

Study Abroad Strengths-Based Curriculum: Advancing Self-Reflection and Relationship-Building Leadership Skills

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Abstract

Immersion in a strengths-based, study abroad program provides extensive opportunity for leadership growth. Navigating the unknown adds to the challenge students experience during their student-organized activities. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how a strengths-based curricula design advanced the leadership competency levels of self-reflection and relationship building during a graduate, short-term study abroad program. The findings show that before and during the program, self-reflection led to thoughtful discussions, which led to valuing differences. Self-reflection contributed to deeper self-awareness of how an individual's primary strengths and blind spots led to mutual respect. On-going mutual respect enhanced relationships through appreciation for diversity. The strengths-based knowledge aided in acknowledging and valuing differences in one another, which positively impacted relationships.

Keywords:

strengths-based curriculum, graduate study abroad, self-reflection, relationship-building

Introduction

In 2018, a group of 11 leadership and nursing graduate students participated in a 15-day study abroad to New Zealand. This paper provides insight into how the study abroad program integrated a strengths-based curriculum to advance the leadership competency levels of two leadership skills: relationship-building and self-reflection.

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Quality relationships between team members contribute to a collaborative work environment. Individuals are more likely to thrive in the workplace when positive relationships exist (Bono & Yoon, 2012). Rezapour and Farzad (2017) report that a strong correlation exists between a member's satisfaction level and the quality of the leader-follower relationship.

Self-reflection is a leadership skill designed to achieve a deeper meaning of our experiences (Lew & Schmidt, 2011), and the level of reflection depends on the interplay between a specific moment and the environment (Savicki & Price, 2017). Park and Millora (2012) suggest that self-reflection improves self-awareness, and Carmeli et al. (2009) report that knowledge of oneself will positively affect a relationship.

The Gallup StrengthsFinder Assessment provides an opportunity for students to create a personality inventory classifying their natural "recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior" (Linley & Joseph, 2004). In the present case study example, students utilized a strengths-based assessment to create a common language and inclusive environment to value differences. Bloom's taxonomy was used as a guide for the progression of the relationship-building and self-reflection competency levels. Bloom's taxonomy is a framework containing six categories in a continuum that progressively intensifies learning (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The categories progress from remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, and evaluating, to creating. Learning at higher levels (analyzing, evaluating, and creating) is dependent on navigating through the lower level categories of remembering, understanding, and applying (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Throughout this paper, learning activities are classified within one or more of Bloom's learning categories.

Literature Review

Short-Term Study Abroad

A short-term study abroad is defined as a period of fewer than eight weeks and can encompass many different types of programs—from two weeks to a full semester abroad (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). Donnelly-Smith (2009) suggests these programs appeal to graduate students because they allow for greater ability to get time off from work and students can keep current with course work. Nineteen percent of United States students participating in a study abroad program in academic year 2016/2017 did so in short-term programs (Institute of International Education, 2018). As the United States' population continues to diversify, it is important for students to increase cultural competency and thrive in a global environment (DuVivier & Patitu, 2017). Study abroad programs offer students the opportunity to build close relationships, with one another, during the immersion experience. Maharaja (2018) report students who engaged in study abroad programs indicated the experience provided a more in-depth understanding of a different culture and growth in self-confidence, self-awareness, and adaptability. Short-term study abroad programs are enriched by scheduled reflection time and interactions with the local population (Donnelly-Smith, 2009).

Gallup StrengthsFinder Assessment

The Gallup StrengthsFinder Assessment is globally recognized as a personality inventory to assist individuals in classifying their natural "recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior" (Linley & Joseph, 2004). More than twenty million individuals have

completed the assessment (Gallup Strengths Center, 2018). The Assessment may support first-year student initiatives (Louis, 2011; Tomaiewiz, 2011), course curriculum (Cantwell, 2005; Passarelli et al., 2010), and student leadership development (Lehnert, 2009; Pritchard, 2009; Tanious, 2012). Studies conducted at the University of Massachusetts and the University of Kansas validated the Gallup StrengthsFinder Assessment (Asplund et al., 2007). The University of Nebraska – Lincoln designed and implemented the Clifton Strengths Institute “to identify and maximize the talent of college students to guide their personal, professional, and leadership development through the use and application of strengths-based sciences” (University of Nebraska – Lincoln 2018, para 1). The Institute developed a Strengths Lab to facilitate research by offering internships, fellowships, and partnerships.

The Assessment ranks thirty-four research-based strengths in order of individual dominance. A strengths perspective focuses on “what is right” within individuals (Buckingham, 2007, p.6) and is grounded in positive organizational scholarship (Cameron et al., 2003) to reinforce the notion that individuals have personal strengths that contribute to desirable outcomes (Seleebey, 2001). Gallup Strengths practitioners refer to an individual’s top eight strengths as *primary strengths*, the next eight strengths in ranked order are referred to as *secondary strengths*, and the bottom 18 of 34 strengths are termed the *blind spot* (Murphy et al., 2018). Primary strengths significantly influence how individuals value, prioritize, and approach relationships and work projects (Murphy et al., 2018). This influence contributes to how individuals interpret language and the expectations individuals place on one another. Secondary strengths do not affect an individual as significantly as primary strengths, but they do influence how individuals experience relationships and work. The blind spot category refers to strengths that the individual is unable to grasp. Blind spots are perspectives foreign to the individual (Murphy et al., 2018). Rath (2007) defines a blind spot as an area in which individuals lack talent and have little potential to develop into a strength. Conflict may occur when an individual interprets a situation based on his or her primary strengths and assumes the other individual has the same primary strengths. When one individual’s primary strength falls into another person’s blind spot, the two perspectives conflict with each other. An individual’s primary strengths may hamper his or her ability to see someone else’s perspective, but healthy relationships can develop when an individual is curious about another’s perspective based on his or her blind spots (Murphy et al., 2018). The ability to understand and identify one’s blind spots creates awareness of differences.

Relationship-Building

Mesmer-Magnus et al. (2010) suggest that the foundation of positive team relationships are team accomplishments. When a team takes steps to enhance interpersonal processes, team performance experiences significant change (McEwan et al., 2017). Relationships—that is, a series of interactions between two people—consist of behavioral, intellectual, and affective characteristics and can range from informal to intimate (Auhagen & Salisch, 1996; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) suggest that relationships consist of multiple encounters, which are often impromptu. Relationships evolve through the initial interactions, continuing experiences, and the development of mutual trust and understanding (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Two theories inform the relationship-building process: social penetration theory and social exchange theory.

Social penetration theory (SPT) explains how relationships morph through the progression that advances a relationship from informal to a more intimate relationship (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Carpenter and Greene (2015) state that relationships develop through disclosure and that the quality of the relationship determines the depth and richness of the exchange. They describe four stages of “self-disclosure: 1) orientation, 2) exploratory affective exchange, 3) affective exchange, and 4) stable exchange” (2015, p.2). During the orientation stage, sharing of superficial details occur. The exploratory affective phase is where individuals share more information and demonstrate less caution when sharing information. Personality begins to show during the affective exchange stage, and interactions become more casual with the use of sarcasm and displays of humor, often leading to conflict. Finally, complete openness—that is, sharing of intimate information and thoughts through honest communication—indicates the stable exchange phase.

Social exchange theory (SET) explains relationships as a process of negotiated exchanges between parties and suggests that the process of exchanges indicates how individuals will interact (Lioukas & Reuer, 2015). Ribarsky (2013) expands on SET by outlining how an individual assesses the cost and benefits of a relationship to evaluate the value of maintaining the relationship. Zimmer et al. (2010, p. 397) explain “Reciprocity involves feelings of obligation within an individual to divulge something in return when the individual becomes the recipient of something similar and is one of the guiding forces in human interaction.” Obakpolo (2015) argues that the level of reciprocity within interactions affects interpersonal relationships. On-going reciprocity leads to high-quality relationships.

High-quality relationships consist of positive regard, mutuality between individuals, and psychological safety even when mistakes occur (Carmeli et al., 2009). Carmeli et al. (2009) posit that high-quality relationships have a higher emotional carrying capacity and can process varied emotional information. Emotional carrying capacity, a characteristic of positive relationships, is the constructive expression of positive and negative emotions (Bradley et al., 2012).

Self-Reflection

Reflection is essential in developing student intercultural competence in study abroad programs (Paige, 2015). A positive relationship between self-reflection and student success has been an area of intense interest in education for over 25 years (Lew & Schmidt, 2011). Scholars suggest that self-reflection should emphasize purposeful and critical analysis of experiences and can achieve a deeper meaning and understanding (Lew & Schmidt, 2011). The articulation of connections between new information, ideas, prior learning, or existing experiences contributes to deeper knowledge (O’Rourke 1998). Lew and Schmidt argue self-reflection

refers to the processes that a learner undergoes to look back on his past learning experiences and what he did to enable learning to occur (i.e. self-reflection on *how* learning took place), and the exploration of connections between the knowledge that was taught and the learner’s own ideas about them (i.e. self-reflection on *what* was learned) (2011, p. 530).

To move the self-reflection skill from awareness toward expert level, the authors of this study adhere to Lew and Schmidt’s definition and suggest that self-reflection is the conscious contemplation of individual strengths, knowledge, and experience to expand an

individual's understanding. As the learner navigates the self-reflection competency continuum, some experiences may stimulate a need for personal reflection in silence and in solitude to absorb lessons and strengthen understanding (Zimmerman & Morgan, 2015). Silence, accompanied by seclusion, provides for contemplation and reflection on past interactions and experiences (Zimmerman & Morgan 2015).

Self-reflection can focus on solving problems or improving self-awareness (Park & Millora, 2012). Both areas are essential to skill development because leaders need to have self-awareness of their problem-solving abilities. When students become proficient in the Gallup StrengthsFinder content, and understand their primary strengths and the strengths of fellow students, they can use reflection time to solve a potential problem or to increase their self-awareness. Reflection provides individuals an opportunity to identify, acknowledge and evaluate differences between their values and experiences and those of others.

Designing A Strengths-Based Study Abroad Program

The study abroad program explored in this article included visits to organizations in Wellington, the capital of New Zealand; Auckland, a major metropolitan area; and Able Tasman National Park, located on the upper tip of the South Island. New Zealand was chosen because of innovative leadership initiatives; students compared and contrasted leadership practices to that of the United States. The goals of this program were for students to develop relationship-building strategies, learn to embrace differences, and to construct shared meaning of cultural experiences. To achieve the goals, students participated in daily self-reflection by synthesizing their strengths knowledge and their responses to daily interactions with fellow students.

Students identified organizations respective to their professional discipline, arranged interviews and transportation to and from organizations, and conducted the interviews. Interviews provided immersive experiences for students to compare and contrast differences in organizational leadership. After spending eight days visiting organizations, the students spent two days hiking through Able Tasman National Park. The challenging hike was designed to be a reflective time for students to process the knowledge they accumulated during the interviews and to provide an environment to continue building quality relationships. Students were encouraged to reflect on their experiences throughout the program to achieve higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy and to create strategies that facilitate positive communication.

Soria and Stubblefield (2015) report that students who recognize their strengths have a common language to reconstruct meaning and understanding of different experiences and backgrounds. The instructor who led the study abroad program desired to create a culture to embrace differences using self-reflection to advance the competency level of the relationship-building skill. A strengths-based curriculum, based on the work of education psychologist Don Clifton and the Gallup organization, established a common language to support quality relationships and individual reflection.

The Gallup Strengths Finger Assessment has been used for curriculum development and student leadership, but a gap exists in how the Assessment may advance leadership skills of relationship-building and self-reflection during a short-term graduate study abroad. In preparation for travel, students were required to complete approximately 60 hours of pre-work focused on the results of their Gallup StrengthsFinder Assessment. (The

literature review section provides background about the Gallup StrengthsFinder Assessment.) The pre-work addressed the two lowest levels in Bloom's Taxonomy, which are remembering and understanding. Although a significant amount of time was dedicated to pre-work, the instructor determined it was best for the students to have a solid understanding of their strengths and blind spots before the start of the trip.

Strengths are categorized into four domains (Gallup Strengths Center, 2018; Rath & Conchie, 2008). Domains characterize how individuals and groups use strengths: (1) to influence others, which is known as the *influencing* domain; (2) to take action and make things happen, known as the *executing* domain; (3) to build and nurture relationships, commonly called the *relationship-building* domain; and, (4) to analyze both quantitative data and qualitative information, known as the *strategic thinking* domain (Murphy et al., 2018). These four domains led to the development of four pre-work learning modules, one focusing on each domain. Table 1 provides the domains and corresponding strengths.

Table 1. Four Domains and Corresponding Strengths.

Strategic Thinking	Executing	Relationship-Building	Influencing
Analytical	Achiever	Adaptability	Activator
Context	Arranger	Connectedness	Command
Futuristic	Belief	Developer	Communication
Ideation	Consistency	Empathy	Competition
Input	Deliberative	Harmony	Maximizer
Intellection	Discipline	Includer	Self-Assurance
Learner	Focus	Individualization	Significance
Strategic	Responsibility	Positivity	Woo
	Restorative	Relator	

In each learning module, students were assigned readings from *Strengths-Based Leadership* (Rath & Conchie, 2008), viewed to videos describing each strength in the domain, and completed an individual leadership development plan (ILDLP). The readings discussed how leaders might interact with individuals who have similar and different strengths.

The videos described the thirty-four strengths and provided information on the contributions and needs of each strength. A contribution is how an individual with a specific strength adds value to a situation or discussion, and a need is what that individual requires to feel valued when working through a situation or discussion. Each strength has parallel needs that, when ignored or misunderstood, can inadvertently lead a person into ineffective behavior. Productive conversations occur when individuals share their strengths' contributions, seek and recognize the contributions of others, and embrace emerging differences (Murphy et al., 2018).

The ILDP assignment was designed to encourage students to self-reflect on their primary strengths and blind spots and to evaluate how these strengths might be leveraged to achieve positive outcomes. Students were asked to reflect on how they might individualize approaches to working with team members who have strengths in their blind spots. The short-term purpose of these ILDPs was to support team collaboration and group effectiveness while in New Zealand. The long-term goal was to provide students with the knowledge to leverage effective outcomes in their profession.

During the trip students participated in visits to self-identified organizations, government ministries, museums, and historic Maori grounds. Students experienced the

New Zealand culture by visiting organizations with innovative practices such as Abel Tasman National Park and Zealandia a Wildlife Sanctuary. For full immersion, students resided in hostels and were responsible for grocery shopping and meal preparation. Students shared their experiences during daily debriefing sessions. The students were prompted to discuss how their strengths knowledge assisted them during organizational visits and explorations. Furthermore, after a challenging activity, the instructor asked students to reflect on how strengths had been used to help the group through difficult situations.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how a strengths-based curriculum in a study abroad program advanced the leadership competency levels of self-reflection and relationship-building skills through study perceptions, using a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology concentrates on elucidating the meanings of experiences to gain insights into phenomena (Heidegger, 1993). Phenomenological scholars surmise that individuals attach meaning to experiences through feelings and practices (Wilson, 2015).

Participants

The sample for this study was comprised of the 11 graduate students who participated in the study abroad program. Participants were recruited by purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015). The 11 students ranged in age from 23 to 61 years old and included ten females. The study received IRB approval and the students received an informed consent form and returned a signed copy to the researchers.

Interviews

All participants were interviewed using Acano, a teleconferencing software. The students were familiar with Acano since it was also used in pre-travel meetings. Interviews were conducted two months after the program ended and the responses were transcribed. Before participating in the interview, students were asked to review their primary strengths and their daily journals. The researchers believed that this strategy would promote a more in-depth conversation. Three open-ended questions were used to gain insight into the experience, with follow-up questions, as needed, to seek a better understanding of the responses. The interview questions included:

1. How did your strengths knowledge help you to prepare for the study abroad?
2. How did the strengths knowledge influence your ability to build relationships?
3. How did you use your strengths knowledge during self-reflection time to change your communication approach to other students?

An interview protocol was developed and adhered to during the interview process to ensure consistency among interviews. Questions were asked in the same order and follow up questions were asked if appropriate.

Analysis

Thematic analysis is a method for pattern recognition in qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2013) and was used to decipher themes from 11 transcribed interviews. Braun and Clark (2006) report that thematic analysis is derived from the research questions and is an

appropriate method for identifying common themes because the research questions direct the investigation. Braun and Clark (2006) present a six-phase framework: familiarize yourself with the data, generate draft codes, search for themes, review themes, characterize themes, and articulate the themes in written form. The following section provides analysis for each of the three research questions and integrates information from the literature review.

Results and Discussion

Three themes emerged from the thematic analysis: mutual respect, blind-spot strategy, and conscious contemplation. The theme of *mutual respect* refers to a shared feeling that each person within a group is held equally valuable. *Blind-spot strategy* refers to how an individual's awareness of his/her blind spots can redirect one's initial response to a response that positively affects interactions. The theme *conscious contemplation* refers to the individual's ability to recognize primary strengths in themselves and others and utilize this knowledge to anticipate future actions. Blind-spot strategy and conscious contemplation utilize all six categories listed in Bloom's Taxonomy while mutual respect utilizes the lower levels of the framework. Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) argue that higher levels of learning require individuals to create or formulate a plan based on an analysis of information. Anticipating future actions illustrates the highest level in Bloom's Taxonomy. The emerging themes for each of the three interview questions are discussed below.

Interview Question One: How did your strengths knowledge help you to prepare for the study abroad?

Two themes, blind-spot strategy and conscious contemplation emerged from the analysis of responses to this question. Before the study abroad trip, students were asked to analyze primary strengths and blind spots and to reflect on how this knowledge would enhance interactions during the trip. Students completed activities to create an understanding of primary strengths and a plan of action on how to navigate blind spots. These exercises prepared students to build strong relationships by being curious about how different approaches broaden opportunities (Murphy et al., 2018).

Blind-Spot Strategy

In the post-trip interview, nine of the eleven students (82%) reported that knowledge of their strengths and blind spots influenced trip preparations. One student stated, "I was able to look at my blind spots before the trip so that I could go where I felt uncomfortable and figure out ways to accommodate people's differences." Eight of the eleven students (73%) indicated that blind spot information helped in strategizing how to avoid issues in communication and interaction with others. Another student indicated, "My blind spots were in the relationship realm and in being adaptable. With this knowledge, I prepared myself to overcome these things rather than meeting the challenge unanticipated." Seven of the eleven students (67%) indicated that awareness of their blind spots before the study abroad, assisted with reflection on relating to others. These findings agree with those of Soria and Stubblefield's (2015) study, that is, students who recognize strengths and blind spots use a common language to construct meaning and understanding of differences. Self-reflection on primary strengths and blind spots created an awareness of student differences and contributed to the appreciation of diversity.

Conscious Contemplation

Seven of the eleven (64%) students indicated that conscious contemplation of their strengths before the trip influenced trip preparation. Students reported utilizing this knowledge to understand their strengths and gain insight into how their strengths affect their ability to build relationships with other students.

One student commented,

I thought about strategies for areas that I might struggle with and how I could use my primary strengths to offset my blind spots. For example, I am high in relator (relationship builder), so I strategized to build relationships with one or two people first.

This finding is supported by Park and Millora (2012) who argued that self-reflection improves self-awareness, and Carmeli et al. (2009), who posited that knowledge of oneself positively affects a relationship.

Interview Question Two: How did the strengths knowledge influence your ability to build relationships?

Two themes, mutual respect, and conscious contemplation emerged from the analysis. Before the trip, students discussed the individual reports generated from the Gallup StrengthsFinder Assessment to explore how differences in the group's primary strengths and blind spots may serve as a shared common language (Soria and Stubblefield, 2015). Group interactions contributed to the emerging relationships by developing mutual trust (Eby and Allen, 2012) through the appreciation of primary strengths and blind spots.

Mutual Respect

Six of the eleven (54%) survey students report the strengths pre-work contributed to identifying the strengths of team members. An in-depth understanding of the primary strengths allowed the team members to embrace the diversity within the group, rather than viewing differences as challenges. One student stated, "Knowing my strengths was a great way to open up communication. It permitted me to have a conversation even with those who you wouldn't gravitate." The strengths knowledge allowed the group to view situations through the lens of the team member, decreasing the amount of conflict within the team. The findings agree with those of Carmeli et al. (2009) who reported that the ability of individuals to accept differences in one another and recognize certain behaviors influence relationships.

Conscious Contemplation

The ability to react to different ideas and behaviors was identified by students, supporting the attribute of connectivity described by Carmeli et al. (2009). Six of the eleven (54%) students reported an increase in the awareness of their strengths and utilized this knowledge to be mindful toward others. Being cognizant of others creates a trusting environment for frequent disclosure, assisting in relationship growth (Dunleavy & Booth-Butterfield, 2009). One student stated, "I paid more attention to how people responded to me and learned how not to take things personally, but rather based on people's different strengths." Another student offered:

Regarding people who were different, knowing others' perspective was helpful. For example, if someone was very high in control and looking at those things as a strength rather than a difference. This knowledge helped to have a positive reaction rather than a negative one. I was able to be mindful of these differences.

Students identified a 22-mile hike as a stressful event. The two-day, physically demanding hike created an environment in which students voiced their frustration with the unknown. After the first day of hiking, most of the students asked the instructor if the second day of hiking could be suspended. However, at the start of the second day, all but two students asked to complete the rigorous hike. The two students who did not complete the hike experienced challenges with pending medical issues. The following student findings relate to the two-day hike. Four of the eleven (36%) students reported that they utilized the strengths knowledge to analyze others' reactions and to change their response in stressful situations. The students' remarks agree with the findings of Carpenter and Green (2015) that relationship development occurs via a series of interactions and information sharing.

One student stated:

I was trying so hard to stay positive since everyone was so miserable. I was miserable. I was trying to trick to myself into being positive. If we wouldn't have known this, we wouldn't have built our relationships as strongly. We would have been more frustrated when things came up like when people went into overdrive, we understood it. Knowing the strengths helped us understand each other.

Discussion and disclosure of the differences in the individual primary strengths empowered the students to have compassion and to identify the needs of a diverse group. Obakpolo (2015) suggests that relationships cannot exist without mutual concessions. Students recognized and discussed which mutual concessions contributed to strengthening relationships.

Interview Question Three: How did you use your strengths knowledge during self-reflection time to change your communication approach to other students?

The themes of blind-spot strategy and conscious contemplation emerged from the analysis of responses to this question. Park and Millora (2012) state that reflection can focus on problem-solving or on self-awareness. The students shared living accommodations and were involved in learning activities approximately ten hours per day. This intentional curricular design created little time for individuals to be alone. The self-reflection activity provided an opportunity for students to focus on positive communication strategies. The strengths knowledge offered a common language (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015) during self-reflection to help strengthen understanding (Zimmerman & Morgan, 2015) and to identify differences resulting in appreciation for group diversity. Students indicated that self-reflection time created an opportunity to contemplate and derive meaning from the events and interactions they participated in during the day.

Blind-Spot Strategy

Lioukas and Reuer (2015) state that social exchange theory consists of actors weighing the cost and benefits of interactions when planning future encounters. Four of the eleven (36%) students stated that they were able to prepare themselves for intense

interactions with those who had different primary strengths. One student responded, "It worked to make the whole experience more pleasant." Another added, "I would reflect on how interactions went, so I could adjust how I interacted to build better relationships." The students' remarks support the findings of Obakpolo (2015), which indicate that the level of giving and taking in an encounter will influence the quality of the relationship.

Understanding primary strengths and blind spots and developing strategies for interactions increased the psychological safety within the group, supporting the findings of Bradley et al. (2012), who state that increased psychological safety positively influences team performance. Students indicated that blind-spot knowledge and reflection on interactions contributed to adjustments in communication, resulting in positive team relationships.

Conscious Contemplation

During the study abroad program, time was dedicated for students to engage in self-reflection. Eight of the eleven (73%) students stated that during dedicated individual self-reflection they identified ways to adapt to others' primary strengths and blind spots. Lew and Schmidt (2011) report that an analysis of an individual's knowledge and experiences creates a deeper level of understanding. One student commented, "I reflected to think about both of our sets of strengths, and then in that comparison, I was able to think of that other person outside of the moments that may have been intense. I could think of this person's differences as a positive." Seven of the eleven (63%) students indicated that time dedicated to self-reflection provided the opportunity to understand others' behavior. One student stated, "I could ask myself how I am doing and do an assessment to see if I am feeling connected and supported." This supports O'Rourke's (1988) research that articulation of connections between new information, prior learning, or existing experiences contribute to more in-depth knowledge.

Conclusions, Implications, and Future Directions

In conclusion, the results of this phenomenological study of the impact of strengths-based education on nursing and leadership students demonstrate that a strengths-based approach can be a potentially powerful one for supporting student development on a short-term study abroad program. The strengths-based curriculum advanced the self-reported leadership competency levels of relationship-building and self-reflection. Leaders who possess relationship-building and self-reflection skills may assist in creating a collaborative work environment and influence positive employee job satisfaction.

The Gallup StrengthsFinder Assessment provided a common language, encouraging the students to value differences. Students participated in some activities in which misinterpretation of individual actions and words could have led to conflict. Learning about student primary strengths and blind spots before the study abroad trip prepared students to respond positively to others whose primary strengths were in their blind spots. A positive response during dialogue is especially important when challenges arise. Throughout the program, self-reflection led to valuing differences, which led to thoughtful and respectful discussions. Self-reflection contributed to deeper self-awareness of how an individual's primary strengths and blind spots led to mutual concessions. Ongoing mutual concessions enhanced relationships. The strengths-based curriculum aided in acknowledging and valuing differences in one another, which positively affected relationships (Carmeli et al., 2009).

Graduate study abroad programs offer a unique setting for adult students to experience leadership development through active experiences and self-reflective practices. Practitioners would benefit from using a strengths-based curriculum to develop a common language leading to an appreciation of differences. Bloom's Taxonomy offers a research-based method to advance the skills from basic awareness towards the expert spectrum.

This qualitative study explored how a strengths-based curriculum advanced the leadership competency levels of self-reflection and relationship-building. Additional research is needed to quantify the growth in the competency levels of relationship-building and self-reflection skills during the trip, and after the program. Further research could also explore whether a student's dominant domain has any impact on the amount of growth students experience.

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