Social Transformative Learning in Human Rights Delegations: Critical Research on the Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Network

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Abstract
This article examines the experience of six participants in the Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Network (BTS) delegation program. Human rights education is central to this program that operates between Canada and Guatemala. Key findings from this research include participants’ rethinking of their own power and privilege upon returning to Canada and making connections with the struggle of Indigenous peoples in both countries. Another finding concerns how specific communal aspects of the BTS delegation (communitas) lead to social transformation and the development of solidarity relationships that are transformative to all. The research affirms the need for experiential learning experiences which use transformative learning approaches to support human rights and social change.

Keywords
adult learning, human rights, social transformation, social change

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Introduction

There is a general skepticism about development tourism, as writer Robert Chambers (1979) calls it, drawing attention to the western development professional who tours development sites looking for new and exciting experiences. A similar skepticism is generally held about those who participate in social justice and human rights delegations and service learning trips abroad. The critique is that such participants are voyeurs, engaged in privileged and entitled travel. However, some research has affirmed the value of travel immersion (Walter, 2016; Morgan, 2011). Those involved in such experiential education say that the visits, limited in time and scope as they are, are beneficial and indeed transformative (Perry, 2012). The purpose of this article is to better understand the transformative learning experiences of six participants in the Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Network human rights delegations.

Background

From 1954 to 1996, Guatemala was the site of an Internal Armed Conflict between the Guatemalan army and civil patrols and leftist guerrillas. The Commission for Historical Clarification estimates that in total 200,000 people were killed and 40,000 people forcibly disappeared during the 36-year Internal Armed Conflict (Drouin & Molina, 2011). There were over 669 massacres throughout the country (where five people or more were killed), including the elderly and small children; of those, 626 of the massacres were committed by the Guatemalan army (Drouin). The darkest period, the late 1970s to early 1980s, is considered as genocide against the Indigenous Mayan people. The signing of the 1996 Peace Accords in Guatemala marked the end of the conflict, but also moved the country into an open market for foreign investment. Over the past 20 years, Guatemala’s inequality has continued to grow through lack of access to land, and the constant threat in rural areas by transnational megaprojects such as mines, hydroelectric projects, or monocropping (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, 2018). The country is still in a fragile state.

The Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Network (BTS), formed in the late 1980s, grew out of the need for continued solidarity with Guatemala after refugees displaced by the Internal Armed Conflict expressed their wish to return home from Mexico. Kathryn Anderson (2003), the founder of the network, states, BTS sent its first delegation to Guatemala in 1991 to “establish a base for the development of a network of Maritimers [eastern Canadians] active in church and community groups and committed to solidarity work” (p. 134). Delegations provided educational opportunities as well as the presence of international observers in communities in Guatemala to “increase the political cost of attacks and intimidation against social activists” (p. 275). BTS built long-term relationships with partners through human rights advocacy and support during legal processes, volunteers in Guatemala, human rights delegations, and speaking tours of Guatemalan activists to the Maritimes of Canada.
At the time of writing, the first author, the BTS Guatemala Coordinator, has 12 years’ experience working in human rights and solidarity with BTS and is committed to social change and transformative learning. One aspect of her work is to facilitate human rights delegations in bringing Canadians to Guatemala to learn from local partners in country, and to begin questioning their power and privilege within Canadian society and how it affects the struggle of Guatemalans. This often leads to continued participation in BTS and working for greater social change. Yet, little is known about the delegate experience, both as it affects individuals and the group.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study builds on social transformative learning. Hoggan (2016) defines *transformative learning* as “processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world” (p. 71). Transformation does not always occur in the same way, or sometimes does not occur at all. Taylor (2008) highlights barriers to transformation, such as an inability to engage in critical reflection and a resistance to journaling. This is important as critical reflection plays a major role in facilitating adult education and transformative learning as it allows one to look deeper at one’s values and ideology to critique views considered “true” and “moral” (Brookfield, 2000), in order to uncover hegemonic assumptions and hidden power dynamics which serve oppressive power structures. For Fiddler and Marienau (2008), the reflection process helps move an event to an experience to garner meaning and potentially challenge preconceived notions or ideas. Other facilitators of transformative learning include individual experience, holistic orientation, dialogue, authentic relationships, and awareness of context (Taylor, 2009). Key to our understanding is the social transformation advanced by Freire (1970) and others writing in a similar vein such as Florence (1994).

Transformative learning theory includes both a focus on individual and societal change (English & Mayo, 2012). Transformative experiences can lead learners to challenge their normalized values and Euro-centric ways of knowing the world. Transformative learning theory aspires to understand the ways and means of change within a person and society as a result of the combined experience. The emancipatory tradition of transformative learning has been cultivated by scholars such as English and Mayo (2012), who work on the premise that learning must extend beyond the personal to the transformation of collective, societal, and other norms. This paper uses the nomenclature of “social transformative learning” to illustrate an alliance with the social emancipatory tradition in the spirit of Freire (see Taylor, 2009). This tradition acknowledges the important of praxis, the ever flowing interplay between reflection and action, which undergirds committed social change. Like Buechner et al. (2020), we see the communal aspects, communitas, of transformation as key to this social change.

Whereas, those such as Hoggan (2016) and Taylor (2008) tend to draw on Freire as the inspiration for social transformation, we also look to the women working in this tradition, namely Shauna Butterwick, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Miles, Darlene
Clover, Mae Shaw, Shirley Walters, and others. Whether they explicitly name it, they are working in social transformative learning. This process of challenging one’s preconceived notions through educational experiences has been at the center of the work of bell Florence (1994) who sees education as an opportunity to challenge apathy and become an active participant in the world (see English & Irving, 2015). For Paxton (2010) and Macalpine and Marsh (2005), educational experiences are opportunities to challenge the white paradigm and the silence about white hegemony.

Yet, for all the discussion on social transformative learning, there is little understanding of how it links to human rights. Tibbitts (2005) says that in the context of human rights education, transformative learning involves dealing with group conflict, to understand the experiences of others. It also involves critical analyses and reflection to identify societal issues, as well as the link between individual and human rights issues. Finally, as with the BTS delegations, it can help mobilize people for action. Though we know more about cross cultural experiences generally (Walter, 2016; Walters et al., 2017), we know little about delegations in circumstances where violent violations of human rights have occurred.

The stakes are high. The United Nations Human Rights Commission (2018) has been clear on the need for support for human rights, as well as for human right education. It has applied this to many settings, including the site of this study, Guatemala. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) says that we have the obligation to ensure, support, and build on these rights. Sustainable development is dependent on democracy, human rights, and human development (see Winkler & Williams, 2017).

This critical research studies how human rights education, within a delegation format, can be transformational. This study attempts to add to the robustness of social transformative learning theory by focusing on Canadians who have participated in a human rights delegation to Guatemala facilitated by the Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Network. The study asks how the delegates are affected, what the experience has been, what conditions are involved, and other transformative dimensions of their experience.

**Methodology and Research Design**

This research employs a critical research methodology to understand existing power structures and to provide an analytic lens of power to the research. Merriam and Tisdell (2016), note that the point of critical research is to, “critique and challenge, to transform, and to analyze power relations…the hope is often that people will take action as a result of the study” (p. 59). Working within this tradition, this research does not focus on the experience of Guatemalan human rights defenders, but rather on the transformative experience for the oppressor (i.e., the delegates): unless there is a clear buy-in by the privileged as beneficial, dominant groups will not be willing to give up their power (Brigham, 2013). The historically oppressive nature of north–south relations is reflected in the relationships and the resistances that are present, and which
flow through all of this research. The critical approach takes one aspect of solidarity and human rights work to shed light on the broader implications and possibilities of combining social transformative learning (English & Mayo, 2012) with a specific goal of investigating learners’ power and privilege in a difficult context.

The focus is six former BTS delegation participants, all of whom are over the age of 18, have participated in a delegation within the last 10 years and continue to participate in a local BTS committee or by attending the annual meeting of the BTS within the last two years. All participants had a level of higher education and identified as female and as active members of BTS. All the participants live in the Maritimes of Canada and have participated in at least one BTS delegation ranging from 2002 to 2018, and four participated in two delegations. Participants all took part in a delegation the first author facilitated. The participants self-identified as having had a transformative experience through participation in the delegation. They were recruited on the BTS email listserv and the first six responses were accepted. All were given pseudonyms.

Semi-structured interviews were held via Skype, with all participants and these were recorded and transcribed. The interview recordings were saved with TrueCrypt, a software that encrypts data, due in part to the potential threats of harm due to the nature of this work, and respect for confidentiality during this research process. Data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection, as each interview was followed by transcription and iterative coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Both during data gathering and analysis, questions focused on transformative experiences around race, class, gender, and sexuality through a critical lens. The data were analyzed by relating it to existing literature and making contrasts and comparisons to findings.

During the delegation, these participants were dependent on the facilitator’s experience, language skills, and contextual knowledge. To negotiate the power relationship between them and her, she promoted knowledge sharing, translation support, and critical debriefing on immersion experiences. The facilitator also shared her reflections in daily reflection circles with the group.

**Research Findings**

This section reports on the three main themes from the study. The first was the importance of solidarity between north and south, between the delegates and the Guatemalan community. The second theme focused on significant aspects of participating in the delegation, including visits to a massacre site, interacting with the Canadian embassy, and facilitating the delegation. The format and practices of the delegation were transformative. The third and final theme was an analysis of power and privilege, which helped to break down some of the experience and to identify human rights issues. There were other issues but these three are most illustrative of the transformative dimensions of the study.
**Importance of Solidarity**

Each of the delegation participants shared a prior interest in human rights and social justice before participating in BTS and a BTS delegation. Three had not traveled extensively before their participation in the delegation and looked to this opportunity as a chance to broaden their international experience. One of the participants, Elizabeth, a retired nurse, had been to Ethiopia and Uganda working in a school and orphanage before coming to Guatemala. All participants saw BTS as providing key educational experiences, beginning with the orientation session which focused on distinguishing solidarity from charity. Paula, a recent university graduate, reflected on her participation in a delegation: “It was the first place I think I was introduced to the term solidarity. That was a big take away for me. Because up until that point I think I had mostly been introduced to the charity model…I think it wouldn’t have come without BTS being a host organization on the ground.” This reflects BTS’ stress on mutual long-term relationships based on partners’ needs as an important aspect of the solidarity model.

Another participant, Megan reflected on the concept of charity versus solidarity as well, and the relationship with BTS’ partners. She stated,

> It’s not about charity, it’s about trying to be a partner and giving something both ways. I think that was a bit of a lightbulb moment for me too, of just, thinking about as I continue through this life, and what kind of groups or organizations do I want to be involved in and what kind of difference can they make.

For Clare, a former social worker now lawyer, BTS provided an opportunity to see how international solidarity works. In her work in Canada, she had had experiences with solidarity, but the BTS delegation brought it even more to the forefront:

> I mean I understood solidarity and as a social worker had done some reading and whatnot, but I didn’t really ever experience solidarity like I have with BTS…It’s opening my eyes to what learnings we can bring from Guatemala, what learnings we can bring from Canada and back and forth…I just find there’s a lot of beautiful relationships that have developed, actually.

Clare sees the relationships with partners as a reflection of the solidarity model exercised by BTS and values that personal relationships are an important component of the model.

The work of international human rights accompaniment falls within the solidarity model of support for partner organizations. Accompaniment is the physical presence of people from foreign countries in support of human rights defenders who receive threats or attacks for their work. To Megan, this accompaniment means, “We’re paying attention to this, we’re not turning away, we’re not ignoring it. That’s pretty powerful.” Similarly, for Angela, a retired physiotherapist, this was also a significant learning from
the delegation, and reflected on human rights accompaniment as an alternative to the white savior mentality common in the North. For her, it was important to learn that partners were not looking for Canadians to “fix” their problems; rather, they were asking for accompaniment and for support in their struggle. For Angela, this called into question her previous understanding of the roles of foreigners in countries like Guatemala. The historically oppressive nature of north–south relationships makes “fixing” particularly problematic as it assumes incorrectly that knowledge, power, and superiority of the fixer. In its stead, the delegation promotes a reciprocal and equitable process that supports a long-term mutual relationship with partners.

**Significant Aspects of Participating in the Delegation**

**Rio Negro—site of five massacres.** All participants had taken part in an organized visit to the community of Rio Negro, which was affected by five massacres during the genocide against the Mayan people in the late 70s and early 80s. The massacre on March 13, 1982 has become particularly emblematic of the conflict both in Guatemala and worldwide; 107 children and 70 women were killed by civil paramilitaries and the Guatemalan military. Surviving community members, after years of living in the mountains or forced into a model village in the neighbouring town of Rabinal, decided to return to their community in the mid-1990s. In 2008, a community tourist center was inaugurated, and now hosts national and international visitors. Since that time, BTS has been bringing delegations to the community center, and groups make the pilgrimage to the massacre site with local guides.

The six interview participants shared the experience in Rio Negro as one of the most significant moments on the BTS delegation. The community is spectacularly beautiful, resting on a mountain on top of a lake created by a hydroelectric dam, the resistance of which is one of the reasons which led to the massacres. Participants walk to the massacre site with a survivor and hear the story of the community. At the top of the hill, participants reach the massacre site, sit and speak with the survivor, and take a moment to remember the victims. Krista, an artist, had heard the story of the massacre for many years but the guided hike to the site added personal testimony to the horrific story. For others, the visit to the community center and massacre site evoked feelings of comparison to their lives at that time. Elizabeth, the former nurse, said,

> Something that was kind of interesting for me and very sad, is that my daughter was born in December of '81 and the massacre occurred in March of '82. It felt very personal to me because at the same time I was having this beautiful time at home breastfeeding, and everything was wonderful, these people were having such a terrible time losing their children.

For other participants, like Megan, the physical experience in Rio Negro and walking the same walk made the experience transformative. The visit engaged emotions and physicality within an experiential learning experience. These emotions,
particularly empathy, stayed with Megan and other participants for many years after the conclusion of their delegation. The physical exertion to hike to the massacre site, the first-hand testimony, and following the same exhausting path, all contribute to a transformational experience. When asked to explain why visiting Rio Negro was a significant moment, she started to cry and said,

I think because we actually walked the same path that the women and children were forced to walk… It made it much more like, wow, this really happened, just because you were physically there, and the guide who was walking up the hill with us had his young son, and him talking... Just to physically be in the same spot as those things happened… just, yeah it hits you a little bit.

This was a shared experience of the participants—the impact of physically walking the same walk and being in the place of the massacre and hearing stories from survivors of that day. This physical embodiment of this horrible history contributed to their transformational experience, as did the experience of empathy, of walking on the same path.

**Visiting communities affected by Canadian mining and meeting with the Canadian Embassy.** Since 2004, BTS delegations have been visiting three of the communities affected by five metallic mineral mines in different stages of operation (full operation, suspension, and closure) that are or have been owned by Canadian companies. Communities have reported human rights abuses at each of the mines, and recently two separate incidents of violence by company security against community opposition were before Canadian courts (Quan, 2017). In one case, the plaintiffs won. The other case is ongoing. For many participants, this is the first time they have critically thought about the actions of Canadian companies overseas and this has challenged their ideas of being Canadian and Canada’s role in the world. Elizabeth remarked, “Before I went to Guatemala, I had thought Canadians were exceptional because we were the experts in mining. And I always thought that was something to be proud of. And after going to Guatemala, I realized it wasn’t. And even that Canadians do despicable things.”

Megan shared something very similar:

It was the first time in my life that I was faced with the fact that Canada isn’t a perfect, great, wonderful place all the time and that there are Canadian places, businesses, entities around the world that do some really awful, horrible things… And I think that was the first moment for me when that concept was shattered or tarnished.

That process of calling one’s identity into questions can lead to an important shift in understanding Canadian politics and society. For Clare, the lawyer, this was also new information:
I had not known about Canadian mining companies being so involved in the extractive industry in Central America, ...I’m very angry with the Canadian government, with Canadian mining companies, to hear about the rapes and the shooting and the guards who followed directions from Canadian companies.

At the end of delegations, the group always visits the Canadian Embassy in Guatemala. While the participants bring questions on a range of topics from the delegation, the issue of Canadian mining in Guatemala is always at the forefront, especially since Guatemalan partners have asked them to once again inform the Canadian government of the human rights abuses. As participants share their experiences to embassy officials, this interaction is often bitter. Paula, the recent university graduate states,

Just meeting with Canada’s representatives in Guatemala was very, very shocking because it didn’t seem like they were representing us at all. And it was frustrating to hear them…argue and defend, but then not visit communities and just have no regard for people’s concerns…It felt like those concerns weren’t being listened to at all. It felt really robotic.

Clare, the lawyer said, “We prepared extensively, we each had speaking roles, we worked at it. I just felt we put a lot of effort into our presence there at the Embassy, but I don’t know that that was as effective as some of the other things we might have done.” This calls to mind a key question: Is going to the Canadian Embassy effective? Learning about communities affected by Canadian mines was a significant moment in the delegation, though the disillusionment with the Canadian government is only compounded with the embassy visit. Further research could be done on what, if anything, the Canadian officials do with the information gleaned from meetings with delegations. Upon returning to Canada, delegates continue raise these issues to the Canadian government through their involvement with BTS, including through advocacy, urgent actions, and meetings with Canadian officials in their own communities. This, combined with participating in fundraisers, local committee work, urgent actions, and hosting Guatemalan partners during speaking tours to the Maritimes of Canada are important aspects of delegates’ work and commitment to BTS upon their return home.

**Importance of facilitators.** The participants also credited the facilitators with the success of the delegation, especially as the first author lives in country.

In her interview, Megan, the union member, touched on the importance of having BTS’s Guatemala coordinator’s analysis around safety:

I think having coordinators who do spend time in Guatemala and who are very comfortable with the place and the people and the language makes everybody feel so much more comfortable and safe in some situations... I remember the first day we were in Guatemala and we were walking down the street and standing on a corner, and a Coca-Cola truck drove by with an armed guard on the back. I was like, did I just see what I think I saw? And
you [the researcher] said, ‘That’s pretty normal here, and here’s why, and this is what’s going on.’

Krista, the artist, went beyond looking at safety, and touched on the importance of facilitator’s role of filling in the gaps for participants who are in a new culture and context. She said,

...because there is a cultural divide, a historical divide, there is an ethnic divide between me and the [Guatemalan] presenters, like the grassroots people, it is really useful to have someone who bridges, who has knowledge and experience, who can expand or explain or give background, to help me digest as a Northerner and a non-Indigenous person. I think the facilitators are able to do that and without it I think my learning would be a lot less solid.

Clare, the lawyer, sees the facilitators not only as contributing to logistics and translation, two aspects which were also mentioned in the interviews, but also giving historical and cultural context to the visits with partners. When asked how much learning came from facilitators, she responded,

A lot of learning. Maybe a different kind of learning though. They had a lot more background on Guatemala and sort of the struggle that has been going on there. And they have also built such strong relationships with all of the communities that we went to visit. So, learning came in that way as opposed to just sharing experiences. They were also sharing knowledge.

Krista and Clare share the perspective of facilitators as filling in gaps around partner experiences and presentations, but here Clare also touches on the importance of deep solidarity relationships which have formed over many years.

**Analysis of Power and Privilege**

The third major theme related to critical analysis and praxis. It is separated out from other aspects of the delegation because it was a core contributor to transformative learning. Participants drew attention to the transformative aspects of the journaling and reflection circles that the facilitators led each night during the delegation. For Paula, this brought a better understanding of the situation, and an analysis of her own feelings:

I think [reflection circles and journaling] are really helpful for debriefing and sort of getting to another level of understanding. It’s really helpful to hear other people share their experiences and their perspectives because it always adds other layers, which is really nice. And it is also nice to be validated too because someone else is feeling similarly to you.
In contrast, Megan said it was interesting to read the group journal, where one person would write about each day, for the opposite reason: “I liked seeing someone else’s reaction to the day and being like, ‘Wow! I didn’t feel that way at all but it’s kind of interesting to see the perspective you had from it.’” This contrast of opinions about a shared experience leads to an enrichment in the understanding of perspectives. Two of the participants found journaling and/or reflecting to be difficult. Participants are often in different stages of challenging their own racism and privilege, which can come to light during these reflection circles.

The critical reflection support helped participants reflect on their own power and privilege through the delegation, and if their understanding of the two concepts had been changed or reinforced by the delegation. Though some such as Clare had a well-defined understanding of the issues, the delegation strengthened her understanding. For Krista, the delegation itself was an example of privilege. She states,

I think the very fact of going as a group of Northerners, mostly Maritimers to Guatemala, especially bring in a group where there’s a bunch of you, really hit home to me, the privilege that we have, the economic privilege…in a group of 10 or 12 of you, it’s so in your face the economic privilege you have…It’s not a privilege everybody has.

Others such as Paula were introduced to the concepts of power and privilege during her delegation to Guatemala. As she was an undergraduate student at the time, she had opportunities to continue to question injustices which she saw in Guatemala in an academic setting. This feeling was shared by Megan, who also began to think critically about her privilege and how she can be a better ally to oppressed communities.

This privilege came to the foreground in discussions of Indigenous Mayan people, which raised the issues affecting Indigenous peoples in Canada. For participants, it was drawing the connection between what is happening in Canada to what is happening in Guatemala and seeing the ongoing repression of Indigenous people who are committed to protecting land and territory as part of a larger struggle. For Angela, the BTS delegation was one of the first times she thought about the effects of colonization of Indigenous people in Canada. Krista too was affected. Following the delegation, she was able to make deeper connections between the situation of Indigenous peoples in Canada and the struggles in Guatemala and became involved in solidarity with the struggles of Indigenous people in Canada.

The drawing of parallels is a very important component of the BTS delegation. Megan had a very significant experience during the height of the Elsipogtog First Nation’s resistance to fracking in their community in New Brunswick, in eastern Canada. Megan had recently returned from the BTS delegation, and states,

I was driving down the highway and this whole convoy of armored cars and fracking trucks [drove by]. And I was like, ‘Woah! Wait a second. Where am I right now?’ ...This isn’t a “Guatemala” thing. This isn’t a “far away” thing. These kinds of issues around extractive companies and the human rights [issues] that go along with it, especially when it
comes to First Nations and community consultations…That was a moment that really struck me, how much there’s a parallel between what goes on in other places and what happens here. And the importance of saying, ‘I’m not ok with it happening there because I’m not ok with it happening here.’

Drawing parallels between Indigenous rights issues and the imposition of the extractive industry and megaprojects is a key lesson from BTS delegations. This critical analysis is part of the ongoing process of praxis, the interplay of action and critical reflection that is the hallmark of the delegation.

**Discussion of the Findings**

The purpose of this research was to examine BTS delegations as experiences which contribute to social transformative learning and societal change. It is evident through the research interviews with former delegation participants that delegations do have opportunities for transformation. For delegation participants, this experience can be transformational in the way they think about their own power and privilege and Canada’s role in the world. These experiences have led to a shift in thinking for delegation participants themselves. With this personal change and the commitment to action through ongoing involvement in Canada and with BTS, this personal transformation contributes to societal transformation and a larger social movement.

This research was designed to examine the pedagogy of the oppressor (Freire, 1970) and as an attempt to examine more closely how BTS as a predominantly white organization can delve deeper into our practice to challenge the numerous aspects of whiteness which are pervasive in Canadian society (Brigham, 2013). Below are three overarching themes prevalent in this research which build on a number of elements key to transformational learning leading to social change. These themes were identified through an iterative process of examining the thick rich data and findings in light of the literature. These three themes include: the role of specific aspects of the delegation that facilitate transformation; the importance of challenging preconceived notions and ideas through experiential learning; and the long-term impact of delegations for continued involvement in BTS and solidarity work and movements in the community.

**Role of Specific Delegation Aspects**

Interview participants focused on key areas of the delegation, which were rich in learning. First, the trip to Rio Negro, the site of the 1982 massacre of women and children, was named by all participants as significant as it engaged all aspects of their being, from the physical, to the emotional and affective, to the reflective, cognitive, and intellectual. Praxis was at the heart of the visit to the massacre site and their transformation. Those three components are impossible to reproduce in other aspects of the delegation but shed light on how people respond to experiential learning. This moment is a key transformational aspect of the delegation.
Another transformative moment for participants is visiting communities impacted by Canadian mining companies. It can be a shock to hear the involvement of Canadian companies in the sexual violence, murders, and criminalization of community members who speak out against the companies. Meeting the community resistance to the projects and seeing the proximity of the mines to communities puts a face and a name to the resistance and demands the identification and shaming of these companies. As stated in the interviews, participants often retain interest in mining issues after the delegation. English and Mayo (2012) look at educating for greater coherence leading to great unity, and finally “solidarity between people who are different and between the progressive and social justice movements that represent their interests” (p. 126). This process of a deeper understanding of the struggle of communities affected by mining companies brings Canadian delegation participants into a committed solidarity relationship and joins a wider movement to stop the continued human rights abuses.

This importance of facilitators touches on aspects of Taylor (2009) elements of transformational learning, the importance of authentic relationships. He states, “transformation at times can be perceived as threatening and an emotionally charged experience” (p. 13) which is particularly true when challenging white hegemony and shining light on power and privilege. The relationship among facilitators, participants, and partners is key to facilitating transformation, which allows participants to question and have discussions on difficult issues.

Critical reflection through journaling and reflection circles, a main element for transformational learning (Taylor, 2009), facilitated the move from an event to an experience where meaning is extracted (Fiddler & Marienau, 2008). While it was challenging for some of the participants, the majority of interview participants stated the important of reflection circles and journaling (Brookfield, 2000) both in the moment, for a deeper understanding and validation of their feelings, and as a time capsule of the experience which participants return to from time to time after the delegation. This confirms Hanson (2013) work which underscores the value of critical reflection in participatory work. It also highlights the links between personal and social transformation.

**Challenging Preconceived Notions**

It is important for BTS as an organization and facilitators specifically to ensure delegations, which are a further expression of privilege, challenge ideas of white hegemony and do not reinforce them. Throughout the BTS delegations, there were major concepts that came into play, where participants were encouraged by facilitators to examine more closely and reflect on their effects. These include the charity versus solidarity models, power and privilege, and reflections on Canada and our country’s impact on Indigenous people in Canada and Guatemala. These educational moments are in themselves transformative (English & Mayo, 2012).

The solidarity model which is a constantly evolving question within BTS is called into the light with BTS delegations. Through long-term relationships and the absence of
project funding, BTS looks to continuously move away from a charity model to one of solidarity, consisting of long-term relationships which are connected in a common struggle for a better world and social justice. For most of the participants, this delegation was the first time they challenged this idea of colonization and patriarchy, exemplified through their previously held beliefs of the need to “help” marginalized communities. This underscores the hard work of uncovering contradictions and hegemonic ideas (see Brigham, 2013).

This experience was similar for power and privilege, as participants, possibly for the first time, were encouraged to reflect on their White and Canadian privilege. One area was the importance to drawing connection with the oppression and marginalization of Indigenous people both in Canada and in Guatemala. Participants had failed to see their role especially as White Canadians in the ongoing issues affecting First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples in Canada, and some after returning from Guatemala became more involved in solidarity work with Indigenous people at home. From an organizational standpoint, this is a powerful result of BTS delegations; not only a greater realization of our role as Canadians on an international scale but also seeing our role as allies and as affected by continued systems of oppression at the local and national level. While BTS is an organization which focuses on Guatemala, there must be a linkage of both the understanding of the issues but also the resistance to these same structures that oppress those who resist the destruction of land and territory, especially indigenous communities. It is sometimes easier to see problems in far off places (e.g., Holma et al., 2018), than at home. However, this area was not fully developed in this research, and the participants’ responses indicate that an even greater focus on power and privilege needs to be done throughout the delegation.

Although the participants had already had an interest in human rights and solidarity work before the delegation, they were greatly influenced by the realization of the actions of Canadian companies in Guatemala and the disinterest of the Canadian Embassy officials of hearing those concerns. This led to a major shift in thinking about Canada and often led to further advocacy efforts by the participants when returning home.

Transformational Learning Through Human Rights Delegations

This research has shed light on a number of ways transformational learning occurs through BTS human rights delegations. The delegation led to a shift in their own understanding of their place in the world as Canadians, and they either began a commitment or deepened their commitment to the struggle for justice for crimes of genocide in Guatemala and/or the struggle against Canadian mining companies. This challenging of one’s identity through this experience is transformative learning. Through the delegation, there was a major shift in participants’ view of themselves as Canadians and their country’s role in the world—a view which had been tightly held and is continuously presented to Canadians through the idea that the country is a force of good on the international stage. It would also seem that this experience was enhanced
by some of the core factors in transformative learning, including dialogue, authentic relationships, and awareness of context (Taylor, 2009). They were immersed in this experience. Delegation participants’ continued involvement with BTS after the delegation through thematic committees, local committees, or by attending the AGM are all expressions of continued commitment stemming from experiences and relationships during the delegation, which are core elements of transformative learning (Taylor, 2009). BTS is a wider movement of people who feel committed to the struggle for human rights in Guatemala and can see the connection to the struggle in Canada, especially for Indigenous communities. Interview participants have stated the importance of reflecting on these connections when returning to Canada and go forward with a new awareness and involvement in wider human rights issues.

This research also builds on existing literature on privilege (English & Irving, 2015). By putting White hegemony and power and privilege at the center of the delegation experience, White Canadians are encouraged to think about their privilege to begin to recognize and challenge their apathy and acceptance of oppression. Most importantly, they begin to consider the importance of doing this together in a collective (Buechner et al., 2020). The stakes are high, given the need to support human rights education (Winkler & Williams, 2017).

This research underscores the importance of experience and reflection, especially collective reflection, as an element to transformation (Taylor, 2009). The process of orientation, experience, and debrief outlined by Fiddler and Marienau (2008) is shown in this research to be significant to the learning experience. The ongoing reflection during the delegation was found by participants to deepen their understanding of their experiences and enrich their time in Guatemala. The journaling and reflection circles go further still to analyze and reflect on the experience in the moment and as a tool for looking back in the future. This experience contributes to personal and societal transformation. The participants’ experience and transformation cannot be undone. They see the world and their relationships with the Guatemalan peoples afresh. This personal transformation has deep implications for how they now engage with the world, with their own friends and family, and with social and economic human rights issues. After so many years of delegations, a critical mass of participants has become deeply engaged in the BTS solidarity network which works for justice in the human rights sector. Their stories of the delegation highlight the deep interconnections between personal and social transformation.

Finally, this study is part of a longer project of understanding the human rights work of BTS. As the specific focus was the transformative experience of the delegation participants, the participants were self-selected, meaning that those who were not transformed by the experience did not participate. Further studies might look at the Guatemalan partners’ experiences of the delegations and at the many political activities of the participants once they returned home.
Conclusion

The interviews with delegation participants touched on a number of topics, but some of the key findings include the role of prior human rights or social justice interests in the participation of the delegation; the importance of reflection and journaling to the experience; and how certain aspects of the delegation lead to deep personal growth, such as the visit to Rio Negro and communities affected by Canadian mining. While these results highlight the work BTS is doing well, the research also highlighted a number of areas where the organization can make positive changes to increase the impact on participants. There is also a need to deepen participants’ understandings of power and privilege in particular upon returning to Canada.

This type of transformative program is labor intensive on the part of the BTS organization and facilitator. It requires organization, capital, and the resources and commitment of partners in Guatemala. Though it is effective and transformational, it raises questions of how best to facilitate human rights work and change. Yet, the commitment is there. This study suggests that small organizations like BTS are effective as they change hearts and minds, one at a time, quite effectively.

This research has shown a light on some of the positive effects of BTS delegations and participants. It has also pointed to the many ways that personal and social transformation are linked. As well, the study points to new areas of research that can be developed such as the extended commitment to solidarity work in Canada and partners’ experiences. The hope through this inquiry is a further deepening of participants’ commitment to solidarity work in Guatemala in support of human rights.

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