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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. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of BSN and MSN students participating in a multidisciplinary service-learning course in a rural, underserved village in Belize. Researchers analyzed student journals utilizing qualitative data analysis techniques. There were eight consistent themes found in the student journals. The findings indicate that international service learning opportunities increase students' awareness of their place in a global society and the potential contribution they can make in society.

For the past decade, service and experiential learning in higher education, including nursing education, has become increasingly important. Simply put, service and experiential learning combine community service activities with a student's academic study for the sole purpose of enriching the academic experience. As faculty, we feel the goal of baccalaureate and graduate nursing education is to produce an educated professional who will become a responsible citizen.

## Purpose

The purpose of this 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. For this study, the definition of service learning is "a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets a community need and reflect on their service activity as a means of gaining a deeper understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and enhanced sense of civic responsibility and/or a greater interest in an understanding of community life" (Personal Communication, B. Strennecky, January 4, 2010).

Western Kentucky University (WKU) is a land grant university located in south-central Kentucky and was founded in 1906. Its mission includes the preparation of students to be productive, engaged leaders in a global society. Since 2005, WKU faculty and students have participated annually in a service-learning project in Belize. The International Multidisciplinary Public and Clinical Health Team (IMPACT) Belize Project is conducted in the remote village of Gales Point, Belize located on the Atlantic coast. The community is a mixture of Creoles, Mestizos, and Mayans but is dominated by Garigunas, a people descended from African slaves (Johnson, 2003). In keeping with WKU's goals, IMPACT Belize provides a service-abroad opportunity for students in health related professions to develop an interdisciplinary understanding from hands on experience through a service-learning project that challenges students to contemplate issues in a new dimension.

The research question for this study was "What is the lived experience for BSN and MSN students participating in an international, multidisciplinary, service learning course?"

## 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 endeavors in comparison to those at other stages of life (Galston, 2004; Oesterle, Johnson, & Mortimer, 2004). Research in service-learning demonstrates that participation in service-learning projects can strengthen interpersonal skills, self-efficacy, and social responsibility (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000). Eyster and Giles (1999) noted a positive effect of service-learning on critical thinking and comprehension. Astin et al. (2000) found that service learning when compared with volunteerism has

a unique impact on activism, writing skills, and critical thinking and may have the direct impact of the choice of a service career.

More specifically international service learning activities can promote positive outcomes in nursing students. In a grounded theory study to explore the meaning of an international experience, nursing students reported increased cultural sensitivity, increased self-confidence, and increased knowledge of social justice (Haloburdo & Thompson, 1998). Walsh and DeJoseph (2003) conducted an exploratory study to describe the experiences of students and faculty following a service-learning experience. Their findings indicated that both the students and faculty had an increased awareness of the global community. Similar findings by Amerson (2009) also suggest that participation in international service-learning projects increase cultural competence in baccalaureate nursing graduates.

There is also evidence of longer lasting outcomes in the nursing profession. Callister and Cox (2006) found that participants in international clinical experiences noted a greater commitment to improvement in healthcare abroad and in their communities. Evanson and Züst (2006) found in a two-year follow-up that nursing students who had participated in an international clinical experience showed evidence of incorporating global awareness and social justice in their professional practice.

## Methods

The study was designed using qualitative methods for data collection. Several months before the planned trip, interested students completed an application and participated in an interview with multidisciplinary faculty from WKU. Nine nursing students, both undergraduate and graduate were selected to participate. Prior to travel, all students, faculty and professional staff participated in a two-day orientation. Topics covered during orientation included: history, geography and the sociopolitical climate of Belize, service learning, team building exercises, and introduction to the \$100 solution project. Students enrolled in the nursing service-learning course for the IMPACT Belize project were required to complete journals making entries during the orientation period prior to the trip, during the eight-day trip to Gales Point and upon returning to the United States. Journal responses were open-ended; however, the course faculty provided suggested topics for discussion in the course syllabus.

## Protection of Human Subjects

The WKU Human Subjects Review Board approved this study before data collection began. Researchers approached students during the orientation period to consider participating in the study. The researchers provided information to the students regarding the procedures for the study and answered questions. Students were assured that participating in the study or declining to participate would not affect their participation in the IMPACT Belize program or trip and that participation did not positively or negatively influence their course grade. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. There were no exclusions of participants based on age, gender, or ethnicity. No data analysis began until after course grades were assigned and posted.

## Data Analysis

Researchers analyzed student journals utilizing qualitative data analysis techniques. Student journals were copied and materials were submitted for review anonymously. The primary method for examining the data was content analysis. The tool chosen was the flexible content analysis approach by Hickey and Kipping (1996) for open-ended responses. This approach was adapted and carried out by nursing faculty/researchers in the current study. A third researcher confirmed the coding structure and overall themes. The basic steps in this content analysis were 1) immersion and identification of preliminary categories, 2) reaching consensus on categories, 3) allocating category and code details, 4) dealing with rogue responses, and 5) merging and reallocating details (Hickey & Kipping, 1996).

Immersion in the data began as an independent

process with each researcher separately reading the journal to develop a sense of what the students were saying as a whole regarding this experience. The researchers made notes in the margins of the copied journals and highlighted key words and phrases. Each researcher worked independently to develop preliminary categories for the data. The researchers then met in person on two separate occasions to discuss the preliminary coding structure. The researchers reached a consensus on the categories for coding the full set of journals. After deciding on the main categories, the 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 the coding structure 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 subtheme.

## Results

There were eight consistent themes found in the student journals. These themes included the following: 1) expectations and emotions regarding the trip, 2) developing a reciprocal relationship with the community, 3) valuing interdisciplinary collaboration, 4) acquiring knowledge that would impact their future nursing practice, 5) growing personally, 6) making future plans to continue doing service work, 7) recognizing themselves as part of a larger social network and a shared responsibility for social problems, and 8) buying into the interdisciplinary change projects.

### Expectations and Emotions

Each student expressed a variety of emotions in their journals prior to arriving in Belize. The students felt excitement and anxiety as they 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 be there, and even with all the preparation, I still am not sure if I truly know what to expect." Another student echoed this sentiment, "I did not sleep the night before embarking on this journey because I was so excited...periods of exhilaration and disbelief that I was actually headed to Belize." Students also expected 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. By providing medical services, 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 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 Sainbai is a traditional African fertility dance. I was surprised how much it reminded me of dance clubs back home, but this was actually better, because of the sense of community that existed at the Sambai. I have never experienced anything 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 said, "I love the feeling of community here, and I love that they are 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

Public Health, Dentistry, Allied Health and Women's Studies. This experience provided the students with a rich understanding of partnerships between disciplines to solve community problems 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 drawn upon to form a complete picture of health. In this case, together we are getting different views and angles of a situation."

Another student wrote,

"I got to see firsthand how the *multidisciplinary* part of our *IMPACT* motto fit in to the clinic. We, as medical professionals, are here to treat their health problems, and they are here to prevent them from occurring again. 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 problem solve. One student wrote, "In my chosen career, I will not have the time to plan and organize everything. I will need to be able to find a solution from what is right around me with creativity and confidence-possibly with no time, or learn to realize that it will come to me when it is time." This quote demonstrates the positive effect of this experience on the student's confidence as she entered her chosen profession after graduation. Another student reported the importance of communication when she said, "I was doing intake this afternoon and I realized how important it is 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, my faults, my weaknesses, and my strengths, I make myself into the person I know I can be. By striving to be that better person and understand myself..."

Another student wrote,

"I'm usually a girl with a plan, but since coming here, I've really enjoyed taking a step back and watching how things work out. This isn't always easy for me to do, but 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 phones, TV, and internet are not crucial ... sometimes I feel that technology, although it is handy and useful, perhaps it takes away from our creativity." The theme can be summed up by the following journal entry at the end of the trip, "It is weird how a little over a week can have such an impact on you."

*Planning Future Service*

It became obvious from reading the students' journals, that this course had sparked a desire to participate in future service projects at home and abroad. One student noted, "this trip has made me want to travel more and see the world. It has also made me want to do more volunteer efforts in countries that are less fortunate." Another student emotionally wrote, "When I looked up and saw the people from the village, my friends, the laughter and the sense of community, I got chills. I know this is a calling, something I must dedicate my life to." The students clearly voiced that this was not just a once in a lifetime experience but the beginning of a life of service to others.

*Recognizing the Larger Social Network and Shared Responsibility/or Social Issues*

Throughout the student journals, there was evidence of a growing understanding of the interconnectedness of people and the responsibility to the larger social network. An astute student voiced,

"The people here are very trusting and forthcoming with their thoughts and feelings. I imagine that is because of our ongoing relationships and visits here. I see now why repeat visits are important. Hopefully, sometime in the future our work here will have made such an impact that we can travel to another place and make our mark there."

As another student succinctly stated, "I am a citizen of the world. When a community or any individual has a problem—I have a problem."

*Buying into Multidisciplinary Change Projects*

During the course of the week in Belize, the students worked in groups with students and faculty from diverse disciplines on what was termed "The \$100 Solution." This is a change project in which students are given \$100 to use to develop a solution to a community problem and improve the life of the community. One of the notable \$100 solutions developed by the students in the IMPACT Belize program was a community meeting between villagers in Gales Point and officials from the Belizean Ministry of Health to address ways the community's health care needs could be served on a regular basis. One student reported in her journal about the importance of this type of project. She stated,

"tonight we began working on our \$100 solution. We decided we were going to promote the mobile health unit by funding a community meeting. There were a lot of good ideas brought up tonight in reflection. I think our project impacts me personally because the nurse's role is health promotion and I also feel like this has a lasting impact on the community as opposed to a one-time 'fix'."

**Conclusions**

International service learning opportunities increase student's awareness of their place in a global society and the 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 in the IMPACT Belize program 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,

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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.

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