Development and Implementation of an International Academic Service Learning Course for Low-income Children in Cambodia

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International service-learning experiences provide many opportunities for nursing students. Using a varied approach to students’ self-reported learning in Cambodia, students reported gaining first-hand knowledge and experience about global nursing and health care, including its rewards and challenges. The key components of a service-learning program, as defined by the International Service Learning Task Force (Sigma Theta Tau International), include reciprocal relationships between academic and community partners encompassing a range of activities and outcomes including social responsibility and cultural competence. (Leffers & Plotnick, 2010). The outcomes of the students’ international-service learning experiences are consistent with those reported in the literature. Creating global citizenship is necessary in the education of professional nurses with implications for nursing education.

Keywords
international service-learning, global citizenship, undergraduate nursing students, development of study abroad courses

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International service-learning experiences provide many opportunities for nursing students. Using a varied approach to students’ self-reported learning in Cambodia, students reported gaining first-hand knowledge and experience about global nursing and health care, including its rewards and challenges. The key components of a service-learning program, as defined by the International Service Learning Task Force (Sigma Theta Tau International), include reciprocal relationships between academic and community partners encompassing a range of activities and outcomes including social responsibility and cultural competence. (Leffers & Plotnick, 2010). The outcomes of the students’ international-service learning experiences are consistent with those reported in the literature. Creating global citizenship is necessary in the education of professional nurses with implications for nursing education.

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Background - Setting up Global Experiences

Since 1997, international nursing service-learning courses have been offered as nursing electives at the University of Michigan-Flint. Benefits include opportunities to gain cultural awareness skills and competence, expand communication and critical thinking skills, grow personally and professionally, engage in global social issues, and allow students to contribute to a global society.

Building international partnerships is often a daunting time and resource intensive process. The need for long term commitment, creativity and persistence provide the foundation for successful international partnerships to support each partner’s goals, as well as shared goals. The importance of people at all levels, top leadership, planners, and implementers are paramount to success. Formalization of the partnerships legitimizes the efforts and enhances the likelihood that the partnership will be successful.

A partnership between the University of Michigan-Flint and the Angkor Hospital for Children (AHC) was formed in 2007. Success of the partnership has been the result of a multifaceted approach of services provided by faculty such as continuing education programs for nurses in topics such as central lines, pain assessment and management in children, and clinical ladders. A nurse exchange program was formed to bring Cambodian nurses to the United States. Partnership reciprocity has included global learning experiences for nursing students to include home care visits to children with AIDS/HIV in rural villages, visiting successful water filter programs including the opportunity to build water filters and talk to the people utilizing the program, and inpatient/outpatient hospital clinical experiences.

Selecting Students

The choice of students is important to the success of the international academic service-learning course as well as the partnership overall. The ability to build trusting and working relationships, valuing diverse perspectives, seeing and appreciating similarities as well as differences promote cultural engagement. Faculty selection of the right mix of pre-licensure baccalaureate nursing students in knowledge, clinical skills, maturity, and cultural readiness is imperative for course success. The process includes a completed reference from one clinical faculty and interview with the faculty teaching the course, and a written application process addressing the following items:

1. An international academic service-learning course can be more physically, emotionally and academically demanding than volunteering or study abroad programs. Please describe your reaction to this statement.
2. What skills do you hope to gain during your course to Cambodia?
3. What skills/experience do you hope to share during the course?
4. What led you to apply for the international academic service-learning course?
5. Traveling to and living in another country can be overwhelming for some individuals and exciting for others. Describe the qualities you have that will allow you to adjust to this new environment.

6. You will be working in a group environment and teamwork is crucial. Describe the qualities you have that will help you adapt to this type of program.

**Preparing Students to Travel/Live Abroad**

Preparing students for a new culture and travel is paramount for a successful program. Goals for course preparation include minimizing culture shock, cultural immersion, preparing for the voluntary service activities, and team building. Beginning preparations include information sessions during which faculty presents an overview of previous international academic service learning courses utilizing multimedia and testimony by alumni of international academic service learning courses, giving opportunity for “students talk to students.” Course objectives, type of service, living conditions to be provided, travel, culture, and responsibilities are discussed.

Preparation steps include creation of personal goals and team goals and the opportunity for students to recognize similarities as well as differences in creating a successful team. The “spirit of service” begins via classroom seminars in preparation for connecting to the global world.

Each student is responsible for presenting a seminar on a topic such as exploration of the culture, delivery of health care, politics, history, language and the economic system of the country. In addition, students take responsibility in obtaining donations, including supplies, and packing bags with medical equipment, supplies, and teaching materials for use in Cambodia.

Engaging in culturally appropriate teaching/learning strategies when interacting with the Cambodian people is an important objective in the international academic service-learning course. The student has the opportunity to develop and teach an identified education need to the diverse population of the people of Cambodia. The needs have been identified by the partnering agency, nurses from the children’s hospital and they assist in the implementation of reaching the population in greatest need. Students work in groups of two to prepare a program in an area of health or education need identified and donate the program to the community served.

Topics identified for the teaching/learning projects include:

1. Emergency first aid
2. Hand washing/hygiene
3. Head lice education
4. Feminine health needs
5. Dental health

**Evaluation**

A multifaceted approach is utilized to reflect the achievement of course objectives and learning from a variety of assessments.

- **Group Journal - Through My Eyes**—Reflective journaling. Students make thoughtful connections to the course objectives. At the end of the course, all individual journal entries are combined and incorporated with trip photos to create a group reflection/photo journal of the trip.

- **Daily Meetings**—Students meet with faculty at the end of each day to evaluate learning experiences, discussion, and communication.

- **Photo Journaling - Media Reflections Through my Camera**—Students record a 3-5 minute YouTube recording that includes, but is not limited to, learning, people, culture, and places to reflect the Cambodia experience.

- **Post-Travel Seminar**—Students meet two weeks after return from travel to integrate and synthesize learning, cultural adjustment
with their re-entry home, and discuss learner attainment of objectives and outcomes of course.

- **Final Self-Analysis Paper**—Students analyze attainment of course objectives in a thoughtful, reflective academic paper.
- **Pre/Post-survey**—anticipated/achievements

The author surveyed 26 pre-licensure baccalaureate nursing students one week before and two weeks after returning from a 16-day credit bearing undergraduate course titled “International Academic Service Learning in Cambodia” offered during the spring/summer semester. Students spent 3 weeks preparing for the trip, 16 days in Cambodia, and, two weeks after returning to the U.S., debriefed and reflected on their experiences. In addition, the faculty conducted periodic individual and small group debriefing sessions while in Cambodia.

The author administered the pre-survey of anticipated learning and post-survey of frequency of learning, as seen in figure 2 and, using a five point Likert-style instrument. The results reveal that, for each survey item, the mean score was between 4.92 and 5.0. The results demonstrate that students gained a deeper understanding of previously learned nursing concepts and had the opportunities to apply skills from previously completed nursing courses in their curriculum while in Cambodia.

The author also administered the pre-survey of anticipated learning and post-survey of frequency of learning (figure 2). The results reveal that, for each survey item, the mean score was between 4.92 and 5.0. The results demonstrate that students gained a deeper understanding of previously learned nursing concepts and had the opportunities to apply skills from previously completed nursing courses in their curriculum while in Cambodia.

**Results of Students’ Self-Reported Learning Experiences in Cambodia**

Students report that they gained a greater understanding of the complexity of the Cambodian culture and the people they served as well as experiencing both professional and personal growth. While working as a member of a team with Cambodian nurses and students, the U.S. nursing students enhanced their cross-cultural communication and team building skills as they were challenged to relate with fellow U.S. nursing students and Cambodian nurses. The U.S. nursing students learned similarities and differences in the role of nurses and the scope of nursing practice in Cambodia compared to the United States. The nursing students learned how to work effectively and efficiently with others and applied many previously learned nursing skills to the care of Cambodian children and their families. The students increased their cultural awareness, sensitivity, competence, and appreciation for the beliefs and practices of the Cambodian people. Lastly, the nursing students reported that they gained first-hand knowledge and experience about global nursing and health care, including its rewards and challenges.

The following are selected quotes from the participating students’ reflections on their experience in Cambodia upon return to the U.S.

A senior level student with her first experience out of her home town reflects: I knew that when I signed up for this trip that I would return to the United States a different person and that I did. Initially I looked for differences. To my surprise the more I searched the more that I learned that we have more things in common than we have differences. Being a person of the lower or middle class I have lived below the poverty line for the majority of my life. I understand their economic struggle. Here in America we cope differently and have more resources available. The people in Cambodia may be poor financially but they are rich in spirit. They continue to laugh, have fun, love, and interact in spite of their hardships.

As a first out of the country opportunity, a junior student noted: There is no true way I could put into words everything that I learned on this trip. It is something I would do again in a heart-beat. I feel like I am not only a better person in going, but I will be a better nurse as well. In Cambodia we were able to utilize the nursing skills and classroom knowledge we have acquired throughout our experiences as students at the University of Michigan–Flint. To set up a clinic with extremely limited means and supplies...
Figure 2. Pre- and Post-International Academic Service Learning Survey Completed by Students Traveling to Cambodia

Impact of an International Academic Service Learning Course on the Education of BSN Students

Semester/year of travel _______ Cohort _______ Sex- Male/Female Ethnicity _________

What led you to apply for the International Service Learning course?

Anticipated Learning: Please indicate how important each item is in your learning in the International Academic Service Learning course. Circle one of the following choices for each item.

Very important = 5 Most important = 4 Somewhat important = 3 Not important = 2 Uncertain = 1

Deeper understanding of concepts I have already learned about in nursing classes 1 2 3 4 5
Applying skills I have already learned in nursing classes to real life problems 1 2 3 4 5
Understanding how complex the problems are with the people I will be servicing 1 2 3 4 5
Understanding myself better/personal growth 1 2 3 4 5
How to effectively work with others 1 2 3 4 5
Developing clinical skills 1 2 3 4 5
Appreciating different cultures 1 2 3 4 5
Increasing my comfort level in working with different cultures 1 2 3 4 5
Seeing world health problems in a real life situation 1 2 3 4 5

What apprehensions do you have?

How do you anticipate this course will affect your clinical practice as a registered nurse?

Post-International Academic Service Learning Survey to Cambodia

Impact of an International Academic Service Learning Course on the Education of BSN Students

Describe Your Learning: For each item, circle the number that best describes the frequency of learning opportunities during your International Academic Service Learning course related to the following.

Very often = 5 Often = 4 Sometimes = 3 Seldom = 2 Never = 1

A deeper understanding of concepts I have already learned about in nursing classes 1 2 3 4 5
Applying skills I have already learned in nursing classes to real life problems 1 2 3 4 5
An understanding of how complex the problems were with the people I serviced 1 2 3 4 5
An understanding of myself better/personal growth 1 2 3 4 5
How to effectively work with others 1 2 3 4 5
Developed clinical skills 1 2 3 4 5
An appreciation of different cultures 1 2 3 4 5
Increased my comfort level in working with different cultures 1 2 3 4 5
To see world health problems in real life situations 1 2 3 4 5

Discuss the apprehensions you had prior to this course. Did you overcome them? If so, how?

How do you anticipate this course will affect your clinical practice as a registered nurse?

How did this course affect your personal growth?
in orphanages and in the jungle took creativity and working as a team.

A graduating senior indicated that: I gained knowledge with developed strategies for effective communication techniques recognizing diversity. I learned some important words of Khmer to use while giving care to the Cambodian people. I learned words such as “good health” to comfort those who were worried about how they were doing. I taught expectant mothers the importance of taking prenatal vitamins. I also taught a mother the proper way to hold a baby by supporting its neck. My trip to Cambodia gave me an awareness of the health, social and economic issues. I learned about the extreme levels of poverty and about the life of villagers. I learned about the superstitious beliefs such as lead bracelets and seeing Shamans for health problems.

A statement by a senior student reflects: A prominent Muslim scholar once said to spend an hour a day in contemplation is better than standing in prayer all night. Each and every day I understood this quote more and more, and it made me realize that I do not count my blessings enough. Poverty and hunger seem like something so distant in my day to day life, and experiencing it then and there was something that no human being can ever forget. Yet with all the stresses in their lives, once again I witnessed how happy people are without the complexity of money and worldly goods. Being a part of a team that was working diligently to alleviate the pain of these children and families, and being able to put a smile on their faces was enough motivation to keep me working persistently.

I have learned more from this experience than what I ever could have possibly expected. My interactions within my group alone allowed me to grow as a person and see things in a new light. Witnessing the health care system—or lack of one—and the extent of poverty that exists made me more conscious of how blessed we are with the system that exists in our country.

**Conclusion**

Figure 3. Nursing students providing care to a recent birth of infant in born in a jungle clinic
Creation of social consciousness and global citizenship is necessary in the education of professional nurses. Connecting cultural differences by going to the “other land” confronts diversity, enhances diversity and cultural skills, and exposes students to different realities. In response to our changing world, it is imperative that nursing students are prepared to provide culturally sensitive care to a diverse patient population in a variety of settings. The outcomes of UM-Flint students’ international service-learning experiences have been consistent with those reported in the literature including personal and professional development, increased global understanding, cultural sensitivity and competence, enhanced critical thinking, integration of theory and practice, enhanced communication skills, values clarification, and enhanced civic engagement. The findings include an additional outcome of a connection between the heart, the hand, and the soul via international academic service learning courses.
References

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Maureen Tippen is a Clinical Assistant Professor at University of Michigan-Flint Department of Nursing. She has more than 38 years of experience in clinical practice and teaching. She teaches Parent-Child Nursing theory and clinical, and has traveled with students for academic service learning courses in the Dominican Republic, Peru, Cambodia, Kenya, and India. She maintains a clinical practice working with high risk youths in a detention setting.