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## The Meaning of Participation in an International Service Experience Among Baccalaureate Nursing Students

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# The Meaning of Participation in an International Service Experience Among Baccalaureate Nursing Students\*

Tracy A. Evanson PhD, APRN, BC and Barbara L. Zust PhD, RN

## Abstract

Nine nursing students volunteered their spring break to provide nursing service in a rural, economically challenged area of Guatemala. The students were involved in all aspects of planning and preparation for the international experience. All nine students participated in a qualitative study which sought to describe the meaning of participation in an international service experience among baccalaureate nursing students. Data were collected through reflection journals, evening group conversations in Guatemala, written narratives, and a post-experience focus group interview. Six themes were uncovered using content analysis: (a) Clarification of career path/goals, (b) Improved understanding of social justice and globalization issues, (c) Motivation to continue service work, (d) Discovering the reciprocity of relationships with others, (e) Appreciation for the whole person, and (f) Finding a way to respect the sacredness of the experience. This study lends support for the positive benefits of short-term international experiences for nursing students.

**KEYWORDS:** International service, International nursing education, experiential learning, qualitative research

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All the outcomes of learning experiences cannot be predicted or known. This is particularly true of off-campus learning events. The optimistic educator occasionally dares to dream that an assignment will go beyond being merely positive and become transformational. Such was the case when nine baccalaureate-nursing students were required to attend a Sigma Theta Tau International (STTI) local chapter conference.

The conference keynote speaker detailed her experiences in South America, where she and a group of nursing students had provided nursing care in villages. Following the presentation, students swarmed their own nursing faculty, wanting to spend their spring break meaningfully by using their nursing skills in an area of scarce resources and the need great. Thus, the planning began for an international service experience to take place during the week-long college spring break. In addition, a study was designed to uncover the meaning of students' participation in this experience.

The primary purpose of this article is to describe the findings from the research study. In addition, planning, preparing, and brief overview of the experience are described.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Because international interdependence is a reality, and the populations of Western countries are becoming increasingly diverse, nurses are challenged to provide culturally appropriate care to varied individuals and populations. As early as 1985, Meleis proposed that international nursing experiences could enhance understanding and care of America's subcultures. Lindquist (1984) stated that to provide the educational background necessary for nurses to work in a global society, educators must allow students to gain first-hand knowledge of people and health care delivery systems in international settings. Study-abroad programs, student exchanges, service-learning projects, mission trips, and other creative approaches (Lindquist, 1986) have given American nursing students international experiences.

Personal accounts of nursing students' international experiences abound. These describe the perceived rewards of participation and indicate an influence on the students' personal and professional growth (Bokelman & Elliott, 2003; Christman, 2000; Earp, Smith & Whiddon, 2000; Graves, 2003; Krambis, 1997; Roberts, 1993; Tessier, 1997). A small body of research supports the benefits of international experiences for students' personal and professional development.

Changes in cognitive development of senior baccalaureate nursing students who did, or did not, participate in an international student exchange were compared. Students who had the international experience were significantly more likely to improve their cognitive development scores over the semester than students who remained in the U.S. (Frisch, 1990; Zorn, Ponick, & Peck, 1995). However, the use of small convenience samples, and the study of cognitive development as the sole measure of impact of participation, are limitations. Additionally, only short-term cognitive development was measured. The long-term impact was unknown.

To measure the long-term impact of international education, Zorn (1996) studied 27 nursing alumni who had participated in an undergraduate study-abroad program, 3-15 years previously. The more recent the experience, and the longer the experience, the greater was the lasting impact on personal, professional, intellectual, and global perspective development. DeDee and Stewart's (2003) study of 38 nursing alumni yielded similar results, except for the finding that short-term international experiences had a lasting impact comparable to longer experiences.

The effects of short-term international experiences on outcomes related to student nurses' cultural sensitivity and competence was explored. Graduate and undergraduate nursing students who participated in 2-3 week international experiences had significantly higher cultural self-efficacy scores after the experience than classmates who remained in the U.S. The experience created behavioral and philosophical changes that helped transform students from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism (St. Clair & McKenry, 1999). In a related study, Ryan, Twibell, Brighan, and Bennet (2000) found that major learning outcomes of international experiences for baccalaureate nursing students included changed values, increased communication skills, and development of culturally focused nursing practice.

In a study of American faculty and students in a learning project in the same location as the present study, Walsh and DeJoseph (2003) identified contributions to cultural competence. They reported that participants had experienced first-hand what it was like to be a minority; confidence and competence in nursing skills and knowledge were enhanced; and they had an expanded worldview.

Haloburdo and Thompson (1998) explored similarities and differences in learning outcomes among baccalaureate nursing students who had traveled either to developed or developing countries. Similar themes were present for both

groups. Yet, students who traveled to developing countries had more personal and logistical struggles because of language and environmental issues. They developed a sense of connection to caring as the essence of nursing, not experienced by those in developed countries. The researchers noted that short-term international experiences resulted in the same outcomes as long-term ones.

Findings from these studies indicate that international experiences contribute to nursing students' cognitive development, and to cultural sensitivity and competence. Also, it appears that short-term international experiences are sufficient to achieve these outcomes. However, there is limited description of the meaning of participation from the participants' perspective. This study was designed to explore the meaning assigned by baccalaureate nursing students to their participation in a short term international service experience.

## **THE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE**

### ***Setting***

The site of the international experience was San Lucas Toliman, Guatemala. Guatemala is a developing country with substandard conditions for health and welfare for most people. Life expectancy is 63.1 years for males and 69.0 years for females (compared with 74.6 and 79.8 years for males and females respectively, in the U.S.). Adult mortality rates are approximately double those of the U.S., and child mortality rates are six to seven times higher (World Health Organization, 2003a, 2000b). About 75% of Guatemalans live in poverty, and 33.8% of workers make less than \$2.00 per day (Nationmaster.com, 2004).

San Lucas Toliman is on the southeast shore of Lake Atitlan, in the highlands region. Most people in the area are indigenous Mayans who support themselves primarily through agricultural work. War and human rights atrocities during the 1980s and 1990s have left communities in the area profoundly impoverished and grieving.

The students' experience was coordinated through the local Catholic mission in San Lucas Toliman. Members of the mission strive to honor the Mayan culture and values of the 20,000 people whom they serve in 22 villages. It has only been in recent years that a hospital was built. It employs one local registered nurse, several local practical nurses, and one physician. In addition to operating the hospital, the mission has built and runs a school, has established a reforestation project, and works to return purchased land to indigenous people.

### ***Planning and Preparation***

Nursing faculty worked with mission representatives to arrange travel and accommodation for the group's stay. Mission staff also provided a list of needed supplies and the names of nurses who had visited the mission. It was suggested that the students might accompany lay midwives into remote villages to assist with perinatal care.

Nursing students and faculty met weekly for eight weeks before the trip. They learned about Guatemala and the indigenous culture. In previous courses, the students had studied transcultural nursing concepts, guided by Leininger's (2001) theory. In addition, a nurse who had been to the San Lucas Toliman mission met the group, and provided valuable information about the local political history, culture, and health issues, as well as her experiences there. Students also used the preparation time to improve their Spanish language skills.

The students gathered various supplies, including pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, school materials, such as writing boards and colored pencils, and difficult-to-obtain foods for the mission staff and volunteers. A fourth grade class contributed and chose Guatemala as a focus for their studies. Class members made a quilt with squares representing themselves, and attached a group picture. Women's groups made infant layettes and baby blankets. Church groups donated quilts and provided money to help defray students' costs. A pharmacist donated pharmaceutical and medical supplies. Students agreed to share their experiences with the donating groups after returning. By the end of the collection phase, each student had two large suitcases or boxes of supplies as checked baggage for the flight, leaving only a small carry-on bag for personal items.

Full funding support for all participants was accomplished through donations and student employment in the college cafeteria. The local chapter of STTI provided additional funding and the college's Center for Vocational Reflection also gave a small grant, with the stipulation that students would reflect on the meaning of their experiences in Guatemala once they returned.

Students identified three goals for their time in Guatemala. These were to: (a) take donations of needed supplies to the mission, (b) provide hands-on nursing care to people with limited access to health care, and (c) accompany lay midwives into the outlying villages and assist in nursing care as needed.

### ***The Experience at San Lucas Toliman***

Two faculty members (the researchers) and a member of the college's community service office accompanied the nursing students to Guatemala.

Unfortunately, the infrastructure was not in place for students to accompany lay midwives to remote villages. However, key mission staff and volunteers worked with faculty to plan other nursing activities for students. These included: (a) working with staff nurses at the mission's hospital to provide in-patient care; (b) accompanying a volunteer physician and nurse to remote village clinics to assist with assessment and treatment of health conditions; (c) accompanying a volunteer nurse to remote villages to provide prenatal assessments, education, and vitamin supplements; (d) working with staff at the local government-operated clinic to provide outpatient care; (e) working as a team with volunteer medical students to provide child health screening and assessments in village schools; and (f) working at the mission's agricultural operations.

In addition to planned activities, the students initiated informal nursing activities in the community. For example, they freely conversed and played with children on the streets. The fast-made friendships frequently resulted in invitations to the children's homes. Through these contacts, students developed relationships with members of the community. In one instance, students visited a family with jaundiced newborn twins. They provided support and education, which resulted in a significant improvement in the infants' condition.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### ***Purpose***

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the meaning of participation in an international service project to baccalaureate nursing students.

### ***Participants***

Potential research participants were nine baccalaureate-nursing students, from a Midwest liberal arts college, who intended to participate in the international experience. Following college Institutional Review Board approval, these students were asked, and consented to participate in the study. They were informed that research participation was voluntary, and that research participation (or non-participation) would not affect relationships with faculty or the opportunity to take part in the service experience. Since the experience was a student-initiated spring break trip, there were no grades associated with it. Eight students were seniors and one was a junior. Their ages ranged from 21 to 27 years. Two were fluent in Spanish.

### ***Procedures***

Several opportunities for reflection were part of the study design. Participants were asked to journal their reflections during and after the trip. They gathered in the evenings for informal reflections of their daily experiences. The

two nursing faculty members kept field notes. Upon returning to the U.S., participants wrote a narrative about their most meaningful experiences during the trip. The students compiled these narratives into a booklet to share with donors. Two weeks after returning to the U.S., all nine students participated in a focus group interview intended to uncover the collective meaning of the experience. The interview was audio-taped and transcribed.

Reflective journals, participant observation, written narratives, and the focus group transcript were the study data. Using content analysis, the two investigators independently reviewed data and identified initial themes. The investigators compared these for commonalities and differences, and through a joint process of verification and consensus, identified the major themes.

## **FINDINGS**

The meaning that students assigned to the experience was reflected in six themes: (a) clarification of career path or goals, (b) improved understanding of social justice and globalization issues, (c) motivation to continue service work, (d) discovering the reciprocity of relationships with others, (e) appreciation for the whole person, and (f) finding a way to respect the sacredness of the experience.

### ***Clarification of Career Path or Goals***

Reflection provided some students with clarity about the area of nursing they wanted to pursue. One student chose public health nursing because of the meaningful experiences she had while developing relationships with families in their homes. Another, encouraged by peer comments about his positive interactions with children, stated:

This entire trip we were around children. They were everywhere in San Lucas and at every clinic site we went to. From a sixteen-day old, to a sixteen-year old, it's very hard not to notice their innocence and purity and the effect that has on you. It felt great to interact and be with the children in Guatemala. Before leaving for the trip, I wasn't sure which area of nursing to pursue. Pediatrics? Cardiology? Med-surg? After being in Guatemala, I have found the area that I want to pursue is pediatrics.

### ***Improved Understanding of Social Justice and Globalization Issues***

The students had an eyewitness experience of health disparities between populations. They compared their own lives to those of people in a developing country. They directly observed the relationships among poverty, oppression, and health. Connections between their lifestyle and a potential impact on the people of

Guatemala were made. Participants became aware that products labeled, “Made in Guatemala”, were likely to have been manufactured in sweatshops dangerous to workers’ health and well-being. One student related:

Does me having ten pairs of shoes indirectly contribute to others having none? . . . I have to ask the question, ‘Is the lifestyle that I’m living, directly or indirectly affecting their lifestyle?’ Does the fact that coffee companies, in order to produce coffee at a high profit, keep the people of Guatemala in poverty and poor living conditions—does my lifestyle of drinking coffee everyday, does that directly affect other people? I think it’s very direct, and we saw that connection. So for me, it’s become pretty obvious how my lifestyle affects others and how my ignorance contributes to others’ poverty.

A common experience was feeling guilty about the material goods students had, while Guatemalans had so much less. When they returned to the U.S., students experienced frustration because their friends and family were as ignorant as they had been prior to the trip. In the words of one student,

I went down there and realized how my lifestyle affects other people. I remember the feeling coming back and going into the cafeteria and seeing everybody who had lived in their little bubble world all of their lives. I was so frustrated that they had no idea that there’s so many people that had no running water in their house, couldn’t drink the water, and had so little. We have so much and took it for granted. We are a very rich nation and don’t understand how rich we are.

Some students questioned the ethics of the health disparities they had seen. They had witnessed both sides of a social justice dilemma and were now grappling with it in their daily lives as nursing students. One who had returned to critical care clinical experience after the trip, illustrates this dilemma.

Is it right that we have such high standards of quality of care and that we focus more on individuals? In the U.S., you have money, and if you have health insurance you can get into any care that you need. I think I question if that’s right. In the U.S., we put the emphasis on the individual instead of the greatest good for the greatest number. . . I really felt like working in critical care would be just such an awesome experience, but I don’t know...I mean, sometimes—it sounds awful, but I look at just one person with all of that technology and equipment, and if that same energy and money could be applied, it could help a whole community in

Guatemala, or...but then I have to step back and say, 'What if this were my mother and she would be withheld that care?' I just don't know.

### ***Motivation to Continue Service Work***

The students identified that service work and volunteerism was part of how they envisioned their futures. Their experiences in San Lucas Toliman had motivated them to engage in work to improve the health and social disparities that they encountered. For some, there was a wish to return to Guatemala, while others felt the location did not matter. As one student said, "I see a lot of us going back down there to do that in the future. I just hope that we don't forget the experience that we had, and that we always remember that there's a need all over the place."

### ***Discovering the Reciprocity of Relationships with Others***

When the students designed the service-learning experience, their goals were to provide tangible supplies and hands-on care and services to "help" the people living in and around San Lucas Toliman. They assumed they would give more than they would receive. They discovered the opposite. One said,

I realized that the people of San Lucas Toliman gave me much more than I could have ever brought down in donations. They opened their homes to us and shared their lives, families, joys, pride, and hardships with us, and did so with more graciousness than any host I have ever known. I thought that I was going to Guatemala to help these people, but instead they helped to remind me what is truly important in life.

Students found significant meaning in the relationships they developed, even though they were of short duration. The informal nursing activities were particularly beneficial in creating relationship. In these encounters, both the student and community member had something to contribute and to gain from each other. For example, one student spent a day informally in the community.

I just really wanted to learn how to wash clothes. I was helping the ladies at the mission and they told me to go over and talk with [Maria]. She has nine kids. I went and asked, in my limited Spanish, if she needed help. She laughed at me at first. But I just really wanted to learn. It's another part of their life. That is something that she does everyday. She tried to talk to me, and we somehow had a conversation and we learned a great deal about each other and our families.

This student and another went back the next day to help the woman with her daily chores and to spend time with the woman and her family. When it was time to leave San Lucas Toliman, the two went to say goodbye. One related:

We shared family pictures and took some pictures of [Maria], her mother, and her children. Before we were leaving, [Maria] asked me if I would be the Godmother to her second youngest child. I graciously accepted and said it would be an honor. That single moment will always stick out in my mind. I had only known [Maria] for a few days and had struggled through most of our conversations, and yet she trusted and respected me enough to be [her son's] Godmother. It was the most incredible feeling

Relationships formed with people encountered during their trip had caused students to reflect on the meaning of their relationships with others, in ways that they never had before. The impact of experiencing reciprocity of relationships was captured in the following:

I think one thing you have to realize by the whole taking and giving thing is that you formed a relationship. . . And it kind of comes full circle. . . It's passing on that knowledge that you gained through their lovingness, their open hearts, and their opening of their homes.

### ***Appreciation for the Whole Person***

The service experience gave students the opportunity to live among the people of San Lucas Toliman; witness the challenges created by living in poverty and oppression; and observe how physical, social, political, and cultural environments are major determinants of health. For many, the experience had helped them integrate the meaning of "holism," and they had learned to appreciate the whole person for whom they cared. One student said:

Looking at some of the older women, they just have this look of sadness in their eyes. It kind of makes me think what really has this woman gone through, how many children has she...how does she manage to get food on her table every night and things like that. And sometimes you come up to a face [in the U.S.] and you might see that same look of sadness, and it makes you think of what has *this* woman gone through instead of just having her as some kind of patient. . . Now I'm looking into the people, instead of just through them.

### ***Finding a Way to Respect the Sacredness of the Experience***

Once they returned to the United States, the students had difficulty articulating to others what they had learned and the level of personal meaning the experience had for them. They felt it was a privilege to have spent time with the people of Guatemala. They wanted to honor the Guatemalan people by helping others understand what Guatemalans' lives were like, and what the experience meant to them as students. However, students were frustrated that when they described their experiences, other people seemed less interested than the students wanted them to be. As one person stated,

When people say, 'Do you have pictures?' I say, 'Yeah, but I won't show them unless you sit and listen to the stories that go with them.' It takes about an hour to go through my photographs and I've shown them to many people. I think you have to find a way to hook them into listening to what these people's lives are like, and what it was like to be living among them. It's hard to find a way to give others a message that conveys what the experience meant for you personally.

While the students had difficulty relating the true meaning of the experience to others, they found it important to talk with each other about their collective experience and its shared meaning. They anticipated they would continue to reflect on the experience throughout their lives, and that new meanings would be discovered. As one person summarized,

Sometimes I think that this stuff will bubble up 20 years from now in ways that I haven't anticipated. I think that in time, the experiences will just keep coming up. You can't take this experience away from you. It's in you and it's part of you. Who knows what will happen with it?

## **DISCUSSION**

Participation in a short-term international service experience resulted in a highly meaningful experience for the baccalaureate-nursing students. The themes describing the meaning of participation reveal that students experienced significant professional and personal growth. Professional growth was reflected in clarification of career path or goals, motivation to continue service work, learning to appreciate the whole person in their care, and seeing the ethics of health care in a new light because of an improved understanding of social justice and globalization issues. Personal growth occurred through a deeper understanding of self and others in reciprocal relationships, finding a way to express to others the

sacredness of the experience, and expanding their worldview based upon a new understanding of issues of social justice and a global society.

Students in this study found the international experience meaningful in ways that go beyond the cognitive development and cultural competency described by others (DeDee & Stewart, 2003; Frisch, 1990; St. Clair & McKenry, 1999; Walsh & DeJoseph, 2003; Zorn, 1996; Zorn, Ponick & Peck, 1995). Fink (2003) asserts that significant learning experiences incorporate more than just the cognitive domain. Application and integration of foundational knowledge must occur simultaneously with caring (developing new feelings, interests, and values), a human dimension (learning about self and others), and learning how to learn (becoming a self-directed learner). In accordance with this framework, participants not only found the international experience meaningful, but they clearly also experienced significant learning. Researchers who examine the impact of international experiences on student learning, and educators who design learning objectives for such experiences, should include multidimensional measures in the cognitive and affective domains to more fully capture the meaningful learning that can occur.

The experience allowed students to gain knowledge about another culture, a developing country, and a health care system filled with disparities. They also applied and integrated that knowledge in ways that fostered their development of new interests, and compassion for others and for global health concerns. Students did not become experts on Guatemala or the Mayan culture, but they did expand their worldview and began to find ways to share their experiences, new values, and perspectives with others. Similarly, Walsh and DeJoseph (2003) also found that other students who participated in a short-term experience at San Lucas Toliman had an increased awareness of the global community.

A key aspect of the students' understanding was that the meaning of participation was transformed from "doing for" the people of Guatemala, to the development of a relationship that was meaningful for both parties. This reciprocity of relationship, in which both parties give and receive, has been described by Porter and Monard (2001) as the Andean concept of "Ayni," in which service to others is expressed not as a "hand out" or a "hand up," but rather as a "hand to." (p. 17).

During their time in Guatemala, students engaged in both formal and informal nursing activities. The formal activities, arranged by faculty and mission staff, were closely aligned to student objectives of providing "hands-on" nursing care. However, it was through informal activities, such as playing with children

on the streets, meeting families in their homes, going to market, and so forth, that students found the most meaning. Through these, they learned about cultural beliefs and practices, and to communicate with people who spoke another language. They developed relationships with individuals and families, and were witness to the environmental conditions in which people lived. These were meaningful experiences that could not be attained through planned activities at clinic, hospital, or school sites.

The findings are limited by the self-selection process of participants. They were highly motivated to participate in the service experience, and committed to planning and preparation for the trip from its inception. This could have influenced the meaning they derived from the experience. Although this is a limitation of the research, the high degree of student involvement in all aspects of the design and planning was important in order to create meaningful and significant learning experiences. Another limitation is that the meaning identified by students was derived from only one, short-term international project at one site. It is not known what impact other sites or longer periods of immersion would have on participation or the meaning derived from it. While previous research has indicated that the location or length of time spent in an international experience do not necessarily limit the learning outcomes (DeDee & Stewart, 2003; Haloburdo & Thompson, 1998), it is unknown if these factors influence the meaning that participants assign to the experience. It is also possible that students' perceptions may have been influenced by their study of transcultural nursing theory (Leininger, 2001).

## **CONCLUSION**

This study contributes to the small body of research that provides evidence for the value of international experiences for baccalaureate nursing students. Participation in a short-term international service experience, which was initiated and directed by students, resulted in meaningful personal and professional growth. The findings extend previous research describing the benefits of short-term international experiences for nursing students. Further research is needed to understand what impact a meaningful international experience has upon later personal and professional life. A follow-up study to explore the long-term meaning is planned.

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