Life Changing Experiences? The long-term impact of an overseas study visit to India on UK ITE students

Stephen Scoffham
Visiting Reader in Sustainability and Education, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK

Postal address
Sustainability Office,
Room Fg10,
Canterbury Christ Church University,
University, North Holmes Road,
Canterbury,
Kent CT1 1QU
UK

Telephone and Email
Tel: 01227 922367 Email: s.scoffham848@canterbury.ac.uk

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This paper explores the long-term impact of study visits to south India undertaken by UK teacher education students from 1999-2002. Fourteen respondents took part in an ethnographic research study between ten and fifteen years after the event. Previous studies have explored the immediate impact of study abroad programmes but the long-term effects are poorly understood. This research suggests that going to India had significant and lasting impacts on (a) students' intercultural understanding (b) their professional practice and (c) their personal development. Analysing their responses through the lens of transformational theory and models of intercultural learning suggests that the study visit not only generated the kind of educational risk that facilitates meaningful encounters with the world, it also helped participants to change their frames of reference from ego-centric to world-centric perspectives. Such dispositions operate at a foundational level and are so deeply embedded they are often not acknowledged even by those who hold them. A rhizomatic model is proposed in which the students' specific behaviours are seen as manifestations of a disposition to ethical engagement with self, others and the environment – an essential quality for ITE students at a time of growing global social and environmental crisis.

Key words

culture, meaning, study visit, transformation, values, world view

Prologue

The minibus is banging and bouncing down a country lane late in the Indian night as we return home after a frenetic day working with disadvantaged children. Blasts of warm air are blowing through the open windows, along with fragments of music from the latest block buster movie. Every so often a way-side temple, brilliantly illuminated and copiously decorated, stands out in the darkness. 'You know' I remark rather casually to one of the students 'you'll never be quite the same after this experience'. My inadvertent comment bounces back to me almost before the words are out of my mouth. 'So how have your trips to India changed you then, Stephen?' comes the response. I struggle to find a neat answer to this innocent query but continue to turn it round in my mind long after everyone else appears to have forgotten. It is the inspiration for this paper and it is encapsulated in just one deceptively simple question: 'Are overseas study visits really life changing experiences?

Introduction

This paper builds on an earlier study published in the *Journal of Education for Teaching* (Scoffham and Barnes 2009) which analysed the immediate impact on ITE students of an educational study visit to south India. In that paper we contended that global learning (by which we meant knowledge and understanding of other nations, peoples and cultures) has the potential to promote both personal and professional teacher development and to infuse ITE courses with multiple perspectives, thereby helping to clarify the hidden values and assumptions which underpin practice. We argued that such learning involves much more than simple knowledge acquisition, can be transformational and is often predicated on powerful emotional experiences. It follows from this that overseas study visits

could be expected to have an enduring impact, but is this actually the case and what type of transformations do they promote?

Rather surprisingly, although study abroad is a growing area of educational interest, there is remarkably little evidence about the long-term impacts. Lupi et al. (2012) and Martin and Wyness (2013), for example, have both noted this absence and called for longitudinal studies. Against this background, the autobiographical memories featured in this paper become significant in that they provide evidence of how several cohorts of students viewed their experiences after an interval of a decade or more. The findings have particular relevance for teacher educators, who, in seeking to promote global perspectives, often find they encounter unexpected barriers and obstacles to learning, as noted by Scoffham (2013). Recognising the pervasive influence of deeply held tenets and beliefs is crucial. And at a foundational level a disposition to engage with self, others and the environment is seen as essential at a time of growing global social and environmental crisis.

The study visits

The study visits which provides the focus of this research were undertaken annually from 1999-2002 as an extra curricula enrichment experience and involved an eighteen-day programme at the end of the summer term. Primary ITE students from a UK university spent a period of ten days at a Children's Home in a remote area in the hills of Tamil Nadu in southern India where they taught pupils at an on-site school gaining experience of formal educational practice. They also organised club activities and social events in the evening which gave them the opportunity to interact with children and their teachers on a more informal basis. One of the main aims of the programme was to give students experience of working in a contrasting cultural and social setting. A secondary aim was to introduce students to Indian culture through an immersion approach (Crossman 2018) which involved staying in a temple city, talking to people in streets and markets, visiting social projects and making ad hoc tours of local projects and enterprises. Students travelled by train and public buses when possible so as to engage with local people and everyday life. They also went to a museum devoted to the life and times of Gandhi to extend their knowledge of Indian politics, culture and philosophy.

Most participants were drawn from a large, three-year BA course in primary teaching and education, although students from other disciplines were also invited to participate. The students were mostly female ethnic white British (in line with the profile of the Education Faculty) and ranged in age from 20-45 years old. The visits were organised by three tutors, all specialists in ITE, who not only helped to structure the programme but who also provided a framework which facilitated on-going discussion and reflection within a framework of agreed values.

Going to southern India to engage with a culture which is dramatically different from Western European models, was a deliberate choice. The visit was designed to move outside and beyond the parameters of everyday life in the UK so as to prompt students to acknowledge and reflect on their values and beliefs. Transformational theory (Mezirow 1985) highlights the importance of the 'frames of reference' or 'lenses' that individuals use in order to interpret new experiences. Mezirow argues that disorientating dilemmas can sensitise individuals to these meaning-making structures, resulting in changes which have lasting and irreversible impact. Bennett (1993), too, recognises that cultural dissonance provides the dynamic to bring about radical transformation. He identifies six stages of increasing intercultural sensitivity which accompany the move from ethno-centric to ethno-relative world views. The critical point is that whilst an ethno-centric world view may seem sufficient for managing relations within one's own culture, it proves inadequate across cultural boundaries. Part of the rationale for the India study visit was that taking students out of their

comfort zone and immersing them in a range of new situations promised to be life changing experience that would firstly challenge, and then enlarge, their world view.

Study visits abroad have come in for a number of criticisms. They have a large carbon footprint and are sometimes regarded as a form of exotic holiday which universities and other institutions use to market their courses. Lansing and Farnum (2017) argue such visits may present students with images of traditional societies from which they will draw misleading conclusions. The impact on the host country has also been called into question. Doerr (2013), for example, worries that study visits to the global South can recreate colonial power relations. Furthermore, as Martin (2011) points out, the uncritical assumption that Western ideas are somehow universal, means that students may end up seeing little more than a reflection of themselves in their overseas experiences.

Despite these caveats there is a considerable literature which extols the value of overseas visits and recognises their positive impact. The argument put forward by Lupi et al. (2012) and Ateskan (2016) that experiences overseas can assist pre-service teachers become members of the global educational community provides a general rubric which is explored in detail in a range of other studies (see Santos et al. 2016; Marx and Moss 2011; Jorgenson 2010; Cushner and Mahon 2002). There is good evidence that experiencing a contrasting culture can be transformative, especially when conducted with appropriate support and in the context of clearly articulated values, as we argued in our earlier paper (Scoffham and Barnes 2009).

Methodology

In order to focus on exploring lived experience based on deep reflection, rather than surface level information, the research adopted a broadly ethnographic approach (Brewer 2005). A key challenge was to help students remember events which had happened many years previously and to find ways of recognising and articulating their impact. Scheunpflug et al. (2016) argue that It is often hard to research 'fuzzy' constructs such as changes in attitudes and beliefs because they are multi-faceted and have different manifestations. This calls for sensitive strategies and nuanced research methods In addition, it is should be noted that the research was conducted within an ethical framework. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, given the chance to withdraw at any stage and guaranteed anonymity. All interview transcripts were shared and approved by those who had been interviewed and stored securely for a time-limited period. Power relations, which would have been significant if students were still enrolled on validated courses, were not an issue given the time lapse. The values which framed the study visit – mutual respect and trust – were transposed to the research context which was neither perceived, nor intended to be, intrusive.

As a first stage, it was decided to ask those who had taken part in the study visits from 1999 to 2002 (the first four visits) to participate in an email/postal survey structured around eight open-ended questions. Participants were asked to consider both personal and professional impacts and whether the study visit had changed their self-image, impacted on their beliefs or altered the way they behaved. The instructions invited them to complete the survey over a period of time as they remembered further details. They were also encouraged to use examples, stories and incidents in their responses. This approach had the advantage of allowing participants to access memories which might otherwise be overlooked and has been used by other researchers to explore significant life experiences in similar circumstances (see for example Catling et al. 2010).

A total of 74 students took part in the visits but tracing them after such a long interval proved problematic. Many had moved home several times and a significant number of the female students had married and were no longer known by their maiden name. In the event, 24 surveys were

dispatched and 14 were returned, representing just under 20% of the full cohort - a viable sample. There were nine female respondents, five in their early twenties and four in an older age group with children of their own. There were five male students, all in their early twenties. All the students had an interest in education but three of the male students were not following ITE courses, being enrolled on programmes in geography, tourism and medicine instead.

To gain greater depth and to triangulate the survey findings, a convenience sample of six respondents was then invited to participate in individual, semi-structured interviews. It was intended that, rather than being statistically representative, this group would, in Polkinghorne's words, 'provide substantial contributions to filling out the structure and character of the experience under investigation' (2005 p139). The interviews were conducted by the tutor who had led the study visit, generally lasted about an hour and roamed quite widely over shared experiences which means they can best be characterised as 'professional conversations' (Brewer, 2005). The tutor noted what was said in the interview, all the transcripts were shared with the interviewees for their approval and their anonymity assured.

At the end of the interview participants were asked to create a diagram to represent what they had talked about. Various formats were considered but it was decided in the end that a tree would be both simple and practical metaphor, notwithstanding the criticism the image is too structured and static to account for the diversity of experience (Deleuze and Guattari 1980). Participants were invited to use the roots of the tree to represent the factors which had motivated them to apply for the study visit, the trunk to represent the experience of the study visit and the leaves and branches the perceived long-term impacts. Creating the diagrams gave the students an additional opportunity to recall and reflect on experiences which they believed to be significant. And as Bagnoli (2009) argues, graphic devices can be particularly useful in making memories more concrete and representing ideas which cannot be so easily expressed in words.

As with all ethnographic research, the aim of the study was to gain a better understanding of the social meaning of a particular set of experiences. The fact that the participants were a self-selecting, ethnically limited group all of whom had an existing interest in overseas travel and the money to pay for an extra-curricular activity is worth noting but in no way undermines the significance of the findings. A further concern is that autobiographical memories are notoriously inaccurate and may be skewed or coloured both by pre-existing attitudes and subsequent experiences. Memories certainly fade and change over time but there is no attempt in this paper to distinguish between episodic and semantic memory. Furthermore, the construction of identity is a constant process of interpreting and reinterpreting stories from the past which means that the fact that we regard certain events as significant in themselves makes them significant.

Findings

An initial analysis of the email/postal survey, interviews and graphic representations revealed considerable overlap between respondents. The data was then carefully re-examined to identify common themes. As in all thematic sampling analysis, the overall aim was to be both flexible and responsive in the search for repeated patterns of meaning (Braun and Clark 2006). It emerged that the students' responses could be grouped around three overlapping clusters:

(a) Intercultural knowledge and understanding
(b) Professional practice and career trajectory
(c) Personal development and values

These clusters were then explored in greater detail and broken down into sub-categories which are presented in the following section, supported by representative quotations from the transcripts. However, it is important to note that what lies behind these generalised findings are the stories and profiles of different individuals, each of whom was following their own life path and trajectory. It is also significant that, although the respondents in this study were overwhelming positive about their experiences, there were oblique references, especially in the interviews, to other participants who had retreated into themselves for a variety of personal reasons.

(a) Intercultural knowledge and understanding

Learning disposition

In order to contextualise their interest in the study visit and intercultural understanding in general, students were asked to reflect on what motivated them to apply for the study visit. This isn't always easy to identify and a number of students simply said they 'just knew' that they wanted to take part. Others were attracted because it seemed 'exotic' or saw it as an 'opportunity not to be missed'. Those who talked about 'broadening their experience' or 'helping deprived communities' expressed more altruistic sentiments. Typically students identified multiple motives.

> It was a ready-made opportunity – a chance to go away with peers and tutors who had inspired me to a country I had never visited and in a manner that would never crop up again. I wanted to take part in everything.

Such responses are significant because an openness to experience and a willingness to embrace change are indicative of a positive learning disposition. Martin and Griffiths (2014) point out that how individuals position themselves in intercultural contexts affects the extent to which they are able to break free from their existing habits of mind and develop new forms of thinking. Andreotti (2013) illustrates this using the metaphor of different ways of travelling. She contrasts the caravan disposition (viewing the world as an outsider from a protected place), the tent disposition (attempting to understand others whilst retaining your own perspective) and the backpack disposition (being exposed to the world in all its complexity and ambiguity). We carry all three dispositions (and many others) within us at any one time but being alert to them and the way they operate is important in developing global awareness.

Ideas about development

One of the aims of the programme was to explore and experience a contrasting culture so it is hardly surprising that the differences between the global South and industrialised West featured in the students' responses. Many said that the study visit had helped them to understand more about development and appreciate its complexities.

> The trip caused me to question how the term 'development' is interpreted – it is not necessarily just industrialisation or modernisation. That allows no leeway for local cultural conditions.

> I would definitely say the trip opened my eyes to the challenges that India faces in terms of development in a broad sense but perhaps more importantly it also allowed me to see how people (seemed to accept) their own fate or turn of events. This philosophy of life (and death) embodied the differences between Western and Eastern culture to me at the time.

These responses suggest that the students had moved beyond and a 'single story' of development in which Western modernity is seen as the only possibly option (Adiche 2009) towards a more nuanced understanding which recognises local factors, different cultural perspectives and the legacy of colonialism.

Cultural awareness

Evidence of students' increasing cultural sensitivity is also to be found in their reflections on the relationships between different cultures and peoples.

> It has given me an insight into a massively different culture and helped build my respect for people in India and other countries that have very different challenges to us here in the UK.

> Living amongst others as we did, even for that very short while, enabled me to see their culture in a totally different way. I strongly believe that prejudice is borne from ignorance and fear, and if you learn why someone is different you can understand and lose your fear.

For some students the cultural differences they observed were so substantial that they found them 'overwhelming'. Others said they were 'humbled' by the way they were received and welcomed by the people they met. Interestingly, Lansing and Farnum (2017) also use the term 'humbling' in their reflections on the positive features of study abroad programmes. The fact that emotions of this kind were still recalled over a decade later suggests their enduring impact.

(b) Professional practice and career trajectory

Teaching

All the ITE students (11 out of a total of 14) commented that going to India had enriched their classroom practice. The opportunity to collect authentic teaching resources and the ability to answer children's questions from first-hand experience were highlighted in both the email/postal survey and focus group interviews. Special study weeks, whole school projects or collaborative activities with parents were also mentioned.

> I took lots of things back with me including a brush made from a bit of branch with a battered end. I also bought some rangoli powder and a rangoli pattern roller. I've used these resources with lots of classes.

> The visit has enabled me to teach about India in a far more exciting and real way. It was the icing on the cake of my teaching career.

Perhaps unsurprisingly the study visit also impacted on the students' ideas about national stereotypes. One student said it had made her 'more curious' about the cultural background of the children in her class, another said she wanted her pupils to understand about other peoples and cultures 'so they had no reason to say prejudiced things'. The students also reflected on their own educational philosophy. One, now a head-teacher, said that he had become much more aware of the needs of the 'whole child' and that this had significantly influenced the ethos and curriculum of a new school he was setting up. In these different ways the experience of the study visit could be seen as having a ripple effect, transforming student teachers who then applied their ideas in the schools and classrooms where they worked in subsequent years.

Career trajectory

The long term professional impact of the study visit on participating individuals is also clearly illustrated in their career choices. For some students their experiences simply confirmed their existing career trajectory, for others it provided the impetus for a complete change of direction.

> I think it is fair to say that the trip was so good that it fanned the flames of my interest geography.
>
> I went on the trip primarily to 'taste' voluntary work overseas prior to my hopes to do voluntary work after a few years' experience as a teacher in the UK.
>
> Going to India definitely was the keystone for me deciding to focus my career on the creation of social equity rather than financial equity… It was the catalyst for a larger change in my own philosophy.

One of the striking features of these testimonies is that a significant number of students found a new direction or sense of purpose as a result of their experiences in India. The idea that these experiences 'fanned the flames' and were the 'catalyst for a larger change' suggests that some of the students at least were at a pivotal moment in their lives. The study visit provided a safe and supportive environment where individuals could park their anxieties whilst they explored alternative directions and life scenarios. The support of peers and the guidance from tutors created a framework for extended conversations that enabled these transformations to take place. Interestingly, several students commented very positively on the experience of being in a group which they regarded as 'something very special' and others reported that they had formed deep friendships as a result of spending time and sharing deep experiences with their peers. It appears that many students found the study visit exposed them to experiences which they subsequently recognised as tipping point or 'focal events' in their lives (Brewer, 2005 p99).

(c) Personal development and values

Self- awareness

On a personal level many of the students commented how they had gained confidence from the study visit. Several remarked on how it had helped them become better at relating to other people and that it had a huge impact on how they viewed others. They reported that they had become 'more open and less judgemental' as a result of their experiences. The sense of growth which is implied by these remarks was also encapsulated by those students who talked about spirituality. As one of them put it:

> Many aspects of the study visit have enabled me to gain a better perspective on an inner sense of spirituality (not religious) that perhaps I was not in tune with before. This, in turn, has enabled me to continue along that journey.

Issues of identity featured strongly as both students and staff tried to make sense of their experiences. 'The main learning experience for me was what I learnt about myself' one student reflected. 'I think you will be aware' said another 'that I am quite overwhelmed by how much the experience has changed me and my beliefs!' Finding words to express these impacts was, however, clearly a challenge for many of the respondents. 'The long term impact was very subtle', one of them declared while another announced, 'Words (if I could write them) would never do justice to the experience'.

Self confidence

It is clear from their responses that many of the students embarked on the study visit at time when they were setting out or changing direction in life and negotiating a range of high stakes personal issues. 'It was a decision made at a time of great uncertainty in my life' said one of them. 'I was not exactly brimming with confidence at that particular moment' said another. In different ways all the students reported that their experiences in India, whilst certainly challenging, had ultimately proved affirmative and given them strength and a sense of hope.

One student who confided the difficulties she had faced at the time of the visit made this point especially forcefully.

> Applying to go to India was a great challenge for me, I cried quite a number of times both when I applied and when I was accepted. My husband and family were very supportive and said it was up to me to decide. But I wanted to test myself and I wanted to seize the opportunity. I had suffered some traumatic experiences as an adolescent and realised that if I simply withdrew into myself then the damage would be permanent. The scars would never heal. I was determined not to let this happen and to live my life to the full.

With that, she seized the diagram she was drawing and added the words 'massive boost of confidence' double underlined at the top of the page (see Figure 1). It was a totally unexpected, heartfelt and very moving response.

(insert Figure 1 near here as a full page)

Figure 1 Two graphic representations showing (a) reasons students applied for the study visit (roots) (b) the experience itself (trunk) and (c) long term impacts (branches and leaves).

Notions of well-being

Seeing people who were living with very few material possessions but who seemed, on the surface at least, to be perfectly happy was a puzzle which many students referred to in their recollections.

> The overwhelming impression which I came away with was that many of the people in India had much less (in terms of material possessions and wealth but had perhaps 'richer' life.

> We encountered such extraordinary generosity and hospitality even when people had very little money themselves. I don't think I've experienced that anywhere else (even though I have travelled a lot in the last ten years)

Such responses might be seen as naïve but the baffling mixture of poverty and generosity which the students experienced triggered many conversations at the time. More than a decade after the event the impact was still clearly apparent. It had led some to question Western materialism.

> Since coming back from India I have been very much aware of how I use water.

> It extended my thoughts in seeing how nothing should be wasted and how any item can be reused and/or recycled.

> I feel ashamed when I think of much rubbish we produce. Maybe this was another legacy of the trip as I hate wasting things and throwing them away now.

Others expressed a sense of gratitude for things they had previously taken for granted saying they were 'truly thankful for what they have' or 'more grateful for their lot in life'. There were also those who also found the example of how people were coping with adversity both 'hopeful' and 'inspiring' and who questioned what is meant by prosperity. The short-hand formula which many adopted to encapsulate such a complex array of responses was that the study visit had not only changed their ideas about the world, it had also changed how they viewed themselves. In other words, it was indeed a truly life changing.

Conclusion

The students' autobiographical memories and graphic representations contain many heartfelt testimonies to both the cognitive and affective impact of the study visit. A decade or more after going to India, the students all affirmed that it was a highly significant event. If their memories had faded over time this was certainly something that they were reluctant to admit – one of them listing 54 specific incidents in support of her contention that the memories from the study visit will 'stay with me forever'. At a deeper level it appears that the study visit was transformational in the sense that it had led the students to expand their frames of reference (Mezirow's term) and adopt what Bennett describes as a more ethno-relative world view. Put simply, their overseas experiences had prompted the students to question their basic beliefs and principles and thereby shaped their outlook on life. Three aspects stand out especially.

Practical wisdom

The visits exposed students to numerous complicated and contradictory situations where they had to balance conflicting information and exercise their judgement. On some occasions they were drawn into deep discussions which continued over several days giving them an opportunity to develop and deepen their thinking. Good teaching requires teachers who can make balanced judgements and principled decisions often in highly charged circumstances. This quality, which Aristotle identifies as one of the virtues which contribute to human flourishing, was developed during the study visit on an on-going basis.

Grown-up-ness

The study visit exposed students to a range of experiences which disrupted and challenged their existing assumptions and cultural norms. By opening up spaces in which students could question what they valued, the study visit aroused their desire to exist in what Biesta (2017) calls a 'grown-up' way – that is as subjects with the potential for action and responsibility, rather than objects to be moulded and disciplined. This is a process which is essentially uncertain (or risky) in the sense that there is no direct correlation between inputs and outputs. However, Biesta argues it is only through embracing these uncertainties that questions about responsibility and freedom which are central to education can really be brought to life.

World view

At first sight, the various themes which emerge from the student testimonies may seem rather disjointed, particularly when studied in isolation. However, they are united by a common thread. rather as the different shoots on a rhizome are connected by a root (Deleuze and Guartarri 1980). As such, they represent manifestations of a more inclusive world view - a world view that is based on an ethical engagement with self, others and the environment. This is an enduring disposition which many students found hard to articulate precisely because it forms a deep foundation for other actions.

Some years ago, Gardner drew attention to the strength of 'the initial conceptions, stereotypes and scripts' that students bring to their learning and 'the difficulty of refashioning or eradicating them' (1993, 5). More recently, Lent (2017) has offered a fascinating analysis of the patterns of thought and root metaphors which underpin different civilizations. Overseas study visits have the potential to promote lasting learning because they reveal and challenge existing assumptions both individual and collective. At a time of mounting environmental and social crisis, finding ways of broadening students' understanding of different peoples' and cultures is a particularly high priority. It seems that overseas study visits have a part to play in this process and that when carefully structured around inclusive values they can help teachers and teachers in training contribute to creating a more inclusive and sustainable future.

Disclaimer

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Biographical Note

Dr Stephen Scoffham is a Visiting Reader in Sustainability and Education at Canterbury Christ Church University, UK and was President of the Geographical Association (2018-19). His research interests focuses on geography education, creativity, the environment, inter-cultural understanding and global learning. His latest books are *Teaching Primary Geography* (Bloomsbury 2017), *Leadership for Sustainability in Higher Education* (Bloomsbury Academic 2018) and *Prioritising Sustainability Education* (Routledge 2020).

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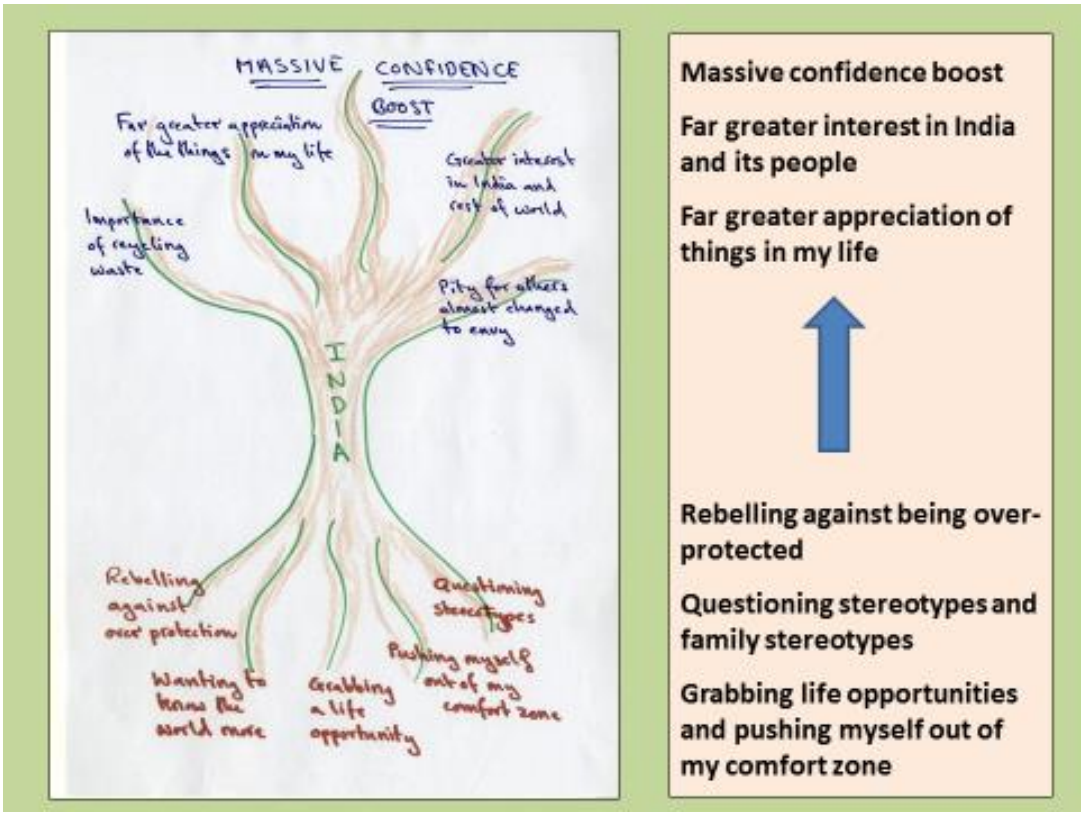

Figure 1 Two graphic representations showing (a) reasons students applied for the study visit (roots) (b) the experience itself (trunk) and (c) long term impacts (branches and leaves).