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Nursing Student Voices: Reflections on an International Service Learning Experience

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Abstract
For the past decade participation in service and experiential learning in higher education has increased and this study was to explore the lived experience of BSN and MSN students participating in a multidisciplinary service learning course in rural, underserved village in Belize. Western Kentucky University (WKU) faculty and students have participated annually in a service-learning project in Belize. The project is a mixture of Creoles, Mestizos, and Mayans but is dominated by Garigunas, a people descended from local Maya, who have strong ties to the land. The study was to explore the lived experience of undergraduate and graduate students participating in a multidisciplinary service learning course in rural, underserved villages in Belize. The study was to explore the lived experience of undergraduate and graduate nursing students participating in a multidisciplinary service learning course in rural, underserved village in Belize. Students are treated to Creole drum lessons at the Sambai, and tours of local areas among other lessons, and tours of local areas among other lessons. The students felt they were meeting a need of the community, but many were surprised by the "gifts" they received in return from the community. Students were treated to Creole drum lessons at the Maroon Creole Drum School, participation in a traditional fertility dance called the Sambai, Creole drum lessons, and tours of local areas among other activities. One student wrote, "I especially liked the drum lessons and I was honored that they would share such a special tradition with us." When discussing the Sambai, another student stated, "The Sambai was awesome. The Sambai is a traditional African fertility dance which reminded me of dance clubs back home, but this was actually better, because of the sense of community at the Sambai. I felt like I was doing something even similar to it. I feel honored to have been invited to participate." The overall feeling of reciprocity can be summed up by the student who wrote, "Thank you for allowing me to be a part of it!"

Valuing Multidisciplinary Collaboration
Many of the nursing students had limited experience working with professionals from other health professions and scholarly disciplines. The trip provided them with an opportunity to work with faculty and students from diverse disciplines such as

Literature Review
The need for international service learning opportunities is evidenced by increasing globalization exposing students to world problems such as poverty, economic disparities, and issues of social justice. Many nursing students are young adults and research indicates that young adults engage in less civic engagement and voluntary service compared to those at older ages. Participating in a service-learning project that challenges students to contemplate issues in a new dimension. The research questions for this study was What is the lived experience for BSN and MSN students participating in an international, multidisciplinary, service learning course?

Data Analysis
Researchers analyzed student journals utilizing qualitative data analysis techniques. Student journals were copied and materials were submitted for analysis. Researchers used the grounded theory method for data collection. Researchers examined the data was content analysis. The tool chosen was the flexible content analysis approach by Hickey and Kipping (1996) for open-ended responses. Researchers identified themes out through several rounds of analysis. Each student journal was assigned a code and number details. The researchers reached a consensus on the categories for coding the full set of data. After deciding on the final categories, researchers worked independently to code all the student journals with the established coding structure. A final meeting was held to discuss the coding structure. At this time, researchers finalized coding categories, discussing rogue responses and revising detail codes. A faculty member from the Women's Studies department at WKU was selected to review and confirm the coding structure. After confirmation of the themes by the third reader, the last step was the selection of exemplar quotes from the student journals to represent each theme and subtitle.

Results
There were eight consistent themes found in the student journals. These themes included the following: 1) expectations and emotions regarding the trip, 2) preparation for the trip and how well the students were prepared for this experience. As one student stated, "I feel anxious. I'm nervous. I'm excited, but I'm scared. I can't wait to get there, but I'm scared. I can't wait to embark on this journey because I was so excited...periods of exhilaration and unbelief that I was actually headed to Belize." Students were selected and hoped to be of service to the citizens of Gales Point and that this would be a life changing experience. "I really want to make a difference in their lives. I expect to learn as much from them as I will be able to teach."

Developing a Reciprocal Relationship with the Community
Students voiced an appreciation of the reciprocal relationship they developed with members of the community. One student wrote, "The nurses felt they were meeting a need of the community, but many were surprised by the "gifts" they received in return from the community. Students were treated to Creole drum lessons at the Maroon Creole Drum School, participation in a traditional fertility dance called the Sambai, Creole drum lessons, and tours of local areas among other activities. One student wrote, "I especially liked the drum lessons and I was honored that they would share such a special tradition with us." When discussing the Sambai, another student stated, "The Sambai was awesome. The Sambai is a traditional African fertility dance which reminded me of dance clubs back home, but this was actually better, because of the sense of community at the Sambai. I felt like I was doing something even similar to it. I feel honored to have been invited to participate." The overall feeling of reciprocity can be summed up by the student who wrote, "Thank you for allowing me to be a part of it!"

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Public Health, Dentistry, Allied Health and Women's Studies. This experience provided the students with a rich understanding of partnerships between disciplines, especially problem at home and abroad. According to one student, "this trip has really helped me see how the different disciplines on this trip are interrelated. Our differences and similarities can be seen in this way, and I think the key is education.

Acquiring Knowledge that would Impact Their Future Career

Students found that they learned skills and knowledge that they could carry into their future careers in the nursing profession. These skills and knowledge related to the importance of health education for all people, the need for using good communication skills with people of various cultures, time management, finding creative solutions and working in teams to solve problems. One student wrote, "In my chosen career, I will not be able to plan and organize everything. I will need to be able to find a solution from what is right around me with confidence and creativity—possibly within the space of time that it will take me when it is time." This quote demonstrates the positive effect of this experience on the student's confidence. She later noted that she has found that it is important to just let them talk. They reveal so much more information about themselves than if we were to just go through a list of "yes" or "no" questions.

Growing Personally

The growth experienced by the students on this trip was not limited to increasing their confidence in their professional skills and knowledge. A great deal of person reflection and growth was voiced in the student journals. One student wrote, "Each new experience helps me to learn minute details about myself and my abilities that I might otherwise never know. By learning to understand myself, I think I'm starting to learn that it might be better for me."

Yet another student voiced, "Being on this trip has made me realize that my abilities and my potential contribution they can make in society. Findings from the current study mirror those found by Walsh and DeJoseph (2003) in that students came away from the IMPACT Belize Project with a greater awareness and understanding of a global community. In addition, students participating in the IMPACT Belize Project reported a desire to work with needy populations to improve healthcare, which is similar to the findings of Callister and Cox (2006). Students in our study reported a great deal of personal growth, as well as a greater understanding of the need for multidisciplinary collaboration in healthcare. The students reported learning valuable skills and knowledge that they can take into future practice as nurses. In the future, more investigation is needed on the long-term effects of international service learning on nursing students. Additional studies should include post college outcome measures of working in their local community, volunteerism, and civic engagement. Since multidisciplinary partnerships in service learning and civic engagement, continued research should focus on collaboration as well.

References


