**Stephanie Mikulasek**

**IEEL PhD Student**

**Portfolio II:**

**Section III: Foundational and Contemporary Literature Essay**

Current societal, political, cultural, and global conditions are arguably characterized by escalating complexity, heightened interconnectedness, and societal polarization, which collectively amplify the demand for leaders who are not only effective but also deeply self-aware and ethically grounded. This essay serves as a foundational inquiry into the core issues, literature, and intellectual influences that have guided my evolving research interests. It culminates in a synthesis of these elements into a new framework, the Transformative Servant Model™ (TSM), which seeks to address a persistent knowing-doing gap in leadership development and provide a blueprint for cultivating leaders from the inside out. This work is situated at the intersection of international education, leadership development, and adult learning, aiming to contribute a new, developmentally-informed model for fostering profound and sustainable transformation for all leaders, including those in academia.

### The Core Issues and Foundational Literature

My developing research interest is rooted in a central issue: how to spark and sustain intercultural competency (IC) in a world where continuous communication and understanding are paramount to mitigating bias and prejudice (Mikulasek, 2020a). My initial inquiry focused broadly on how immersion programs could serve as a powerful tool to achieve this goal (Mikulasek, 2020a). However, my studies and professional experiences have led me to two more nuanced and consequential questions: first, what is the specific role of the leader in facilitating transformation during these experiences, and second, what makes the difference between a person who reacts to cultural dissonance with curiosity and compassion versus one who responds with fear and derision.

To address these questions, my research has engaged with a triad of foundational theoretical frameworks: Intercultural Competency (IC), Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), and Adult Development Theory (ADT); additional work and research into Internal Family Systems (IFS), Somatic Coaching, Mindfulness Meditation, Neuroscience, and Conscious Leadership also have influenced my research. Two key foundational thinkers in the field of IC include Darla Deardorff and Milton Bennett. Deardorff defines intercultural competency as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in diverse situations (Deardorff, 2006), while Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) provides a framework for understanding an individual's progression from a monocultural to an ethnorelative mindset (Bennett, 1993). In parallel, Kenneth Cushner has emphasized the importance of intentional, experiential learning, such as immersion programs, as a catalyst for IC development (Cushner, 2009; Cushner, 2011; Cushner, 2012).

While these and other researchers define *what* IC is and how its development can be measured, Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory provides the framework for understanding the *process* of how deep personal change occurs in adults (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow asserts that this transformation is triggered by a "disorienting dilemma," a significant life event or experience that challenges a person’s existing worldview, forcing them to critically reflect on their assumptions and beliefs (Mezirow, 2000; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011).

My inquiry into why some individuals respond to these dilemmas differently led me to a deeper exploration of Adult Development Theory (ADT). This study is where the work of key contemporary thinkers becomes central to my research. Pioneers such as Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson established the concept of developmental stages, but ADT theorists like Robert Kegan, Susanne Cook-Greuter, Bill Torbert, and Jennifer Garvey Berger have applied this lens to adult learning. For example, Kegan’s Subject-Object Theory explains how individuals evolve through increasingly complex stages of meaning-making, moving from being "subject to" their experiences to "making object" of them, allowing for greater reflection (Kegan, 1994; Kegan, 1982). This shift is evident in moving from a "Socialized Mind," which relies on external validation, to a "Self-Authoring Mind," which operates from an internal compass of values and beliefs (Kegan, 1994). Building on Kegan, Garvey Berger applies these ideas to leadership, coining the term "vertical development"—a shift in *how* one thinks, not just *what* one knows (Berger, 2012). She also refers to the uncomfortable threshold of this growth as a "growth edge," which is the precursor to my own conceptual contribution (Berger, 2012; Mikulasek, 2024).

The literature reveals significant points of both complementarity and tension. Transformative Learning Theory and Adult Development Theory are highly complementary, as they both recognize that dissonance and structured reflection are crucial for growth. Both frameworks suggest that sustained, intentional exposure to complexity, paired with structured reflection, can catalyze shifts in perspective and capacity. My work bridges this gap by introducing the unifying concept of "dissonant edges," which aims to describe the point of collision between an individual's internal developmental boundary and an external challenge (Mikulasek, 2022, 2024). This collision serves as the catalyst for growth across all three domains – ADT, IC, and TLT (Mikulasek, 2022). Said another way, the core of intercultural competency is posited as making sense of the world and experiencing the transformation when sense making shifts, a theoretical construct Kegan (1994) calls constructive-development.

However, tensions also exist. A notable critique of Mezirow's theory is its strong emphasis on rationality, which some scholars argue neglects the emotional and intuitive aspects of learning that are also crucial for personal growth (Mitchell & Paras, 2018). This has been a key area of refinement for my work, leading me to incorporate emotional and embodied practices into the TSM. Another tension is the ongoing debate about the universality of intercultural developmental models like the DMIS, with some critics arguing that cultural, contextual, and individual factors can mediate or disrupt these trajectories (Cunningham, 2019). This also informs the TSM's focus on a leader's ability to facilitate a unique journey for each individual.

### The Influence of My Thinking

My thinking has been most profoundly influenced by a direct engagement with these theories through personal and professional experiences. My coursework challenged me to move beyond a superficial understanding of intercultural training. In EDRS 812, I grappled with the question of what makes an immersion program "done well," turning to student perspectives to understand what was truly impactful. EDUC 892 forced me to confront the "messy intersection of social justice and politics," questioning whether a volunteer in a developing country was an agent for social change or a form of colonization. My certification in Executive Coaching was the pivotal moment, embedding the principles of ADT and the concept of growth edges directly into my thinking. My recent certification as a Mindfulness Meditation teacher incorporated a somatic element to the processing of dissonance.

Of particular relevance and impact to my thinking was a directly engaged research experience with Jennifer Garvey Berger in her "Conversations on the Edge" course (Mikulasek, 2024). This qualitative, first-person inquiry allowed me to practice identifying and navigating an individual’s meaning-making structures through structured, reflective dialogue. I learned to use specific questioning techniques to probe for the moment of dissonance, or the "dissonant edge" (Mikulasek, 2024). For example, using superlative questions like "What was the hardest part?" repeatedly forced interviewees to move beyond a superficial answer to the core issue driving their response. Open-ended questions encouraged deeper reflection, and binary questions were used to confirm or validate an individual’s current developmental stage.

This direct practice reinforced my hypothesis: the leader's ability to facilitate these conversations is paramount to turning a moment of discomfort into an opportunity for growth (Mikulasek, 2024). The analysis revealed that the process of navigating dissonance is a learned function that can be cultivated through intentional practice. My inquiry into *what is* IC and ADT to the *process* of their development through TLT, I then looked at the *outcome*, or resulting attributes arising from TLT, IC, and ADT within leaders. This question led to research into Richard Greenleaf's Servant Leadership and its emphasis on the leader's primary role as a servant to others' growth (Greenleaf, 2002; Mulyadi Robin & Sendjaya, 2019). Collectively, my experiences with the direct application of ADT, my doctoral academic coursework, my Executive Coach and Mindfulness Meditation teacher certifications, courses on Group Dynamics work with the Conscious Leadership Group, and Internal Family Systems, among other courses and research, has led to the development of my new framework, the Transformative Servant Model (TSM), an integration of these theoretical insights with practical application.

### Situating the Work in the Field

My area of interest is situated at the intersection of international education, leadership development, and adult learning. This work serves as a response to a critical gap in the existing literature. Researchers such as Bennet (1993), Byram (1997), Deardorff (2006) and Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003) have shown immersion programs can move participants to a new way of being and knowing – that is, a transformed ontology that facilitates the recognition and value of other epistemologies, and subsequently accepting, adapting, and integrating knowledge, skills, and attitudes of intercultural competencies as well as building global competency. However, there is limited research on the specific programmatic components that have the most influence, and even less on the process of *how* these changes occur (Mikulasek, 2020a; Mitchell & Paras, 2018). My research addresses this by exploring the underlying developmental and psychological mechanisms that mediate an individual's experience (Mikulasek, 2020a; Mikulasek, 2024).

The TSM is designed as a direct, practical response to the knowing-doing gap, where leaders may intellectually grasp concepts like cultural competency but lack the internal capacity to embody them. The model provides a holistic, research-backed framework for cultivating leaders from the inside out through three interconnected layers: Alignment, Awareness, and Action. Alignment focuses on the leader’s internal foundation, drawing from ADT. Awareness focuses on interpersonal understanding and cultural fluency, grounded in TLT and IC. Finally, Action embodies servant leadership principles, which are the external expression of the leader’s internal work. The model is not linear but a continuous, cyclical journey.

By integrating these disparate fields, my work provides a more complete, multi-faceted understanding of human development. It proposes a new approach that goes beyond traditional training, which often focuses on the accumulation of skills, to a model that intentionally introduces dissonant experiences and provides the necessary scaffolding for structured reflection and facilitated dialogue. This approach responds to the call in the literature for greater attention to individual differences and the leader’s critical role in fostering transformative growth. My work asserts that by including a focus on a leader's own developmental stage, we can better equip them to guide others through the complex, often uncomfortable process of confronting their "dissonant edges," thereby cultivating more adaptive, compassionate, and globally competent leaders. The TSM is not a final destination, but a blueprint for a continuous journey of learning and adaptation, which is vital for effective leadership in a constantly changing world.

### References

Bennett, M. J. (1993). Towards ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural

sensitivity. In R. Paige (Ed.), *Education for the intercultural experience* (pp. 21–71). Intercultural Press.

Berger, J. G. (2012). *Changing on the job: Developing leaders for a complex world*. Jossey-Bass.

Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence.* Clevedon:

Multilingual Matters.

Cushner, K. (2009). The role of study abroad in preparing globally responsible teachers. In R. Lewin (Ed.), *The handbook of practice and research in study abroad: Higher education and the*

*quest for global citizenship*. Routledge.

Cushner, K. (2011). Intercultural research in teacher education: An essential intersection in the

preparation of globally competent teachers. *Action in Teacher Education*, *33*(5-6), 601–614.

Cushner, K. (2012). Intercultural competency in teacher education: Developing the cognitive,

affective, and behavioral dimensions of intercultural competence. In D. K. Deardorff (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence* (pp. 152–166). SAGE Publications.

Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student

outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *10*(3), 241–266.

Greenleaf, R. (2002). *The servant as leader*. Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership.

Hammer, M.R., Bennett, M.J, & Wiseman, R. (2003). Measuring intercultural sensitivity: The

intercultural development inventory. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*. 27. 421-443.  DOI: 10.1016/S0147-1767(03)00032-4

Kegan, R. (1982). *The evolving self: Problem and process in human development*. Harvard

University Press.

Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Harvard University

Press.

Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*.

Jossey-Bass.

Mikulasek, S. M. (2020a). *Fostering global competence in future teachers through study abroad*

*programs*. [Unpublished document]. George Mason University.

Mikulasek, S. M. (2020b). *Positivism and post-structuralism: Different ways to understand the*

*elephant*. [Unpublished document]. George Mason University.

Mikulasek, S. M. (2022). *Dissonant edges: Exploring how adult development theory informs*

*intercultural competency development*. [Conference proposal]. Comparative and International Education Society.

Mikulasek, S. M. (2024). *Dissonant edges: Exploring the intersection of adult development*

*theory, transformative learning theory, and intercultural competency development*. [Unpublished independent study paper]. George Mason University.

Mitchell, T. D., & Paras, P. (2018). When difference creates dissonance: Understanding the

“engine” of intercultural learning in study abroad. *Intercultural Education*, *29*(3), 321–339.

Morais, D., & Ogden, A. (2011). Initial development and validation of the global citizenship

scale. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *15*(5), 445–466.

Mulyadi Robin, M., & Sendjaya, S. (2019). The concept of servant leadership: A review and

synthesis. *Journal of Management & Organization*, *25*(3), 358–377.

Trilokekar, P., & Kukar, P. (2011). Disorienting experiences during study abroad: Reflections of

pre-service teacher candidates. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *27*(7), 1141–1150.