

Sharing a Vision with an International Partner through Photographs

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to establish a shared vision between the academic program and the international service-learning partner. Through the use of photovoice (Collier & Collier, 1986), we conducted a needs assessment to determine the partner's priorities. Analysis of interview transcripts and photos yielded themes representing the partner's needs and were the basis of the shared vision, adding clarity to the purpose of the experience.

Keywords: photovoice, community engagement, assessment, needs assessment, international service learning

The importance of a relationship with a community-based organization (CBO) in student service-learning experiences cannot be overemphasized. A solid foundation will set the stage to benefit all stakeholders: students, faculty, and community partners. Establishing the CBO relationship is time-intensive and often defers to the goals of the academic institution (Cipriani, 2017). Yet, a truly sustainable relationship must include consideration of the CBO's needs.

BACKGROUND

Following a 10-year tradition, the undergraduate occupational therapy students from a Midwestern Jesuit liberal arts university complete a service-learning experience in Guatemala. Fulfilling occupational justice course objectives, students collaborate with therapy practitioners and spend a week each summer in Guatemala, providing occupational therapy at homes and clinics for children and adults with developmental, physical, or psychiatric disabilities. During the initial years of this program, the occupational therapy service-learning (OTSL) program focused on specific individuals with disability, consulting

with parents, caregivers, and clinicians. More recently, the OTSL program used a train-the-trainer model to improve the long-term benefits to the CBO.

In 2014, the OTSL partnered with a government-run residential facility housing approximately 60 residents, from 6-53 years of age, providing occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy, special education, and medical care. The OTSL is the only university-based volunteer program serving the facility. Realizing that the individual approach was inadequate for the new partner's specific needs, the focus changed to assessing overall facility issues. We directed our 2014 recommendations toward general environmental and scheduling changes, with a few specific recommendations necessary for more challenging situations. Within the next year, the facility had implemented all of our suggestions and had taken some initiative on its own. While our initial efforts were successful, we were concerned the CBO would continue to defer to our ideas, rather than identifying their specific needs. In an effort to understand fully their needs, we proposed photo interviewing as a method to facilitate the CBO's voice and develop a shared vision.

The purpose of this study was to conduct a needs assessment to establish a baseline to build a solid relationship between the academic institution and the CBO, to encourage positive changes in the care of individuals with disabilities in Guatemala, and to ultimately facilitate our student learning and cultural awareness. After providing a literature review of service-learning partnerships, this article will present the process of using photo interviewing to conduct a needs assessment of an international CBO. We will emphasize the importance of solidifying a reciprocal relationship through a shared vision.

Partnership

Blouin and Perry (2009) recommended a stronger partnership between the academic institution and the community partner, focusing on clear objectives and communication between the students, community partners, and the academic institution. Dorado and Giles (2004) suggested the stages of the CBO/academic institution relationship as tentative (focusing on student learning), aligned (seeking a common vision to meet both partners' needs), or committed (interactions that show both partners value the relationship). Similarly, Lear and Sanchez (2013) recommended a proactive approach to establishing the partnership by first designing the service learning experience, then building the partnership through collaboration, and finally, sustaining the relationship over time. Due to the urgent needs of the CBO, our relationship did not follow the paths as suggested by Dorado and Giles (2004) or Lear and Sánchez (2013). While there is a sustained relationship with annual short-term service-learning projects, there is a desire from both parties to move the relationship from a transactional to more transformational (Enos & Morton, 2003) partnership to better benefit both organizations. A transactional partnership serves the immediate, short-term needs of the CBO (Enos & Morton, 2003). However, a transformational relationship promotes sustainability, allowing the OTSL to benefit

the Guatemalan facility, the university, and student learning (Enos & Morton, 2003).

As noted above, the OTSL's relationship with the facility is young compared to other facilities the OTSL serves. An assessment of the OTSL/community-based organization (CBO) relationship, as proposed by Dorado and Giles (2004), revealed the partnership is on a committed path of engagement as both parties value the relationship past the short-term service-learning experience each summer. However, OTSL leaders questioned whether the OTSL was meeting the facility's goals and how we could better sustain the benefits of our service. The needs assessment was designed to identify the needs and goals of the CBO to plan future experiences and to develop a shared vision, as recommended by Lear and Sanchez (2013). The motivation for creating the shared vision was prompted by the need to establish a solid service-learning experience for OTSL students, and meet the ongoing needs of the CBO.

METHOD

The researchers aimed to investigate additional necessary improvements to serve the residents of the facility, thereby establishing a transformational relationship to increase the sustainability of the OTSL and achieve long-term benefits for the facility and future student groups. The project focused on the following research questions: "What is the experience of working with individuals with multiple disabilities in a residential facility in Guatemala?" and "What factors impact the experience of working with individuals with multiple disabilities in a residential facility in Guatemala?"

Traditionally, research on the evaluation of service-learning experiences has been implemented through surveys and interviews (Edwards, Mooney, & Heald, 2001; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008; Worrall, 2007). However, this project used a case study approach (Mertens & Wilson, 2012) to complete a needs assessment. A case

study approach focuses on a “specific, unique, bounded system” (Mertens & Wilson, 2012, p. 331) or community; in our case, this community was all CBO stakeholders, defined as anyone who provides care to the residents, from personal care aide to administration personnel at the facility.

By including all levels of stakeholders, the data collected provided a global view of the experience of caring for residents of the CBO. Data was collected through photo interviewing (Collier & Collier, 1986) in the participants’ native language, Spanish. Photo interviewing facilitated the sharing of stories about the photos participants took for the study, allowing them to evaluate the community according to their priorities, and without requiring English writing or reading skills to participate (Wang & Pies, 2008). According to Collier and Collier (1986), “the potential range of data enlarges beyond that contained in the photos themselves” (p.99), and captures the full context of the community (Wang & Pies, 2008). The use of photos prompted the subjects to reflect on their motivations for photographing specific images and encouraged them to share deep perspectives on multiple aspects of their work.

Participants

With approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board and the CBO itself, participants were recruited upon recommendation from administrators. The sample included 17 participants from all levels of care providers at the facility. Participants represented the following professions: medical director, social worker, psychologist, physical therapist, occupational therapist, speech therapist, nutritionist, special educator, and personal care aide. This cross-section provided a global overview of the range of experiences at the facility. The criteria for involving subjects in the investigation included language (Spanish or English), ability to use a disposable camera, employee of the CBO, and being 18 years of

age or older. Students were not used as initial stakeholders in this study in order to more systematically identify the needs of the CBO, establish the relationship, and benefit future students.

Procedure

While students were completing their service-learning experience, the research team collected the data for the project. A member of the research team invited participants based on an administrator’s recommendation and reviewed the informed consent using a local interpreter. Participants were instructed in the use of a disposable camera and/or how to transfer digital photos to the researchers. Participants were asked to take photos that captured work experiences, but were alerted not to take photos of residents engaged in any activity exposing genitalia, breasts, or buttocks. No photos of residents in compromising situations were taken.

Each participant selected up to five photos, which then became the focus of the semi-structured, video-recorded interview. The researcher conducted the interviews in Spanish in a private office located at the facility. Seventeen participants took photographs and participated in interviews about the photographs. However, due to availability and prohibitive work schedules, three participants who submitted photos were unable to complete the interview process.

Upon return to the United States, videotaped interviews were transcribed by a native speaker from Latin America familiar with cultural idioms of Guatemala, and translated into English. In addition, a second translator checked the transcripts for linguistic and cultural accuracy.

Analysis

Fourteen participants submitted 197 usable photos. Photo analysis yielded four categories: staff relationships, environmental influences, endearing moments, and client care.

Interview transcript analysis consisted of three researchers individually reading

the English translation of the transcript three times. Upon the third reading, each researcher drafted possible code words; all three researchers then determined a final list of 34 code words with operational definitions through discussion. The transcript was coded according to the agreed-upon list and analyzed with the use of HyperRESEARCH®, a qualitative data analysis software. Descriptive and analytic memos were drafted and three themes were identified.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of data methods, sources, and researchers (Curtin & Fossey, 2007; Krefting, 1991; Shenton, 2004). Data was collected over four days; however, participants were familiar with the researchers from previous years. Administrators at the facility expressed trust in the academic institution as a result of continued service. Thanks to the established relationship and the guarantee of confidentiality, participants appeared authentic in the sharing of their experiences. To minimize the positionality of the researchers, three strategies were used. One strategy was the use of two translators, one with the cultural background of Latin America and the other from the United States. A second strategy was the use of the photos taken by the participants, providing the participants complete control over the data that they supplied. And finally, each researcher had a different relationship with the CBO and different roles in the OTSL, further minimizing researcher positionality.

FINDINGS

Three themes emerged from photo and interview analysis: internal factors (values and beliefs of employees), client care (programming), and external factors (challenges of the job).

Theme: Internal Factors

Internal factors affecting the care of residents with multiple disabilities in this facility reflect the values and beliefs of the employees. Throughout the interviews, staff

reported their values and beliefs based on their Guatemalan culture, specifically the value of family. Participants considered residents as a son or daughter and residents respond by calling staff “Daddy” or “Momma.” According to one participant, “They all have the same necessities, and they all need love and the same affection.” An additional value was a faith in God and a sense of purpose. As one participant stated: “And that God has put us over here for a reason, and I believe the purpose is to help them and give them all that life has denied to them.”

Theme: Client Care and Programming

The strong values and beliefs held by the staff are evident in the provision of client care and programming. Programming focused on the whole person, addressing medical care, nutrition, occupational therapy, physical therapy, special education, and personal assistance. Due to the significant impairments of the residents, staff expressed a sense of accomplishment and job satisfaction with the smallest amount of client progress. The slightest improvement was greeted with great satisfaction.

Theme: External Factors

Staff reported job challenges inherent in the care of individuals with multiple disabilities. These challenges often include external factors over which the staff has minimal control. Inherent in these challenges is the limited cognitive ability of the residents. The low cognitive ability coupled with the adult size of the residents result in physical challenges in redirecting or engaging them in purposeful activities.

Additionally, participants articulated the impact of the environment on programming. Rooms for therapy or education are either too large or distracting, making engaging with the residents difficult; or too small, limiting the types of possible activities. Another concern shared by several participants is the difficulty in maintaining a clean and attractive workspace. The playground was specifically mentioned as an

unsanitary area for the residents. Recreation time periods have a decreased resident-to-staff ratio. This ratio, coupled with the distance to the restroom, often results in toileting in the playground area. Participants expressed frustration with the lack of activity supplies and resources for basic needs, such as medicines and clothing.

SHARED VISION

As Lear and Sanchez (2013) proposed, this project facilitated the collaboration (Dorado & Giles, 2004) of the OTSL/CBO partners to align and develop a shared vision. Considering the information shared by the staff, the following shared vision was proposed:

To impact the lives of individuals with multiple disabilities in a residential facility in Guatemala, the vision of the OTSL is to provide the needed physical and personnel resources during the service-learning program for occupational therapy students to sustain the current level of personal engagement in client care. Additionally the aim is to empower the facility to establish an organizational mission grounded in the solid values and perspectives of the staff. By doing so, they will support the staff in their continued desire to provide quality programs for the residents. In the essence of a transformational relationship, the CBO provides real-life opportunities for OTSL students to interact with individuals with disabilities from a different culture.

This shared vision will prompt both parties in creatively meeting their individual and shared needs, and define the activities pursued during the service-learning experience. Elements already targeted for improvement include the physical resources for activities and alternative care provided by OTSL students and clinicians to allow staff members to pursue professional development opportunities. Additionally, specific CBO re-

quests include determining an appropriate assessment to determine resident goals and programming activities. The OTSL continues to provide written recommendations prepared by teams of students, faculty, and therapists, focusing on facility staffing, buildings, and scheduling.

IMPLICATIONS

A transformational relationship between the CBO and OTSL requires a shared vision (Enos and Morton, 2003). Pausing to determine a shared vision is time well spent as it focuses the relationship and obtains commitment to the relationship from both partners. Photo interviewing proved to be an appropriate method to develop a shared vision for CBO/academic institution partnerships. The value of photo interviewing lies in the combined effect of the empowerment of subjects in the generation of their own materials for the interviews, and the visuals prompted personal descriptions, often resulting in a storytelling-type narration. The combination of photos followed by interviews added depth to the data, allowing subjects the opportunity to elaborate on work elements depicted in the photos, such as the unsanitary playground conditions. At times, the photos prompted additional discussion of issues not represented in the visuals, such as inequality and basic needs. Furthermore, the photographs and story narratives afforded a perspective often unrecognized in other interview methods.

Participants chose the data and provided descriptions through their own cultural lens, revealing the critical role of culture and language in the methods, procedures, and analysis of international research involving photo interviews. According to Geertz (2000), culture provides individuals with a structure to guide aspects of their lives and offers a rationale for behavior, a lens through which to observe the world and a perspective by which to evaluate actions. Due to the central role of culture (Kumaravadivelu, 2008) in the overall lives of subjects, data collected through photos

only and no interviews would have lacked the depth of profound reflection and resulted in misconstrued interpretations through the cultural lens of the researchers. Conducting interviews in Spanish allowed for culture-specific words, which, according to Wierzbicka (1997), “are conceptual tools that reflect a society’s past experience of doing and thinking about things in certain ways” (p. 5). Participant-chosen photo interviews relaxed the power differential between the researchers and the participants and eliminated any literacy issue or cross-cultural challenges.

Despite the benefits of using photo interviewing to develop a shared vision, there were challenges throughout the project, such as concern expressed by the Institutional Review Board about the residents consenting to their photo being taken. As all residents were wards of the State and some were cognitively unable to consent to their photo being taken, the facility obtained permission from the judicial system. Even with this approval, participants were instructed to ask the resident’s permission prior to taking a photo. Another challenge was the method of photography. Disposable cameras were available, but they required development of the film. Despite this potential obstacle, a local photo lab developed the photos in a few hours. Several participants preferred to use personal cell phones and were instructed to delete photos after sharing with the researchers, who printed the digital photos to preserve a hard copy of the data. Photo interviewing appeared to be enjoyable and empowering to the participants and resulted in almost twice the number of participants expected. This, in turn, increased costs of photo development and printing, translations services, and complicated data analysis.

Additionally, the student perspective as a stakeholder was not utilized in this study; this could be an area of future research in order to further describe the complexities of the transformational relationship of CBO/OTSL/student. In future iterations of the OTSL, students will benefit

from results of this study with future reciprocal learning opportunities. The student learning experience will be improved by the investment of time to determine the CBO’s needs.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations included several misplaced/lost photos and not all participants were interviewed. As a result of the large data volume, there was a delay in transcription and translation that postponed the analysis of the data. Researchers recognized the need to interpret the literal translation to English of cultural-specific words and concepts. According to Gee (1993), “The way a language cuts up the world will influence how we initially think about something” (p. 11). Interpretation during data analysis required detailed rereading, sensitivity, and additional consultation to prevent misinterpretation. Additionally, the transcription and translation expenses may be prohibitive. Self-report measures may not be valid and reliable, as they may have altered their responses due to the perceived authority to U.S. university personnel. Participants may have felt obligated to participate as the invitation to do so was initially extended by administration personnel.

CONCLUSION

The use of photo interviewing proved beneficial in determining a shared vision between the OTSL and the CBO, a foundational component of building the relationship for an effective service-learning program for the students. By removing the power differential of U.S. university personnel questioning CBO staff, and allowing the participants to share what was important to them, the resulting shared vision is more authentic than the implied vision of past service experiences at the facility. By adhering to this shared vision, the CBO, OTSL, and future student participants can continue to grow and truly experience the transformational relationship.

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