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**Portfolio II**

**Section IV: Depth of Knowledge Essay**

My foundational inquiry into the literature of international education, leadership development, and adult learning has underscored what I believe to be a critical truth: the most profound and sustainable transformations in human behavior are not achieved through the mere acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes but through a fundamental shift in how one makes meaning of the world. This essay builds upon my previous work by delving into a more specific area of study: the application and cross-examination of adult development theory (ADT) and intercultural competency (IC) development in the context of leader-facilitated immersion experiences. While significant literature exists on each of these topics independently, a notable gap remains in the empirical and theoretical cross-examination of these domains. My developing work aims to bridge this gap by proposing that ADT, combined with Transformational Learning Theory (TLT), Mindfulness, and Somatic learning offers a critical lens for understanding, enhancing, and ethically guiding the transformative potential of such programs.

### Contributions to Practice and the Profession

My research seeks to make contributions across three distinct yet interconnected areas: practice, methodology, and theory.

*Practical and Ethical Contributions:*

From a practical standpoint, my work argues that effective leadership development is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. Rather, a leader’s own developmental stage fundamentally shapes their capacity to facilitate growth in others. This insight offers a critical ethical contribution to the profession of leadership development. It suggests that practitioners have a responsibility to not only provide content but also to meet participants where they are developmentally and offer appropriate scaffolding to support them through their personal and professional "growth edges" (Berger, 2012). This approach helps ensure that moments of discomfort, or what I call "dissonant edges" (Mikulasek, 2022, 2024), are leveraged for curiosity and growth rather than leading to defensive reactions or regression (Mitchell & Paras, 2018; Mikulasek, 2024). By focusing on the leader's role in facilitating these transformative moments, this work provides a blueprint for designing interventions that are more compassionate, effective, and tailored to the individual learner. Immersion experiences, I argue, are the optimal forum for facilitating deliberate dissonance and subsequent reflection to spark developmental growth, curiosity, connectedness, and creativity.

*Methodological Contributions:*

Methodologically, this work highlights the insufficiency of a singular, one-dimensional research approach to study human transformation. As previously argued, a positivist approach alone, which relies on quantitative data to measure objective outcomes, is incapable of capturing the nuanced, subjective, and contextual nature of personal change (Mikulasek, 2020b). Therefore, my research agenda proposes a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative developmental assessments with qualitative inquiry such as reflective journaling and in-depth interviews (Mikulasek, 2020a). This integrated methodology allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the subject, where broad, generalizable data can be enriched by deep, contextual insights provided by individual narratives (Mikulasek, 2020b). It embodies the philosophical stance that both empirical and interpretive data are necessary to truly "understand the elephant"—the complex phenomenon of transformative human growth (Mikulasek, 2020b).

*Theoretical Contributions:*

The primary theoretical contribution of this work is the synthesis of three foundational frameworks—Adult Development Theory (ADT), Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), and Intercultural Competency (IC)—into a single, cohesive model (Mikulasek, 2024; Mikulasek, 2025). While the literature recognizes that IC development is an experiential process, it has been limited in exploring how adult developmental stages influence this process and the specific role of dissonance (Mitchell & Paras, 2018; Mikulasek, 2024). My work bridges this gap by formally introducing the concept of “dissonant edges,” which unifies the "disorienting dilemma" from TLT (Mezirow, 2000) with the "growth edge" from ADT (Berger, 2012; Mikulasek, 2022). This new concept provides a more precise and integrated term for the cognitive and emotional misalignment that serves as the catalyst for growth across all three domains (Mikulasek, 2024). By doing so, the work moves beyond simply describing a process to providing an explanation for its underlying mechanisms.

### Gaps in the Literature and Their Origins

A significant and critical gap in the foundational and contemporary literature is the lack of empirical research that explicitly integrates adult development theory and intercultural competency development. While existing studies often examine intercultural programs and their impact on global competence (Cushner, 2009; Mitchell & Paras, 2018; Mikulasek, 2020a), they rarely cross-examine these findings with a participant's developmental stage. Specifically, there is limited research that explores how a leader's or participant's developmental stage influences the outcomes of a group or an individual's journey.

The origins of this gap are rooted in several factors. First, the academic disciplines of adult learning, leadership studies, and international education often operate in disciplinary silos, with scholars focusing on their own frameworks and not frequently engaging in interdisciplinary research. Second, there are inherent methodological challenges in assessing and measuring developmental change. While tools like the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) can assess intercultural sensitivity, they may not provide a complete picture of the deeper cognitive shifts that ADT explores. Measuring these internal, qualitative changes over time and across diverse populations requires a complex and robust methodology that can be difficult to design and implement. Finally, the field has not adequately answered the question of the *process* of how intercultural competency is developed (Mitchell & Paras, 2018; Mikulasek, 2022). While we know that immersion programs can be effective (Cushner, 2011; Mikulasek, 2020a), we lack a clear understanding of the specific mechanisms—or the "engine" of intercultural learning (Mitchell & Paras, 2018)—that drive transformation at a personal level.

### Addressing the Gaps

My research agenda is designed to directly address these gaps. To bridge the theoretical silos, I will synthesize and apply key concepts from ADT theorists such as Kegan (1994), Berger (2012), Cook-Greuter (2004), and Torbert (2004) to the design and facilitation of leadership development and immersion programs. This theoretical integration will serve as the foundation for my novel Transformative Servant Model (TSM), which is intentionally designed to be a holistic, multi-layered framework. Specifically for my doctoral studies, I will utilize research on undergraduate students moving through a course on IC development with ADT and TLT theories as well as mindfulness practices intermixed into the course.

Methodologically, I will employ a mixed-methods approach that moves beyond traditional pre-and-post-testing (Mikulasek, 2020a). The research will include empirical studies that assess both leader and participant developmental stages using recognized assessments like the IDI, supplemented by qualitative developmental interviews. This will allow for the cross-examination of how a person's developmental stage interacts with their intercultural learning trajectory. For example, the research could explore whether individuals at earlier developmental stages (e.g., Socialized Mind) are more likely to experience resistance to dissonance, while those at later stages (e.g., Self-Authoring Mind) demonstrate a greater capacity for integrative thinking (Mikulasek, 2024).

From a practical perspective, my research will develop and test specific interventions—such as structured reflective dialogue and coaching—that are tailored to participants' developmental readiness. As demonstrated through my directly engaged research experience, a leader’s ability to ask specific, targeted questions is what turns a moment of discomfort into an opportunity for growth (Mikulasek, 2024). The proposed work will provide a more detailed and research-backed answer to the question of *how* leaders can effectively guide others through dissonance to achieve more profound and sustainable transformation.

### The Compulsion to Address These Issues

My compulsion to address these issues stems from a deep personal conviction that fostering intercultural competency is not an academic exercise but a moral imperative for our increasingly polarized world. The challenges of the 21st century demand leaders who can think in complex ways, bridge divides, and act with compassion and purpose (Berger, 2012). My professional and personal journey – from my experiences in coursework to my foreign service career to my certification in Executive Coaching and the founding of my company, The ServantEDGE – has been a direct response to this need (Mikulasek, 2020b).

My work is influenced by the persistent knowing-doing gap—the frustration of seeing leaders who can articulate virtuous principles but lack the internal capacity to embody them. My professional experiences have shown me that this gap is not a deficit in knowledge but a failure to engage in the necessary inner developmental work. I am compelled to address this because I believe that by understanding the developmental mechanisms that underlie transformative growth, we can design more effective educational practices, leadership development programs, and interventions that lead to authentic and sustainable change. My work is my attempt to provide a research-backed, practical pathway for bridging that gap and preparing leaders for the complex reality they face. It is a fusion of my passion for education and my professional commitment to helping people become the most compassionate and effective versions of themselves.

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