

Original Paper

A Cultural Immersion Experience to Enhance Nursing Students' Appreciation and Understanding of Different Cultures

Abigail Mitchell, DHEd, MSN, RN^{1*} & Connie Jozwiak-Shields, PhD, ANP-BC, RN¹

¹ School of Nursing, D'Youville College, USA

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Abstract

The practice of studying abroad for professional development is not new and has been undertaken by scholars since the medieval times, however it is a relatively new endeavor in nursing education. Research has shown that cultural knowledge in nursing is extremely important and the lack of it may cause deficits in practice. The purpose of this study is a two-fold. Nursing faculty completed a literature review and sent out a self-designed 15-question survey to all nursing students registered for the travel abroad experience. This experience took place during March 14-24, 2019. The goal of this experience was professional growth and to be more culturally aware in various populations.

1. Background

Today's generation of students have challenged nursing faculty to develop creative strategies and innovative methods to encourage students to experience various cultural programs including study abroad. High School and college students in the United States have studied in various countries and cities for decades, however nursing students are often left out of these experiences due to the curriculum design and mandatory clinical hours. Study abroad programs have been encouraged to be part of the college experience in the United States for more than 30 years; however, these programs are lacking in nursing education (Wright, 2010). The practice of studying abroad for professional development is not new and has been undertaken by scholars since medieval times; however it is relatively a new endeavor in nursing education (Edmonds, 2010). Masters and undergraduate (Freshman-Senior) nursing students traveled to Amsterdam Netherlands, Paris France, and London England over a ten day period during spring break with two nursing faculty. Prior to this experience, students attended an overview of each city; customs, languages, religion, healthcare policies, political situations, food and water safety, international travel requirements, monies, and faculty expectations. The School of Nursing Handbook was reviewed regarding social media and professional conduct.

Current information to the stability of a country's government, how local populations react to foreigners, crime rates, and major health concerns can be found by accessing the country's website and by reviewing The United States Department's Web site (Wright, 2010).

2. Supporting Literature

Globalization was first used by economists in 1981 and it refers to the development of increasingly integrated global economy, especially in trade, which is rapidly changing in today's new venue. Culture is learned by each generation through both formal and informal life experiences (Leininger, 2002). Since the 2000s' the need for competent healthcare professionals has grown. Cultural awareness and international travel and learning are now considered as being fundamental to university education (Forsey, Broomhall, & Davis, 2012). Master and undergraduate nursing education is increasingly embracing study abroad opportunities as means to engender cultural competence and intercultural sensitivity among nursing students (Edmonds, 2012).

Cultural awareness is important for everyone and especially important for healthcare professionals to improve patient outcomes. For nursing students to develop cultural competence as part of their nursing education, the cultural aspect should be embedded in the learning process (Hovland & Johannessen, 2018). Nursing education plays a large role in preparing students for their competent cultural care; however what is lacking is actual cultural experiences in various places. Allowing students to participate or to embrace another cultural allows the student to better understand individuals from various cultures and how they perceive illness and health and what measures these individuals take to remain health, and this in turn can be reflected in practice.

Traditional study abroad programs are offered over a semester, fifteen weeks. Short term programs are often four to eight weeks. This particular program was over 10 days. Since short term study abroad has not been the normal way, the transition to short term programs has been met with resistance (Slotkin, Durie, & Eisenberg, 2012). Faculty have found that by offering short term cultural experiences nursing students embrace the chance to participate and do not lose class time, clinical time, and impinge upon other responsibilities. Short term study abroad programs appeal to adult learners, who now comprise 40% of the student population in higher education (The Condition of Education, 2019). Many studies have shown that cultural knowledge in nursing is extremely important as nurses. Nurses need to be culturally sensitive and competent to provide safe patient care in various settings and globally.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this study was a two -fold. Nursing faculty (trip leaders) developed an educational experience that would reflect both an introduction to cultural variation in lifestyles along with experiences that would reflect the health care focus of the trip. Working closely with experienced global support personnel the experience was planned that would show the historical perspective and evolution of healthcare in that particular country along with common views and practices. Prior to the

trip, a consent form along with a self-designed 15 question survey was sent to the 15 students who had registered for the study abroad experience.

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The survey collected participants' demographic information in addition to examining students' current and perceived travel experience. During the study abroad trip, faculty met with the students' every morning to brief discuss their surroundings, things to watch for including safety issues, and the plan for the day. In the evening a short de-briefing was completed. This group sharing engagement offered the students the opportunity to ask questions, share previous experiences and discuss some of their observations. This daily exercise proved very beneficial not only to students who enjoyed relating their travel encounters but also provided an excellent teaching opportunity to highlight and discuss what participants had experienced and relate it to how these observations may relate to patient care. Students developed personal maturity to stimulate cultural mindfulness with various cultural groups. Thus their knowledge has grown and they become more sensitive to cultural differences, which impact their intercultural competence (Bennett & Holtz, 2008).

The age group of the students ranged from 19 to 36, all female, and English was their main language with a few knowing a little bit of Spanish. One student had never traveled via airplane, eight students have never traveled for a distance outside of the country, and all fifteen felt that a person's culture influences their view of health and illness. Thirteen felt that they had minimal knowledge on how to take care of a patient from a different culture, and 2 felt that they could take care of a patient from another country and or different culture as they were enrolled in a course pertaining to nursing and cultures. Upon returning from the experience a few student comments:

- Great experience, all nursing students should do this
- Learned so much about people, places, and where I want to go next
- Nurses are respected
- Nursing schools are different and requirements are different from the U.S.
- Health care is so different; they pay in to it based on income and or provided
- Chronic health issues such as smoking is huge
- More vacation time and vacation time has to be taken, as compared to the amount of time taken in the United States
- Longer maternity leave, often from 1-2 years and it is paid
- Shorter working hours in many instances

- Lifestyles are more active, as they often bike or walk to places as transportation is very expensive
- More family oriented
- Museums are less expensive and sometimes free, which allows family time and cultural experiences.
- Different languages are spoken in the same country
- Politics and protesting is common
- Larger cities are expensive to live and many have to commute to work
- Food and the experience of eating in a restaurant is different-no rush

Students all felt that they had a very beneficial experience. In addition, because of the positive perception of this trip, some student participants inquired as to the availability of future such trips to other countries.

Another unperceived benefit not anticipated by faculty members was the interaction between the undergraduate and graduate students. Undergraduate nursing students were able to engage graduate nursing students in discussions related to their student learning experiences and the real-life working experiences of the graduate nurses in a relaxed non structured encounter.

International experiences appears to provide ways of building student leadership, confidence, cultural awareness, development, and growth through the personal challenges involved (Edmonds, 2010).

4. Conclusion

Despite being limited, short-termed study abroad experiences do work and encourage a wide range of nursing students to participate. There are many benefits to a program; professionally and personally. All nursing students should have the opportunity to travel and become culturally competent by engaging in a cultural experience. Careful planning by faculty created a personal growth experience, a health related outlook and a cultural opportunity that met these needs.

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