggan et al., 2009; McGregor, 2012). Symbols and images are highly emotional, and they bring out personal perspectives (Dirkx, 2001). This aspect of arts-based methodology is clear in my research. Using images provided the space for participants to have access to their own coming to consciousness which cognitively they may not have done as it helped them to discover new realities about themselves. Images evoked strong feelings and empathy in the group and encouraged participants to recall similar experiences of transformative learning in their own life. Therefore, the participants were able to harmonize with other participants

and to join their experience. In this regard, photographs created the possibilities of experiencing others' transformative moments and joining those learnings without being physically present in that situation. For instance, this happened when Sana showed her photo of First Peoples House and explained all her learnings about Indigenous people through different experiences at this place (First Peoples House). Sana's learnings about Indigenous people are important to understand because Canadian history does not educate us about Indigenous peoples.

Imaginary Language and Symbolic Meaning

The employment of imagination and emergence of symbolic meaning in this research was very important. People imagine and create things with metaphors to build up a shared meaning. According to Hall (1997), "language is able to do this [building up shared understanding] because it operates as a *representational* system. In language we use signs and symbols... to stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings" (p. 1). Metaphors act like signs in a language to represent difficult concepts. I used photography to enable communication between the participants who might otherwise have trouble communicating in English since "signs stand for or *represent* our concepts, ideas and feelings in such a way as to enable others to 'read', decode or interpret their meaning in roughly the same way that we do" (p.5). The images seen in a photograph might mean different things to different people, depending on their previous life experience and cultural background. Therefore, "it is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them- how we represent them- that we give them meaning" (Hall, 1997, p.3).

The participants of my study actively employed that imaginary language and spoke in metaphors in some of their photos. The symbolic meaning of metaphors allowed them to summarize their long, gradual stories of transformative learning in an image, and to convey a lot in a short time. Symbolic meaning acted as a mediator to ease understandings of complex concepts that were seen through the filter of interpersonal as well as cultural differences. As noted above, there are multiple interpretations of symbolic meanings in an image. However, when these symbols and images were accompanied by the words of their creators, we as readers could be more faithful to what the participants intended to convey in their images. This would enable us to have a better understanding of participants' experiences in this research.

The role of images in overcoming the limitations of words, especially when people speak different languages (e.g., Clover, 2009) and with international students (e.g., Dogus, 2013), is well-noted in previous research. The results in this research confirm that images were indeed significant in conveying feelings, personal meanings and perspectives with international students who do not speak the same languages. Images can also ease communicating cultural differences and developing further awareness of one's cultural background in a diverse context, such as research with international students. For instance, when Maya was talking about her reaction to the two lesbians' closeness in public, Sana was surprised and uncertain about why viewing gays on UVic campus had not raised this curiosity in Maya. Then, there was a clarifying discussion about cultural differences, which provided us with contextual background information about gender issues in the country where Maya was coming from. Finally, we realized that because of gender inequalities and superiority of males to females, males

have more freedom in Maya's country to practice their life as they wish. In this case, even if homosexuality was forbidden in Maya's home country, she had encountered some male homosexuals before but not female homosexuals. Images led to a productive discussion of intercultural differences and educated all of us about a very different context from ours.

In the final chapter of this thesis, I will explain major findings and conclusions. This is followed by my reflections on this study and recommendations.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this arts-based study was to explore with a sample of five international students how they had come to consciousness regarding diverse social issues such as LGBTQ2S+, gender, Indigenous issues by studying at UVic. In this final chapter, I conclude with a discussion of the most important contributions of this study to understandings of transformation, critical consciousness, storytelling, responsibly to learn, the potentials of tertiary education, and photography. I conclude with some recommendations and reflections on this study.

The ability to negotiate cultural differences through experiences at UVic, which in turn transformed both knowledge and sense the self, was a critical finding of this study and speaks well of UVic. Participants managed to overcome the challenges of acculturation by having exposure to various social issues, hearing the voices of marginalized individuals, engaging actively with signs and images at UVic, and learning from a combination of formal and informal sources. Therefore, depending on the educational context and the international students' perceptions of intercultural differences between their country of origin and the host country, studying abroad can offer international students transformative potentials. What I mean by educational context here is studying in an institution in which international students have access to alternative knowledge and perspectives that are different from what they had been taught was 'normal' and what they had assumed to be 'normal' until then. Providing exposure to marginalized individuals and their culture, creating the space for students to be informed of marginalized individuals' needs, challenges, and potentials, and surrounding students

by a series of informative initiatives are among other factors making these institutions of higher education successful sites of learning.

Although an educational context can create transformative moments for international students and all the individuals on that site, it is the individuals' responsibility to nurture seeds of awareness planted in them and to transform their lives into lifetime journeys of gradual learning about social issues. According to the literature, there is paucity of acculturative perspectives which consider variations in the international students' cognitive appraisal of life changes and explore the transformative opportunities of studying abroad (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). My study adds to the previous research, in pointing to the transformative potentials of international students' experiences in the host country.

As it was noted in the findings of this study, there were other students studying and working in the same context, not necessarily international students, who needed more awareness and a revisiting of their beliefs regarding these social issues. In this regard, it also can be concluded that it was the participants' willingness to learn, openness to the alternatives, and their positive perceptions about moments of intercultural discomfort which aided this group of international students and their academic institution in highlighting the learning potentials of studying abroad. This study supports the claim made by Brown and Brown (2009, p. 351) of the transformative potential for "those who managed to overcome stress and develop a new identity" from studying abroad, but also the potential of being opened up by and through new and diverse culture experiences (e.g., Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015).

A second major finding was that for most of the participants, hearing authentic stories of marginalized groups promoted their social transformations. A conclusion that can be drawn from this finding is that storytelling is significant, especially when it is narrated by marginalized individuals who themselves have lived those stories, or at least belong to a community whose members have lived them at some point in history. This not only empowers these marginalized individuals by giving them a voice, but also it is capable of influencing individuals outside the marginalized groups and deepening their understandings of this perspective towards reality. The role of authentic stories is made more evident by acknowledging that for the participants, the stories were easy to believe as a part of reality rather than being perceived as mere imagination or related to distant history. Narratives also engage individuals at deeper levels by containing emotions and the potential to provoke feelings and empathy. In my study, positive experiences for participants through Indigenous peoples' authentic stories responds to Smith's (2012) belief in the power of stories that share silenced knowledge. By including the Indigenous peoples' narratives in classes and other events, their life stories become powerful tools of critical consciousness (e.g., Temple, 2017).

Since visuals often lend themselves to metaphoric interpretation, photographs, scholars remind us are capable of employing individuals' imagination in creating and interpreting them (Clover, 2006). Through the photos, participants spoke in metaphors in ways that allowed them to overcome the limitation of words and to ease perspectives and understandings of what were often for them, complicated concepts or issues. What can be concluded from the participants' experiences is that when metaphors are visualized in photographs, they linger in people's memories, and individuals may carry those learnings

into their lives outside of research context. My study therefore contributes to studies of the past by recognizing the value of photography in easing conversations about complicated concepts, conveying a diversity of feelings, and overcoming the limitation of words in diverse contexts. I can also infer from the findings that photographs have the potential to balance researcher-participant power relations. In this study, photographs assisted the participants in directing conversations and articulating what they intended to express, rather than being redirected by the researcher in light of research questions. Although the photos were originally taken for the purpose of considering the research questions, participants had the space to explore what was appealing to them in the flow of conversations.

Recommendations

I offer recommendations based on the findings, analysis, and conclusions of this study. The recommendations that follow are for academic institutions in general and UVic in particular, as well as for further research.

Given that there are multiple factors that effect international students' experiences on campus while they are studying abroad, and acknowledging the role that academic institutions can play in nurturing the potentials of acculturative experience, the suggestions put forth here address the initiatives that can promote awareness of social issues among all students on campus. The international students in this study suggested designing a compulsory "university-wide" course at UVic to help all the students become aware of the Indigenous culture and provide space for students in all the departments to be familiar with an alternative form of knowledge. This introductory course would not only educate students about the Indigenous people's distinctive culture, but would also

help reduce stigmatization of Indigenous people and false beliefs about them that might still exist among some students, as noted in chapter four.

Integration of the minorities' voices in the dominant discourse of university, class discussions, and research, in addition to the minorities' presence on campus can be considered essential at UVic. UVic is encouraged to supervise the implementation of its initiatives regarding social issues across the university to ensure all the departments' and faculties' activities are in line with its major policies regarding promoting a culture of inclusion and awareness of Indigenous people. The fact that even one student from the Department of Engineering expressed her dissatisfaction with the passivity of this department regarding encouraging awareness of Indigenous issues must be concerning for the university.

While UVic's initiatives proved to be successful to some extent in promoting awareness of social issues on campus, other academic institutions could encourage social awareness on campus by designing similar activities. Awareness-raising initiatives about LGBTQ2S+ issues on welcoming orientations, territory acknowledgements from the perspective of the university as a settler, signs (for instance, LGBTQ2S+ safe zones, neutral washrooms, etc.) and visuals (for instance, cultural and tribal symbols, films, pieces of art, and posters) on campus, the presence of cultural centers such as First Peoples House, conferences, talks, and workshops about social issues are among the successful activities for encouraging students to think critically about social issues surrounding them in their communities.

A further similar study to be conducted with a larger sample and with international students from various departments would enrich this area of research. Future

investigations may focus on how international students develop their transformative learnings and make them a lifestyle. Delving deeper into the education of international students, researchers could pose the questions of how cultural discomfort and acculturative challenges can be transformed into potentials for critical thinking and raising critical consciousness.

Another possible focus could be individual departments' initiatives regarding raising awareness of social issues and how they have integrated subjects related to minorities in their teaching objectives.

In light of the findings about the role of storytelling and visuals in promoting social awareness and critical consciousness, I would suggest conducting more research on these methods.

Final Researcher Reflections

This journey began for me when for the first time in one of my classes I realized how much I did not know. This transformative moment encouraged me to reflect on my beliefs, my experiences in my previous context, and what I was discovering within my new experiences at UVic. I recall having complex feelings. On one side, I was excited to learn about other individuals who needed to be understood (and like me, felt like members of a minority on campus); on the other side, I was feeling ashamed of my own ignorance about LGBTQ2S+ individuals and the multiple issues that were happening around me and had been of their concern. When I questioned my own experience as an international student in higher education, I became curious about what this experience was like for other international students who discovered the call inside them to consciously educate themselves. I also wondered how these international students had

overcome the challenges of intercultural differences and managed to transform their ideas alongside their experience studying abroad. In the early stages of my research, I found a gap in the literature regarding research on the potentials of acculturation among international students' experiences in their host countries. As I engaged in this research, the outcomes and my learnings shifted my expectations. At the beginning of the research I thought the participants' experience might be similar to mine, and although there were some similarities, everyone's experience was unique. I discovered multiple avenues that have led to critical consciousness for every individual in this study.

As a researcher, I learnt that there is always a possibility of encountering unexpected situations and that I should welcome and learn from these situations. As a researcher and participant, I was inspired by other participants' stories, and this transforming experience has expanded my thoughts and educated me about other aspects of the aforementioned social issues and intercultural differences. I was happy to see that this research provided a space for participants not only to talk about their transformative experiences as graduate international students, but also to share information about their home country and culture.

I was excited by the possibilities that using an arts-based methodology created in my study as well. It helped us to experience a safe(r) and friendly atmosphere in which we felt comfortable to share our personal experiences and feelings. The use of photos eliminated the need to provide detailed contextual or introductory information as everything could be seen and felt in the photos. I could easily relate to the other participants' challenging moments as if they had happened to me. There were also some photos that stuck in my mind and reminded me of shared experiences. I can say that each

photo along with the words of its narrator opened up a story of reflection, awareness, and learning for me.

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Appendix A



Participant Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a study entitled “How do international students describe their transformation in Canada: A photovoice study”. This study will be conducted by Laleh. S. Mousavi in the Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies at the University of Victoria. Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation.

Purpose and Objectives

The objective of this project is to focus on international students’ experiences of coming to social consciousness around gender, Indigenous, and/or LGBTQ2S+ issues. Specifically, this research will explore how international students have experienced change in their value systems regarding one/all of these three social issues, after studying at UVic, and how this may form a new value system for their future. Questions participants will be asked are:

What has contributed to your awareness about these social issues?

What has helped you to come to a state to critically question your previous taken-for- granted assumptions?

The arts, as many scholars argue, are important ways in which we can explore our consciousness. In particular, photography and photos are very effective in helping people make meaning of and share their knowledge and experiences, particularly those that do not fit easily into words. Therefore, this study will employ photography as its research method.

Participation

- You are asked to participate in this study because of your experience as an international student who has experienced a change in the beliefs, and values regarding LGBTQ, Gender, or Indigenous issues. Your responses will be valuable for this research.
- Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time.

You will be asked to respond to

1. Participate in an introductory session to become familiar with the research and photovoice ethics
2. Collect or take 5-7 photos on campus which you believe can visualize your experience and add a short text to it about your interpretation of the photo during two weeks’ time. The photos should be symbolic photos of only objects and places not people.
3. Discuss the research questions together in two face-to-face interviews in group.

- The introductory and interview sessions will take approximately five hours of your time.

Inconvenience

This research will take about five hours in total to attend the introductory and interview sessions. Besides your time commitment, I do not expect this research to cause you any other inconvenience

Risks

There are no known or anticipated risks to you from participating in this research.

Benefits

You will have an opportunity to reflect upon your experiences and contribute to the knowledge.

Withdrawal of Participation:

- You may withdraw at any time without explanation or consequences.
- Should you withdraw, your photos and responses will not be used in the analysis and will be destroyed

Anonymity and Confidentiality

- There will be limits to the nature of anonymity. Due to the nature of group activities, the researcher cannot guarantee the confidentiality of the information shared in the group session, and participants should refrain from sharing information that they wish to keep private.

- A pseudonym assigned will be used in place of your name.
- The researcher does not need to know your name.
- Only researcher will have access to the data.
- All electronic data will be password protected.

Research Results will be Used/Disseminated in the Following Ways

It is anticipated that the results of this study will or may be shared with others in the following ways: a thesis, and a published article or chapter in a book.

Disposal of Data

The data will be kept in password protected university computers. All files will be deleted after-2 years.

Questions or Concerns

- If you have any questions about the research, please contact the researcher via email: lmousavi@uvic.ca Darlene Clover via Clover@uvic.ca
- In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers, and that you consent to participate in this research project.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Appendix B

Survey Questions

- 1) Please talk to me about yourself, where you are from, what it was like, why you are here (for how long if not emigrated)?
- 2) What was the focus of your undergraduate degree? Talk to me about the university you went to and what kinds of things you learned
- 3) When I said the “social issues”, what kinds of social issues, if any, did you discuss in your household, previous undergraduate or schooling or work?
- 4) When I say ‘social justice’ how would you have understood that?
- 5) What programme are you in? Talk a bit to me about the courses and the kinds of social issues that were raised in your formal classes? Or were they not?
- 6) Transformative learning talks about a ‘disorientating dilemma and what that means is a sudden understanding about something about a social, political or cultural issue. Others, however, suggest that change takes time, and that consciousness grows over time. Which of these would describe what has happened to you as a result of your being here at UVic? A fundamental quick change or a change over time.
- 7) Can you talk to me about the kinds of images or symbols on campus that have affected you? Have you attended talks on different social issues and if so, which ones?
- 8) What do you now understand about LGBTQ2S+?
- 9) What do you now understand about gender issues (violence against women)?
- 10) What do you now understand about Indigenous issues? What do the terms decolonisation and reconciliation mean to you now?
- 11) What has contributed to your awareness/consciousness on the campus?

- 12) Who are the people who have had the most impact on you in terms of a new consciousness? How have they done that?
- 13) Do you think photos can ease talking about your experiences?
- 14) How do you think an academic institution, like University of Victoria can develop international students' awareness of LGBTQ2S+ individuals and issues, Indigenous reconciliation, or gender issues?

Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. Transformative learning talks about a ‘disorientating dilemma and what that means is a sudden understanding about something about a social, political or cultural issue. Others, however, suggest that change takes time, and that consciousness grows over time. Which of these would describe what has happened to you as a result of your being here at UVic?
A fundamental quick change or a change over time?
2. What has contributed to your awareness/consciousness on the campus?
3. Do you think photos can ease talking about your experiences?
4. How do you think an academic institution, like University of Victoria can develop international students’ awareness of LGBTQ2S+ individuals and issues, Indigenous reconciliation, or gender issues?