



International Service Learning : A Model Program and What Students are Learning

Lynn Gitlow, Ph.D., OTR/L, FAOTA

Elaine Keane, OTD, OTR

Carole Dennis, ScD, OT/L, FAOTA



Objectives of this presentation:

1. Identify resources to support the development of quality international service learning experiences from the practitioner and university perspectives.
2. Identify strategies to enhance clinical reasoning and cultural immersion during the international service learning experiences.
3. Discuss student learning based on reflective journals analyzed from an international service learning experience.

What is international service learning?

International service learning is a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students are supported to . . .

1. participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs in a location outside the U. S. a
2. reflect on the service activity to gain a deeper . . .
 - a. understanding of course content;
 - b. appreciation of host community & cross-cultural issues;
 - c. sense of their own global relationships & responsibilities (Brown,2007) .



Why is international service learning important?

AOTA's Centennial Vision conceptualizes international networks of occupational therapy professionals that strive to meet society's occupational needs (AOTA, 2007).

It is predicted that the population of the U.S. is going to be more racially and ethnically diverse as we move towards 2060 (US Census Bureau 2012).

Evidence that Service Learning is Valuable

Wolfe et. al (2015): Students who participated in international service learning fieldworks demonstrated increased cultural competence as compared to those who participated in domestic fieldworks.

Humbert et. al. (2012): Students who engaged in cross- cultural learning and service experiences gained cultural awareness, & developed important connections with faculty, other students, and international community members

HINT-31300: Healthcare and Culture: An International Field Experience

Course Competencies: The student will be able to:

- o Examine personal cultural orientation and its potential influence on delivery and use of healthcare services;
- o Identify why the study of sociocultural issues is important in health education;
- o Discuss the impact of sociocultural factors on healthcare practices & service delivery in the U.S. & in Ecuador;
- o Describe the impact of history, politics, culture, religion, and economics on Ecuador's health care and rehabilitation.

Course Participants

Thirteen first and second year OT (7) , PT (2), exercise science (2) and culture and communication (2) students participated in the course. None of these students had taken discipline specific intervention courses.

CRECER partnership

Centro de Rehabilitacion, Educacion, Capacitacion, Estudios, y Recursos (CRECER) is a volunteer organization with the mission to promote increased access to health care services in underserved regions through education, treatment and research. The word "CRECER" means "to grow" in Spanish.



CRECER's clinic tree, where volunteers' hands as the leaves



Elaine Keane, Executive Director
Susana Albuja, Project Manager

During this service learning trip, students worked in those settings where CRECER treats clients, including an outpatient center, orphanage, adult daycare facility, and nursing home. Students planned daily activities, which they carried out with supervision from instructors. Students participated in cultural experiences during evenings and on weekends.

References

Brown, N. (2007). *Introduction to International Service-Learning: Engaging Students with the World*. Presented at American Democracy Project National Meeting Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Humbert, T., Burket, A., Deveney, R., & Kennedy, K. (2012). Occupational therapy students' perspectives regarding international cross-cultural experiences. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal* 59:3, pp 225-234.

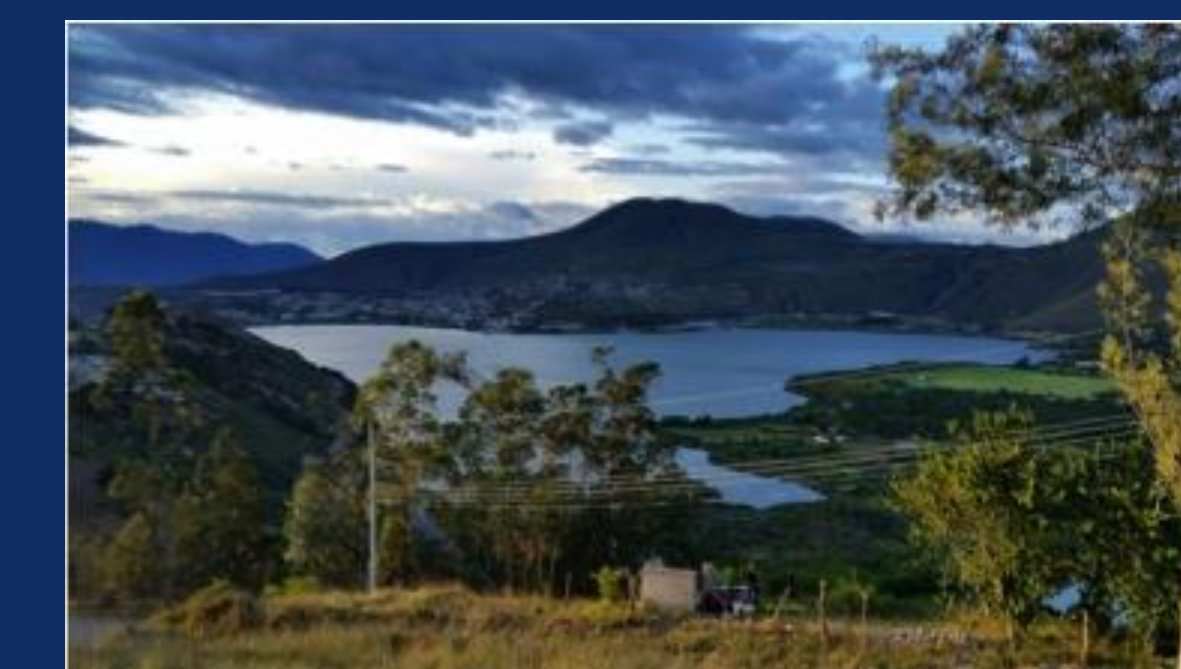
Wolfe, C., Oberle, L., Myers, M., Haskell, A., & Blakeley, A. (2015). Program evaluation regarding domestic versus international service learning experience. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy* 69(Supplement_1): 6911510146 p.1.

Student learning themes from reflective journals and daily debriefings

Themes prevalent in students' reflective journals, with student quotes:

Appreciating the beauty of Ecuador

- "It might just be the most beautiful city/country I have ever been to"



Being anxious, fearful in this unknown place

- "Feeling like people are watching us & knowing I stand out"

Making friendships

- ". . . friendships that that will tie us for life"
- "Being in a large group definitely helped overcome being nervous and fearful"



Money, purchasing differences

- "having big bills \$50; bill could not be broken"
- "Bargaining a unique experience"



Cultural Observations

- " While physical contact may have been foreign, it helped establish relationships with clients."
- ". . . importance of family working as a unit in this culture: There is a focus on family as opposed to the individual."

Flexibility and creative problem solving

- "Being resourceful using materials at hand; . . . creative"
- "I will be more appreciative of cardboard and other materials that to me, seem like trash but I know they could be used for so much more."



Clinical experiences

- ". . . it just felt like we were playing . . . what I learned from this was that everything we did with him was a step in the right direction to correcting his disabilities in order to improve his life in the future."
- "It made me think . . . about how to be strategic in picking out activities for fun & learning."



Communication frustrating for students and clients

- "From this experience, I have an even stronger realization of how important communication is."
- "Using other ways to communicate, including gestures, iphones, eye gaze . . . facial expressions, picture books helped bridge gaps"
- "I went out of my comfort zone struggling with communication"

Discomfort with informality of clinical settings

- "Informality of the clinic is something that really struck me . . . At home, being late or not showing up to a scheduled appointment is a huge deal, but here everything is much more relaxed."
- "I think patients need to have better records of initial evaluations and treatment plans and goals. "

Volunteer work is critical to client engagement

- "It makes me sad . . . that the clients are only engaged in activities when volunteers are there but it also made me realize how important & helpful we actually were."
- "Lack of staff interaction with clients concerned me"

Discussion & Conclusions

Overall, review of journals and daily debriefing meetings revealed that students placed a high value on the friendships they developed and the support the group provided. They also reported learning how to be flexible and communicate despite language barriers. Their journals reflected a focus on planning, implementing, and critiquing clinical experiences as opposed to reflecting on sociocultural course outcomes. We conclude that structuring learning activities and content related to sociocultural outcomes may be needed to achieve these course objectives.