

INTERNATIONAL SERVICE—LEARNING: AN OPPORTUNITY TO ENGAGE IN CULTURAL COMPETENCE



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One-day international service—learning projects are an opportunity for nursing students to engage in learning cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills. At XXX University, faculty developed these international service—learning projects in Mexico where students participated in health promotion teaching for children and families and providing health care for older adults. The purpose of this article is to describe 3 types of student experiences gained during 1-day international service—learning projects. We named these experiences cultural communication, cultural confidence, and cultural surprise. (Index words: Cultural competency; Service—Learning; International; One day) *J Prof Nurs* 31:242–246, 2015. © 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

RESEARCH HAS DEMONSTRATED that cultural competency education for health care workers can overcome barriers to cultural competency (Amerson, 2010; Bentley & Ellison, 2007; Kardong-Edgren et al., 2010; McAuliffe & Cohen, 2005). These barriers include lack of knowledge about cultural needs, lack of cultural sensitivity, and lack of skills in working with diverse cultures and backgrounds (Maltby & Abrams, 2009; Waite & Calamaro, 2010).

Cultural competency is typically viewed as the process of effective care which the nurse provides for individuals, families, and communities within their cultural context (Campinha-Bacote, 2013). In nursing education, providing the student with experiences to build skills of cultural competency is fundamental for professional practice (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2008a). In the baccalaureate nursing program at XXX University, faculty created 1-day international service—learning projects in Mexico. The students' learning outcomes of this program were to enhance the following: (a) the students' cultural awareness and (b) the students' cultural knowledge by offering cultural encounters while being immersed in Mexican culture and to provide for the needs of the community (Kohlbray & Daugherty, 2013). The program evaluation methods included debriefing meetings after each visit for the students to reflect on experiences and learning (Larson, Ott, & Miles, 2010). The purpose of this article is to describe three types of student experiences

gained through an international service—learning project: cultural communication, cultural confidence, and cultural surprise (Bosworth et al., 2006; Reising et al., 2008; Walsh, 2003). These experiences illustrate beginning development of the constructs of cultural competency (Pretorius & Small, 2007).

International Immersion Project in a Mexican Community

One-day immersion visits took place between fall 2008 and spring 2010 in Tijuana, Mexico, near the California border. Four visits took place. Each trip involved 8 to 15 students; however, it was not always the same 8 to 15 students. In all 37, students participated in at least one trip with a few students participating in two. Students were allowed to choose between two sites for their immersion experience. The first choice was to teach health promotion at a Kid's Club in a colonia located near the community garbage dump in Tijuana. The second opportunity was to provide health care in a homeless shelter for indigent older adults, many of whom had chronic diseases. Residents are cared for by a salaried, missionary registered nurse (RN), lay health care workers, and volunteers from a faith community group. The older adults are brought to the shelter by family members who cannot afford to care for them, hospitals who have nowhere to refer homeless patients upon discharge, and/or by individuals who find them living on the streets. In general, clients have a variety of health challenges including diabetes, leg ulcers, recent surgical incisions, dementia, and mental illness. The shelter receives donations of food, clothing, and supplies.

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Collaboration with on-site teams is essential for sustainable and ongoing health care for shelter patients and children at the colonia. Hope Without Borders is a faith community group that makes monthly trips to the sites ([Latin American Evangelist, 2010](#)). Hope Without Borders has staff in Mexico that provide support before and after the student visits. At the homeless shelter, an RN works full time with the residents along with the lay volunteers. One of the authors has an affiliation with Hope Without Borders, which fostered collaboration between the professional and lay health care staff on site. Our students' participation expanded the health care for patients and support for the RN and lay staff. This was a mutually beneficial experience for patients, staff, and students. Students helped identify health care needs of patients that were followed up by the RN and lay staff. An example of these experiences include assisting the RN to organize documentation of treatments for follow up by organizing notecards that listed wound descriptions and treatment needs on the cards. Documentation remained locked in the staff RN's office. A second example included assisting lay workers with activities of daily living (ADLs). The lay workers were routinely overwhelmed with the number of patients needing assistance and could not meet everyone's needs daily. Student assistance meant that all patients would receive attention that day. The RN on staff provided guidance on which patients needed priority assistance.

Prior to each of the four trips, meetings were held to introduce students to the immersion project and help them plan the service–learning activities. For the first two trips, students were self-selected to participate in the projects. The student selection for these trips changed over time. As interest in the experience grew in popularity, the number of participants had to be limited because of coordination and transportation issues. As a result, on the fourth trip, faculty capped the number of participating students and developed a selection process. Students were required to submit an essay on reason/motivation for participation and personal goals for the experience. Faculty selected the students based on essay submissions. Students were not required to have previous international experience. Over the course of time, selected students became more involved in planning, organizing, and conducting subsequent trips and projects with minimal direction from faculty.

To determine the health promotion activities taught at the Kid's Club, the local community leaders and an organizer from Hope Without Borders were consulted. Recommended health promotion activities that students implemented were hand washing, dental care, making healthy food choices, and engaging in physical activity. To determine community needs at the homeless shelter, students not only met with leaders of Hope Without Borders but also utilized the information obtained by the students who went on the first two trips. Identified needs included assisting with ADLs, nutrition and feeding, and chronic and postsurgical wound care. Many patients at the long-term homeless shelter were discharged from hospitals and physician offices with no follow-up

instructions or care plan. In response to this, the students and faculty worked in teams to identify and implement care. Health conditions along border areas are often more severe than generally found beyond the distance of the border area ([Kohlbray, 2011](#)).

After the last two immersion experiences, the students debriefed on their perspective of the learning experience as a group with the faculty. Debriefing occurred 1 week after the experience to give students time to reflect on their experiences and organize their thoughts. Student responses such as “I’m so glad we got to talk about this. I’m glad I got to hear others’ experience” demonstrate the value of debriefing. In the debriefing process, students processed the experience and expressed a greater understanding of cultural care. The students' reflections highlighted experiential learning that was meaningful to them. They expressed that they grew in their level of confidence regarding their professional development as a nurse and their ability to provide culturally sensitive care.

Three “Cs” of Cultural Experience

This immersion experience program was evaluated through a series of debriefings with students, faculty, and Hope Without Borders leaders. Student feedback became incorporated into program improvement and evaluation. One program improvement was having students from past trips provide peer orientation to students on subsequent visits. Common areas of experiences became apparent from student comments during the trip and debriefing and informal observations from faculty. Some students published journal entries in the school of nursing's newsletter describing the details of their experiences ([Manguil, 2009](#)). The three common experiences that were described were categorized as cultural communication, cultural confidence, and cultural surprise. These experiences support the building of cultural knowledge and cultural skill, which contribute to the development of cultural competency. As part of program review, these observations regarding common experiences are not intended to be a qualitative study. Rather, these observations are intended to summarize what we believe are the successes of the learning outcomes.

Cultural Communication

Two areas of cultural communication that proved important in the immersion experiences were the communication with the children, families, and elderly residents being served and with the local site coordinators in Mexico. The first area of cultural communication dealt with the need to overcome language barriers for communication with clients. To compensate for the language barrier, among the non-Spanish speaking students, we created student teams that included at least one Spanish-speaking student per team. Team teaching was especially valuable in doing health promotion teaching with the children and addressing specific psychosocial needs for elderly residents ([Hughes & Hood, 2007](#)). As part of the planning, Spanish-speaking students created a user-friendly card of Spanish words and phrases for fellow students to use. Regardless of language proficiency, students learned to communicate

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