



Pre-departure preparation and co-curricular activities for Students' intercultural exchange: A mixed-methods study[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Background: Nurses are required to be culturally competent to provide quality care to an increasingly diverse and ageing population. International exchange programmes were developed to support the traditional nursing curriculum. These programmes have often overlooked the importance of pre-departure preparation and co-curricular activities to the development of intercultural competency.

Objectives: To explore the influence of pre-departure and co-curricular activities on the intercultural learning experiences of both exchange and host students in a short-term international summer programme.

Design: A mixed-methods study.

Setting: Students were recruited from international and mainland exchange partners, with host students as ambassadors. The international summer programme involved a week of online pre-departure activities and two weeks of face-to-face meetings.

Participants: A convenience sample of 62 students from diverse cultural backgrounds was recruited on a voluntary basis. The participants were aged between 19 and 27.

Methods: Data were collected from students' pre- and post-visit questionnaires, discussions within the workshops, their online discussion threads, and focus group discussions.

Results: The quantitative findings suggested that students' cultural intelligence improved significantly after the exchange programme. Qualitatively, three themes emerged as: 1) Students' motivation to engage in intercultural learning; 2) Barriers to intercultural communication; 3) Enablers of intercultural communication.

Conclusion: Pre-departure preparation enabled students to discuss their common goals and expectations, while exploring differences, asked for practical living information, and used the basic intercultural concepts in their discussion on the care of elderly. This virtual encounter has laid the foundation for students' subsequent discussions about the why and how the differences that inform their own practices and about global ageing and poverty issues during their co-curricular activities. While the pre-departure preparation could serve as a stimulus, the value of this programme for intercultural learning also rests with the importance of debriefing to further students' reflective and experiential learning.

1. Introduction

With greater cultural diversity, the ageing phenomenon, and rising rates of chronic illness, nurses have to re-examine their roles and values within the context of intercultural competence (IC) (Liu and Dall'Alba, 2012). International exchange programmes (IEP) have been developed to support the traditional curriculum. However, one criticism of IEPs has been the lack of pre-departure preparation that would allow nursing students to unlock their full potential (Root and Ngampornchai, 2013).

Studies on IEPs have often also overlooked the importance of co-curricular activities that fall outside of the formal curriculum (e.g., site

visits, gatherings) in the acquisition of IC (Marais, 2011). Co-curricular activities can function as meeting places to foster multiple perspectives and an awareness of cultural diversity (Leask, 2009).

Despite reports on the positive effects of IEPs (Smith-Miller et al., 2010), few studies have utilized a pre-post design to document changes resulting from international experiences (Anderson and Lawton, 2007). Studies have also tended to focus exclusively on the perspectives of exchange students. While it is undeniably beneficial to exchange students, such an experience is also arguably beneficial to the host students, based on the premise that cultural exposure is a core element of intercultural learning.

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Building on the extant literature on IEPs, this study focused on pre-departure preparation and co-curricular activities within our international summer programme, with an emphasis not only on the learning of the exchange students, but also on that of the host students.

2. Methods

Since the aim of our study was to explore the influence of pre-departure preparation and co-curricular activities on the intercultural learning experiences of student participants, we adopted a concurrent triangulation design of a mixed-methods approach (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2011).

2.1. Ethical Considerations

This project was approved by the ethical review committee of the university. Participants were given a detailed information sheet. They were informed that their consent to participate was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time with no effect on their studies. They were reassured about their anonymity and confidentiality.

2.2. Sampling and Setting

Exchange students from our international and mainland exchange partners were recruited. Sixteen host students were also recruited to serve as ambassadors in order to determine how intercultural learning at home takes place. A convenience sampling of 62 students was conducted. Fifty-six of them (90%) responded to the pre- and post-visit questionnaires. Students' ethnicity and demographics were included in Tables 1 & 2. The Chinese: Non-Chinese ratio was 3.7:1. Due to the cost of traveling and the schedule of some of our non-Asian exchange partners, a disproportionate number of Chinese students participated. Apart from the ratio and the language, the non-Chinese students were about two years older ($p < 0.01$) than the Chinese students, with no other significant demographic differences between the two sub-populations.

2.3. Procedure

The project ran from July 11 to 29, 2016. There was a week of online pre-departure activities, followed by two weeks of face-to-face workshops on intercultural learning, an interactive lecture series, elderly community care experience and hospital visits. Two host students looked after 5–6 exchange students. Eight groups were formed, with a team of 7–8 students.

Pre-departure activities began with participants describing their goals and expectations within their teams. They were given an introductory guide and some intercultural concepts to use when sharing and posting their reflections online, as well as two videos and a short guide to learn about elderly care. Three intercultural workshops were embedded within the face-to-face activities. For the first intercultural workshop, students shared the benefits and challenges that they had

experienced with the online activities within their own team, then discussed their common and/or different goals and expectations with the other groups. For the second session, the groups talked about everyday interactions as a part of their intercultural experience – namely, about interactions with students from different cultural backgrounds that the participants regarded as surprising or unexpected. In the last session, they discussed their “ageing in society” project, and shared accounts of their visits to local settings and their non-local experiences with ageing and the aged (Fig. 1). Two focus group debriefings of host students were held one week after the departure of the exchange students.

2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative data came from the students' discussions in the three intercultural workshops, their online discussion threads, and the focus groups. The transcribed texts were then analysed by focusing on the manifest level, employing the principles of qualitative content analysis (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). Data triangulation from different sources was conducted by comparing and connecting related data for a more comprehensive understanding. To ensure credibility, frequent discussions were held to discuss the themes that were uncovered until a consensus was reached. All quotations were also presented in detail so that they could be confirmed in an audit.

The quantitative data came from pre- and post-surveys of the Cultural Intelligence Scale. Cultural intelligence (CQ) is defined as one's ability to function and manage effectively across cultural situations (Ang et al., 2007). Sub-domains of CQ include: 1) CQ-strategy, 2) CQ-knowledge, 3) CQ-motivation, and 4) CQ-behavior. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Strong psychometric properties were reported for the CQS, with corrected item-to-total correlations ranging from $r = 0.46$ – 0.66 , and reliabilities ranging from 0.77 – 0.84 .

3. Findings

3.1. Quantitative Findings

Overall, the improvements of total CQ and knowledge subscale scores were found to be statistically significant in both Chinese and non-Chinese participants after the exchange programme. The item of the strategic subscale, “I adjust my cultural knowledge I use when interacting with people with different cultural backgrounds”, was the only item with statistical significance (Table 3). However, the non-Chinese participants also showed statistically significant improvement in the behavior subscale score. When comparing the mean differences between the pre- and post-measurements, the non-Chinese participants demonstrated more statistically significant improvements than the Chinese participants in the total CQ, knowledge and behavior dimensions (Table 4). Results also indicated that the pre-measurement scores of different subscales had low to moderate levels of correlation ($r = 0.28$ – 0.86 ; $p < 0.05$) with the total CQ score and other subscales, except for the knowledge score, which was not correlated with the motivation and strategy scores (Table 5).

However, subscale scores were correlated with each other at moderate to high levels ($r = 0.61$ – 0.93) in the post-measurement. The significant improvements in post knowledge scores suggested a positive learning outcome in the strategic, motivation and behavior dimensions with these stronger correlational relationships.

3.2. Qualitative Findings

Three themes were identified as: 1) students' motivation to engage in intercultural learning, 2) barriers to intercultural communication, and 3) enablers of intercultural communication. We used abbreviations to indicate our sources of data: sharing sessions are represented by S,

Table 1
Participants' ethnicity.

Country of origin	Number (percentage)
China	26 (41.9%)
England	4 (6.5%)
Hong Kong	14 (22.6%)
Indonesia	2 (3.2%)
Scotland	4 (6.5%)
Singapore	4 (6.5%)
Sweden	1 (1.6%)
Switzerland	3 (4.8%)
Thailand	4 (6.5%)

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