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Study Abroad: Enhanced Learning Experience in Cultural Diversity

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Abstract

This paper examines how a study abroad experiential learning course in diversity provided a cultural immersion experience for a group of social work students from a small private university in central Kentucky. The students participated in a three-week international education experience in Kenya and reported this experience helped them become more sensitive to cultural diversity and to better understand their cultural heritage and its influence on their worldview.

Introduction

The social demographics of many United States communities are changing, making cultural competencies essential for social workers. Social work educators, therefore, have the responsibility of providing social work students with the knowledge necessary for developing an appreciation for cultural diversity and successfully managing interpersonal relationships with people from differing cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

This paper reflects on a course that offered an opportunity to undergraduate social work students from a small private university in central Kentucky to participate in a three week long cultural immersion experience through a study abroad program to Kenya. The course was designed to help students to experience what it would be like to be a member of a minority group and also to develop greater cultural self-awareness and cross-cultural sensitivity. Cross-culturally sensitive social work practitioners strive to understand the cultural values of their client's systems and incorporate them in providing services in a way that is culturally acceptable to clients (Fong & Furuto, 2001).

Cultural Immersion

Studies have shown that many students feel unprepared to work with clients from differing cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002). And, while many students have taken cultural diversity classes, few have experienced a cross-cultural immersion experience (Lum 2004). This is perhaps due to the fact that many cultural diversity courses in social work programs do not require a cultural immersion component as part of the course (Cordero & Rodriguez, 2009).

Cultural immersion components in diversity courses provide an avenue for students to engage in cross-cultural learning process in which they examine, question and expand their cultural assumptions, and develop an appreciation for the differences and similarities in various cultures (Alvarez, 2001). An immersion experience thus has the potential of helping students learn about different cultures, in addition to understanding their own cultural heritage and its influence on their worldview.

Experiential study abroad programs are one approach to cross-cultural immersion experiences that social work educators may provide for their students as a means of developing skills for competent cross-cultural social work practice.

Experiential Learning

Developing cross-cultural competency cannot be achieved through theoretical didacticism by itself (Parham, 2001). A practical component is essential. There is significant empirical evidence indicating that students learn more efficiently by engaging in hands-on activities (Hammer, 2000). Without hands-on experience, many students find it difficult to achieve a real understanding of theoretical concepts. Confucius once said, "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand". This saying by Confucius is the gist of experiential learning. The main emphasis of the experiential learning process is the learner's actions. By definition, experiential learning is a method of acquiring knowledge through engaging in hands-on activities (Kolb, 1984).

According to experiential learning theory, effective learning must involve actions or active participation (Kolb, 1984; Ndoye, 2003). However, action or active participation alone does not necessarily lead to learning. For learning to take place, action or active participation must be followed by a critical reflection phase and an application phase (Enfield, 2001). The reflection and application phases lead to further action, reflection, and application, in a cyclical manner (Hegan, 2004). This process of experiential learning involves the facts of new experiences being integrated into prior experiences and then transformed into relevant new knowledge through a process of inquiry, action, and reflection.

According to Goldstein (2001), experiential learning is vital in linking theory and practice in social work education. Experiential learning has the potential to help students make a connection with various social work course contents through learning activities that cannot be conducted in the classroom, but that are important in enhancing their overall learning experience. Further, experiential learning has the potential to increase students' self-confidence and a deeper awareness of their strengths and weaknesses (Cordero & Rodriguez, 2009).

Setting of the Study Abroad Experience

Kenya is located on the east coast of Africa, bordering Ethiopia to the north, Sudan to the northwest, Uganda to the west, Tanzania to the south, the Indian Ocean to the southeast, and Somalia to the east. The country is made up of more than 40 different ethnic groups or tribes. Swahili is the national language and English is the official language.

While in Kenya, the students were based in the city of Kisumu for eight days and in the city of Nairobi for 12 days. Kisumu city is situated in western Kenya and lies near the shores of Lake Victoria – the largest fresh water lake in Africa. Although Kisumu is a cosmopolitan city, the majority of its residents are members of the Luo ethnic group.

Nairobi is the capital city of Kenya. It is Kenya's principal political, economic, judicial, administrative, and cultural center and is one of the largest and fastest growing cities in Africa. Population is approximately three million inhabitants. Like most large cities in Africa, Nairobi's population is very diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion, and social class. All the ethnic groups of Kenya are represented in the city.

Study Abroad Experience

Prior to the trip to Kenya, students participated in five four-hour class sessions with the course instructor. Students were required to complete assigned readings and assignments on basic Swahili, Kenya Geography, and intercultural communication prior to the class sessions. The class sessions included seminars and video clips on various traditions and practices of the Kenyan people. A final debriefing class session was held on campus upon return to the United States.

During the trip, students were required to participate in all learning activities, keep a daily self-reflection journal, and attend debriefing sessions each evening with the course instructor. Debriefings sessions about experiential learning activities and the discipline of keeping reflection journals have been shown to be effective methods of gaining self awareness and increasing understanding of individuals who are culturally different (Nagda, Gurin, & Lopez, 2003).

On the second day in Kenya, the students attended a four hour orientation session with the course instructor. The students officially began their learning activities on the third day. Over the next two and a half weeks,

the students were immersed in the local culture and had the opportunity to interact with the local people and share in their experiences. The students had the opportunity to visit three local villages, a local rural primary school, six children's homes, and a local private university. During their visits, the students engaged in observations, interviews with children and staff, and community service. At various places, the students spent time with local families and were treated to local cuisines and local music.

Self-reflections

Each student was required to keep a daily self-reflection journal. Through self-reflections, students attempted to make sense of the world around them. Self-reflection has the potential to help students develop a capacity to understand their feelings, beliefs, behaviors, and biases (Carey, 2007). In a situation of cultural immersion, self-awareness through self-reflection is intended to help students develop an appreciation for the differences and similarities in the experiences, needs, and beliefs of various people. The self-reflection process is vital to understanding different cultures and social realities (Genor & Schutle, 2002; Komins & Nicholls, 2003).

Findings

Each student's self-reflection journal was read and coded by the course instructor. Five major themes emerged from the reflections. Descriptions of each theme with illustrative excerpts from students' journals are presented below:

Stereotypes Challenged

Despite having participated in pre-departure orientation sessions, the students arrived in Kenya with certain preconceived ideas and stereotypes about Kenya and its people. Some of these stereotypes were quickly challenged upon arrival in the country.

Excerpt 1: I had the opportunity of getting to visit Kenya and have the most amazing and eye opening experience of my life. Upon arrival, I was initially shocked at the modern airport and busy city of Nairobi. We didn't sleep in a hut or have dirt floors, have to hunt our own food, and there weren't lions and elephants walking up and down the highway.

Excerpt 2: To my surprise we didn't see naked children walking around the city with pitiful faces that haven't eaten in weeks... Television can be so misleading at times. Not to say that there aren't starving children and that most people don't butcher their own food, but the whole of Kenya is not the desperate country that many people view it from the documentaries on television.

Excerpt 3: Oh my, I did not expect many people here to be fluent in English. I knew that English was taught in schools but I had no idea that it was spoken by many people here.

Excerpt 4: Everyone here seems to have a cell phone, even in the poor villages, and the lines are very clear. I was surprised to be able to stay connected with my family back in America by phone and by email.

Different View of Poverty

Although poverty is a universal phenomenon, the students described having observed devastating poverty firsthand. From their excerpts, it is evident that they came face to face with the realities of poverty. This is not to imply that there is no poverty in the United States. The reality however is that the level of poverty in the United States for the most part pales in comparison.

Excerpt 5: Poverty looks so much different up close and is something I could have never truly understood without observing it firsthand. I was able to see it and it truly opened my eyes.

Excerpt 6: Today we visited Markuny Primary School. Here children go to school from

preschool to 8th grade. This school is in a very poor village so many of the children didn't even have shoes. There are no doors or windows, and charts for the teachers were painted on rice sacks and the building is made of mud.

Excerpt 7: Today we went to the slums. There was garbage everywhere, and children playing in this garbage. There was an overwhelming stench throughout the entire area. It is impossible to imagine living in the small tin huts and the conditions that these people make it through every day. It is heart breaking to think that the people that live here actually work and have jobs and try to do better for themselves but because of the economic conditions, they are unable to get ahead.

Excerpt 8: Yesterday, Oh My yesterday! We went into the slums. You won't believe the pictures; anything that you can imagine won't even come close. I will never forget the smells of sewage, and burning garbage. It was a truly humbling experience. I don't even know what else to say because words cannot express.

Need for Government Assistance

The students seem to hold the view that governments have the responsibility of providing certain economic and social services to their citizens. Their assumptions were that government social programs that are readily available in the United States ought to be universal programs.

Excerpt 9: In America, citizens are given the option of applying for food stamps, government housing, and free medical care. This is not to say that there are not flaws in the system and that people do not still suffer; evidence proves otherwise. However, the staggering difference between America and Kenya is that most people are left to fend for themselves in Kenya. Many people in Kenya are able to provide food for their families by growing it themselves, but what happens to those who do not have the necessary space to grow their own crops and cannot afford to buy enough to feed their families?

Excerpt 10: While in America we are given a free education, free books, and in some cases free lunches up through the 12th grade, Kenyan children are required to start paying for their materials in Kindergarten. After the 8th grade they are also required to pay tuition.

Excerpt 11: There is a big difference in how the American government and how the Kenyan government works and how they each help their citizens, as well as how citizens help each other in times of need. The Kenyan government does not have enough money allotted to provide welfare for their people who are in need of financial assistance. While the American government doesn't necessarily have enough money to provide welfare for our citizens, they still find a way to make sure that the people are taken care of. The Kenyan government, unlike America, does not have government subsidized housing provided for people, they do not hold themselves solely responsible for orphaned children, and they do not provide food stamps for people to purchase food from the grocery store.

Excerpt 12: Among the poor are unfortunately hundreds of thousands of orphans. What happens to them? Do they automatically become the responsibility of the government as children in America do? Sadly, they are not the responsibility of the government. There are various Children's homes throughout Kenya and these homes are not government supported. They gain all of their financial assistance from personal donors, and if they are lucky - though international funding.

Gratefulness of the Kenyan People

The students described the appreciation that a number of Kenyans have for opportunities that others may take for granted elsewhere. They were particularly amazed by the gratefulness that school children displayed even in the midst of difficult learning situations.

Excerpt 13: I have never met people that are so service oriented and so grateful for what they have. It was such a joy to see kids that are so appreciative to be able to learn in conditions that much of the world doesn't even know exist.

Excerpt 14: Many Kenyans are excited to be in school and to have an opportunity to learn. They appreciate the value of an education and understand that education is the key to their future. I think that many Americans underestimate the value of an education and have become complacent in their desire to pursue higher education. In my current position, I'm amazed at how many clients haven't even finished high school. When asked whether or not they would be interested in pursuing a GED, many find excuses not to. I don't think you'd have to ask a Kenyan child twice if they'd like to go to college. They'd know it's the opportunity of a lifetime!

Excerpt 15: It is sad to think that many children and teenagers in American take their education for granted. They do not even want to be in school, much less do well. While many American teenagers sleep their way through high school, Kenyan teenagers that are lucky enough to have the opportunity to go to secondary school are grateful for their education.

Kindness of the People

In general, the students experienced the Kenyan people as being welcoming and kind. The Kenyan people seem to have been eager to welcome the students into their homes.

Excerpt 16: We have been in Kisumu for almost two days now and I LOVE it!! It is beautiful!. More importantly the people are beautiful on the outside and the inside. Everyone is very welcoming and the people are so polite.

Excerpt 17: People are here so kind! There was a lady who was supposed to be cooking the eggs and kept apologizing when she came out and I was cooking my own.

Excerpt 18: I feel at home here. Everyone is so kind. People seem to go out of their way to make you feel at home. People are eager to invite us to share a meal with them. Today, we ate lunch twice – at two different homes.

Excerpt 19: The children and the teachers at the school were very kind to us. They provided us with drinks even though they are very poor. They also did not mind that we were late for our appointment with them. They waited patiently and were just thankful that we showed up.

Discussion

Although a study abroad experience may create in students an element of discomfort and fear, students reported the experience gave them a sense of humility, self-confidence, self-awareness, and a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity. Students also reported the experience challenged them to be more involved in community service within their respective communities.

One student said her experience at the primary school, which gave her the capacity to empathize more with students in poor rural and inner city schools in the United States. Another student noted she developed a deeper appreciation of the differences and similarities in the experiences, needs, and beliefs of various people. These are examples of transformative experiential learning that would be difficult to teach in a classroom setting.

One other student shared that her long held belief that all Maasai people of East Africa were illiterate and non-progressive was quickly shattered when she met a professional Maasai man in Kenya who was a university graduate. She stated she held the stereotype after reading the false claim in a book written by a European author. This is a reminder that to be informed citizens of the world, we need to develop intercultural sensitivity and also be wise consumers of information.

Conclusion

With the changing social demographics in the United States, it is almost impossible for social workers not to encounter clients, who are members of culturally different groups. It is thus crucial for social work practitioners to understand the worldviews of clients who are culturally different and to develop an appreciation of cultural diversity. In this paper, the author presented a hands-on study abroad program as one model of experiential learning that social work educators may provide for their students as a means of developing an appreciation for cultural diversity. A well-organized study abroad program that combines academic learning with meaningful field activities and reflections has the potential to help students begin the process of developing cultural competencies.

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