



## Using Guided Reflection to Link Cultural and Service Learning in a Study Abroad Course



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### ABSTRACT

The literature indicates that service learning integrated into a study abroad course results in cultural learning, personal growth, and professional development. However, there are inadequate examples of strategies to achieve cultural learning in the context of study abroad. The purpose of this article is to briefly describe the authors' collaboration with leaders of an international health system in developing a faculty-led study abroad course and describe strategies to promote guided reflection to achieve cultural learning. The preparation phase of the course was delivered with two video conferences and an online learning management system for students on three campuses. Service learning with clinic nursing staff of the international health system and children in a residential home was purposefully incorporated in the study abroad phase of the course. During the first week of study abroad, specific prompts for daily journaling were introduced to the students to promote guided reflection as a critical component of service learning. During the second week, students discussed concepts that had been introduced during the preparation phase. The students wrote a final summary reflection paper with the guidance of additional prompts and an evaluation rubric. In summary, preparation phase learning activities, study abroad phase daily journaling and group discussion combined with a summary reflection paper were used as strategies to achieve cultural learning.

### Introduction

Faculty who lead study abroad courses have a broad goal of promoting cultural learning through student experiences in foreign countries. Cultural learning is promoted by interaction with people, visits to historical sites and cultural events, as well as, participation in service learning. In isolation, the experiences may not achieve a lasting impact unless students use reflection to achieve deep learning. However, faculty face challenges in finding specific strategies to guide student reflection in the context of study abroad.

#### Purpose

In this article we will:

- Describe the partnership of our College of Nursing with an international health system that has clinics in underserved areas of the world.
- Present an overview of development and implementation of the course, including a preparation phase and a study abroad phase.
- Describe implementation of strategies to promote guided reflection

based on recommendations by Schmidt and Brown (2016) and provide examples of student reflections.

### Background

#### Study abroad and service learning

Service learning in the context of study abroad has gained popularity among students and faculty due to multiple perceived benefits. Nursing students at a university with extensive opportunities for study abroad completed a survey concerning their perceptions of the benefits and barriers of study abroad (Kent-Wilkinson, Leurer, Luimes, Ferguson, & Murray, 2015). The students reported the top benefits were experiences of cultural learning and international nursing. Cost and family responsibilities were the most frequently reported barriers.

In addition to student perceptions of the benefits of study abroad, empirical evidence supports effectiveness in promoting cultural learning. A systematic review with content analysis of seven studies determined the following outcomes of study abroad for nursing students: (a) increased cultural knowledge, (b) personal growth, and (c) impact on individual nursing practice (Kokko, 2011). An integrative

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review of 13 studies of study abroad for nursing and health professions indicated that the two major benefits are personal development and professional development (Kelleher, 2013). Personal development included cultural sensitivity and cultural competence, as well as confidence and cognitive development. Professional development included skills in collaboration and advocacy. In summary, study abroad service learning has been shown to have positive outcomes, specifically, cultural learning.

#### *Guided reflection to achieve cultural learning*

Despite the evidence of positive outcomes, limited evidence exists concerning the effectiveness of specific strategies to achieve cultural learning. The conclusion of Kelleher's review (2013) cautioned that only three out of thirteen studies included a framework or structure as a strategy to promote reflective practice. Amerson (2014) reviewed the literature and made evidence-based recommendations related to strategies to promote self-evaluation and reflection. Amerson recommended journaling or alternatives such as photography or video-recording, but cautioned that students need guidance in any form of reflection.

Recently published evaluations of study abroad programs provided limited description of strategies used to guide student reflection. In several study abroad programs, students were encouraged to journal daily (Conroy & Taggart, 2016; Craig, Zou, & Poimbeauf, 2015; Crowe, Sanchez, Weber, & Murtagh, 2016; Curtin, Martins, & Schwartz-Barcott, 2015; Long, 2014). A few program reports described the use of discussion or debriefing sessions that were held every evening or every other evening, but no discussion guides were included in the articles (Craig et al., 2015; Curtin et al., 2015; Krishnan, Richards, & Simpson, 2016). One source described the use of a standard format specific to Purdue University (Krishnan et al., 2016). Savicki and Price (2015) provided examples of specific reflection questions that students answered and submitted to the faculty before, during, and after a study abroad experience. Several authors reported a reflection paper as a strategy to achieve synthesis at the end of the experience (Boateng & Thompson, 2013; Conroy & Taggart, 2016; Gilliland, Attridge, Attridge, Maize, & McNeill, 2016; Krishnan et al., 2016). Mu et al. (2016) described group discussion as a synthesis activity.

Among the limited number of sources with specific guidance concerning strategies to promote student reflection of service learning, we chose to follow the recommendations by Schmidt and Brown (2016). Briefly, these strategies included sample reflection questions on the "What?", "So what?", and "What now?" based on experiential learning theory.

#### *Service learning and reflection*

Our working definition of service learning is from the work of Bringle and Hatcher,

Service learning...a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112).

This definition is supported by the Health Professionals Schools in Service to the Nation, launched in 1995. They defined service learning similarly with an emphasis on clear student learning outcomes, preparation prior to service learning, and reflection on the experience (Seifer, 1998). Hatcher, Bringle, and Muthiah (2004) recommend integration of course content and the service experience. Reflection learning activities should focus on personal values, should be regular and repeated (e.g., daily journaling), and should be structured rather than free-writing. They recommend structure with prompts or questions and a rubric to help students describe their experiences, analyze the

connections to course content, and apply their personal values. We used these definitions of service learning and guided reflection in addition to the specific guided reflection strategies by Schmidt and Brown (2016) as a framework for development of a faculty-led study abroad course.

### **Study abroad course development and implementation**

#### *Partnership*

Our College of Nursing, within a land grant institution, offers undergraduate and graduate education at four sites throughout the state and through online courses. The strategic vision for the College of Nursing to promote global partnerships was the impetus for this study abroad course. In addition, a baccalaureate nursing education must prepare each student to provide culturally sensitive and appropriate care (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2008). We partnered with an international health system to help us meet this goal. The health system has created clinics around the world to help meet access issues that the United Nations has identified as one of its Sustainable Development Goals. Several of these clinics are located in Ghana.

We developed the course and travel itinerary after we accompanied a colleague on a similar health care course to these clinics in Ghana. We designed the service learning aspects in partnership with the international health system team and nursing staff in Ghana. In response to the nursing staff request, we created an interactive presentation on medication safety issues with an emphasis on dosage calculation. The presentation utilized the undergraduate nursing students to work directly with individual Ghanaian nurses to help foster interaction. The international health system team selected four clinics in Ghana where we provided two sessions at each clinic so all nurses could attend. The goal of this service learning opportunity was to empower the Ghanaian nurses to expand their knowledge and skills in medication safety.

#### *Preparation phase*

The three-credit course included both the preparation and study abroad phases and was cross listed as a graduate and undergraduate course that was open to students from all majors. However, the seven students who enrolled were all pre-nursing or nursing students. We used our online course management system and video conference system to provide the preparation phase of the course over eight weeks. The preparation phase of the course included the concepts of Social Determinants of Health, Culture, Health Care Systems, Nursing Ethics, UN Sustainable Development Goals, Infectious Diseases, Leadership, Service Learning, and the AACN professional values of Social Justice, Autonomy, Integrity, Human Dignity, and Altruism.

#### *Student learning outcomes for the preparation phase*

1. Discuss the culture of Ghana.
2. Describe common diseases and health problems in Ghana.
3. Compare and contrast health care in the United States with health care in Ghana.
4. Describe global responsibilities related to health.
5. Discuss cultural learning and the impact of intercultural competence on health care delivery.

#### *Learning activities during the preparation phase*

Videos, weblinks, and short presentations addressed the course concepts and the student learning outcomes. Students identified questions about the health care system in Ghana as one of their discussion postings. We used these questions for discussion in the study abroad phase of the course. Another assignment was to choose one of several infectious diseases that are common in Ghana and write a paper about the incidence, evolution, progress, treatment, future of the disease and

an analysis of the social determinants of health regarding the disease. Graduate students had a higher-level rubric for the paper. Yet another assignment was a discussion posting regarding malaria and innovative approaches to disease eradication. We used video conferencing for two classes with the students, including a travel health presentation by a nurse practitioner and a safety presentation by the International Studies Director.

#### *Study abroad phase*

Briefly, our itinerary started in Accra where we visited the West Africa AIDS Foundation and presented the medication safety course at a clinic. Then we traveled to Kumasi where we visited another clinic and presented the medication safety course. On the weekend we traveled to a residential home for individuals with disabilities and to Mole National Park which is known for its elephant safari. We also visited a monkey sanctuary. We visited a traditional healer who explained and demonstrated his practices and beliefs. We then traveled to Cape Coast where we visited two clinics and presented the medication safety course. Along our way we visited numerous historical and cultural sites. A travel guide and bus driver accompanied us and arranged our meals and lodging throughout our travels in Ghana.

#### *Student learning outcomes for the study abroad phase*

1. Participate in service learning to individuals, families, or groups.
2. Explain concepts of cultural learning, intercultural competence, social justice, social determinants of health, nursing ethics, and professional nursing values.
3. Summarize one's cultural learning.

#### *Learning activities during the study abroad phase*

At the beginning of the study abroad phase, blank journals were distributed to the students with prompt questions provided by Schmidt and Brown (2016) pasted on the inside back cover (see Table 1). One of the senior students was mentored by the faculty and led the students in a discussion of how to use the prompt questions in daily journaling. To promote student privacy and free expression of sensitive topics, faculty did not read the daily journals. During the first week of the study abroad phase, the students focused on the "What?" component of the guided reflection journaling by describing their expectations, the people, their interactions, and their thoughts and feelings about their experiences. Students said they used the prompt questions to guide their journaling.

During the second week of the study abroad phase, we encouraged students to make connections between course concepts and the experience they were having, the "So what?" by responding to the journaling prompts. Concepts introduced during the preparation phase of the course were reinforced with journal articles distributed to each student. After each student read an article, the student and faculty led discussion on the topic with a focus on the "So what?". The topics included the social determinants of health (Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014), social justice (Redman & Clark, 2002), the Code of Ethics for Nurses (<https://nursingworld.org>), maternal and newborn disparities (<https://www.unicef.org>), a statistical profile, communicable diseases and malaria (<http://www.who.int/en>) and cultural values (<https://www.hofstede-insights.com>).

Students used their journal entries as a basis for a reflection paper that was due the week after we returned to the United States. The focus of the paper was a summary of the "What?" (Remembering and Understanding), and "So what?" (Analyzing and Applying) with an emphasis on the "What now?" (Evaluating and Creating). In response to the "What now?" journaling prompts, the students grappled with some of the larger issues facing the world and what this experience helped them understand. We obtained written permission from each student to

include the following excerpts from the reflection papers in this publication.

#### **Examples of guided reflection**

##### *"What?"*

"One thing you adjust to rather quickly is the pace of the country. Often in America people are rushing around and everything is done at a fast rate, but Ghanaians have a different outlook on life. In Ghana, everything is slower, no one is rushing to get anywhere and it is not unusual to wait many hours to eat a meal."

"Going to Ghana was an incredible experience. I had no idea what to expect from my first trip outside of the United States. I think some part of me expected to be amazed and instead I found myself more shocked than anything else. When we landed in Accra, knowing it was the capital city, I expected it to be brighter. It wasn't long into the trip I found out electricity, like running water, would not be as reliable as I had been used to. As a matter of fact, there were many things I encountered on the trip that I was not used to. Things like, only drinking bottled water, seeing people relieve themselves openly on the side of the road, seeing the amount of trash that accumulates in a place where there is no established, regular sanitation service, and watching the dozens of people walking through the chaotic streets attempting to sell any number of things from the trays and baskets they carried on their heads. To some extent I think I had an unrealistic, glamorized view of what it would be like in Africa. There was no hot, dry, grassland with giraffes and lions roaming about. Instead there were tons of cars and people and while it was hot, it was the humidity that made the first breath of African air feel like trying to breathe under water. Life is lived on the sides of the road in Ghana."

"Patients moved from room to room (in the clinic) seeing the different providers. In our system, the patient stays in one room and the providers come to them. I noticed in Ghana that health care was a privilege to the people, and in the U.S., we look at health care as a right."

##### *"So what?"*

"Throughout this trip I felt I learned how to understand and accept other cultures. I have always been fairly narrow-minded when it comes to diversity, simply because of the area where I grew up as it is lacking majorly in the diversity department. I went into this trip with an open mind so that I could see how people who are different from me live their lives and learn how to accept them for that, even though it is drastically different from how I prefer to live my own life. We were taught to be consciously competent; keeping that in mind throughout the trip, I think I increased my cultural competency and broke down many biases that I had."

"We observed that mentally and physically disabled people in Ghana are not accepted in society. This is a form of social injustice that was very hard to accept. This experience definitely put me out of my comfort zone, but I am very thankful for it. I loved getting to know the different kids and getting to experience their community for a short time. It was amazing to see how happy they were with so little and how they took care of one another. I hope one day the society in Ghana can accept these amazing kids into their society."

"I learned from this experience how grateful and caring this culture and these people are. With health care, the pharmacist said at the clinic how patients can wait for hours and still be happy with their care as long as they are welcomed with a smile and good care. In the U.S. it is not that way, we see health care as a right and they see it as

**Table 1**  
Reflection paper rubric.

	Prompts for reflection	Does not meet expectations	Meets expectations	Exceeds expectations	Comments
What? (include responses to these prompts in your journal and summarize in the final paper)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ What do I expect to get out of this experience?</li> <li>■ What did I observe?</li> <li>■ What did I think or feel about what I saw?</li> <li>■ What is the community partner's mission or goal?</li> <li>■ Describe the people you worked with at the community site.</li> <li>■ What am I learning about others and myself?</li> <li>■ What did I do that was effective?</li> <li>■ Why was it effective?</li> <li>■ How was I different/similar than other people?</li> <li>■ What values, opinions, decisions have been made or changed?</li> <li>■ Is it important to me to stay involved in the community?</li> <li>■ How will my efforts contribute to social change?</li> <li>■ Will I continue to do this?</li> <li>■ How can society better deal with this problem?</li> <li>■ What social and economic policy changes will resolve the problem?</li> <li>■ Where do we go from here?</li> <li>■ What is the next step in the process?</li> </ul>	<p>Description of the experience is vague or unclear</p> <p>Superficial description of thoughts or feelings associated with the general experience</p>	<p>Description of the experience with identification of significant aspects in a clear, organized, logical manner</p> <p>Full description of positive and negative thoughts and feelings associated with the experience</p>	<p>Description of the experience with identification of significant aspects in a clear, succinct, organized, and logical manner</p> <p>Full description of positive and negative thoughts and feelings as these persist or change throughout the experience</p>	
So what? (include responses to these prompts in your journal and summarize in the final paper)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ What am I learning about others and myself?</li> <li>■ What did I do that was effective?</li> <li>■ Why was it effective?</li> <li>■ How was I different/similar than other people?</li> <li>■ What values, opinions, decisions have been made or changed?</li> <li>■ Is it important to me to stay involved in the community?</li> <li>■ How will my efforts contribute to social change?</li> <li>■ Will I continue to do this?</li> <li>■ How can society better deal with this problem?</li> <li>■ What social and economic policy changes will resolve the problem?</li> <li>■ Where do we go from here?</li> <li>■ What is the next step in the process?</li> </ul>	<p>Identifies how well the experience went, but with minimal connection with own strengths and weaknesses</p>	<p>Discusses how well the experience went, incorporating the impact of own thoughts, feelings, strengths, and weaknesses</p>	<p>Discusses how well the experience went, incorporating a detailed evaluation of the impact of own thoughts, feelings, strengths, and weaknesses on the experience</p>	
What now? (include responses to these prompts in the final paper)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ How will my efforts contribute to social change?</li> <li>■ Will I continue to do this?</li> <li>■ How can society better deal with this problem?</li> <li>■ What social and economic policy changes will resolve the problem?</li> <li>■ Where do we go from here?</li> <li>■ What is the next step in the process?</li> </ul>	<p>Learning is not clearly identified and there is failure to identify how learning can be applied in future situations</p>	<p>Learning and application to future situations is clearly identified and discussed</p>	<p>Learning and application to a variety of future situations is clearly and thoroughly identified and discussed</p>	
Presentation		<p>Many errors in spelling, word usage, sentence structure, grammar, or punctuation</p> <p>Submitted after due date/time</p>	<p>Minor errors in spelling, word usage, sentence structure, grammar, or punctuation</p> <p>Submitted before due date/time</p>	<p>No errors in spelling, word usage, sentence structure, grammar, or punctuation</p> <p>Submitted before due date/time</p>	

Satisfactory = 75% (3 out of 4 categories) meet or exceed expectations.  
Adapted from Schmidt and Brown (2016) and Demmison, Rosselli, and Dempsey (2015).

a privilege. Being effective here is about being present and friendly with every encounter you have.”

“I still can't wrap my mind around how different life is on the other side of the world. What surprised me the most was the difference in attitude the Ghanaian people had in comparison to Americans. Their attitudes towards life, religion, and time could not be more different than the typical American views. For example, in the first clinic we visited, I saw first-hand how the people waiting in the clinic, sometimes for hours on end, regarded the health care services they received as a privilege, rather than a right, no matter how long they had to wait. In the U.S., any patient who had to wait more than 15 minutes would be annoyed or even angry, feeling their time had been wasted. If I learned anything from my time in Ghana, I at least had a lesson in having patience and gratitude. Thankfully, I learned much more from my experience. While I was there, I was given an article to read about the importance of being exposed to experiences where the concept of social justice, or lack thereof, can be applied. There were many instances throughout our trip across Ghana, where social injustice was at the heart of the situation. Near Accra, we visited a private clinic focused on helping people with HIV and AIDS. I was shocked to find out, even doctors and nurses shunned patients who had HIV. At XXX the community itself was an example of how their society accepted the rejection of people who were born differently. What broke my heart the most about spending time with the residents at XXX, was noticing the children whose physical deformities could have, and would have been easily corrected had they been born in the U.S. Instead, they would spend the rest of their lives never setting foot outside of that community, living in a place where outside of XXX, they were unaccepted and unwanted. Finally, in Cape Coast we learned about the history of the slave trade from Africa to the Americas. While we didn't witness the social injustice in action, it was as much a core part of that history as the slave castles themselves. I will never forget how our tour guide at Cape Coast Castle ended our tour by reminding us that slavery is just as prevalent today, it's just taken a different form. There are so many things to take away from the unique experiences I had on this trip and the longer we were there the easier it was to embrace.”

#### “What now?”

“What is next for me? The next step for me I think is going back. Next summer, I would really like to go back to XXX for the summer and work as a volunteer for them. My experience there was absolutely amazing and I fell in love with the environment, the people, and the children. I want to make a difference in those children's lives as much as I can at least. I think that getting to experience the health care in Ghana has made me realize that it takes baby steps to make something great, and that is exactly what the XXX are doing. They are providing health care for those who need it and are doing so in a manner that fits the Ghanaian style. I think that being able to experience something like Ghana has made me appreciate more, love more, and become a better person and nurse.”

“I think it is important as a member of the American culture to be consciously aware that our way of doing things is not the best. Observing other countries health care systems may help broaden the perspective of possible care. After my experience in Ghana my next step is to continue traveling and gaining a more worldly perspective.”

“I think it is important to be involved in service learning. It brings more of a perspective, actually being a part of the learning. It is more likely to stick with me and I can apply it more having actual experience in seeing social injustice versus just reading about it. Being more aware about social injustice I will be able to speak up against it and help others become more aware to help change

policies.”

“It would be easy to go on with my day to day life, forgetting those lessons I learned because I'm no longer faced with them on a daily basis like I was in Ghana. The challenge will be to hold onto them. Lessons as simple as having patience. Patience for difference and ignorance. Patience for when things won't go my way or when I encounter something I can't understand. Lessons like gratitude. I'm grateful I had the opportunity to do something and have an experience that many people might dream of and never achieve. I also gained a newfound gratitude and appreciation for the luxurious life I didn't realize I was living. Finally, I learned a little more about the importance of being open minded and accepting of all people in all situations. These are lessons that carry a whole new importance to me as I learn to be a nurse. Having patience, gratitude for the big and the little things in life, and being open and accepting with people will impact the care I give to my patients every day. I truly think I will be a more caring nurse because of my experience in Ghana. Just like the article discussed, I also think the exposure I had to a social justice experience has begun to spark a sense of social responsibility in me. I have always wanted to work or volunteer internationally to provide care to people in areas where their access to health care is much more limited, but this experience has deepened that passion in me. It's not just something I want to do, it's now something I feel a sense of responsibility to do. Now more than ever I think it is important to be more active and involved in the issues the world faces today. I think it is all too easy for people to get lost in their own world and forget that there are major issues going on all around the world and that we can do something about them. The first day I spent in Ghana I found out I had another name. Abena. It means I was born on a Tuesday. I left Ghana a different person than when I arrived. As Abena I had an experience I will never forget. Now as XXX, I will take that experience and the things I learned and do my best to make a positive difference.”

#### Discussion and conclusions

Based on these examples from the final reflection paper, we determined that the students achieved the learning outcome related to cultural learning. Guided reflection prompts for journaling was instrumental in promoting critical thinking about the course concepts and inspired the students to process the experience in an organized, and meaningful manner. We believe that the focused prompts and group discussions helped the students make meaningful connections among the concepts, their experiences, and service learning. As a result, we plan to retain this process of guided reflection and developed an analytic grading rubric for the summary reflection paper (see Table 1) that we will use the next time we offer a study abroad course.

Our next revision of the course will include a stronger emphasis on cultural learning by incorporation of a model by [Campinha-Bacote \(2013\)](#) or [Purnell \(2005\)](#) to expand what we used from the *Essentials of Baccalaureate Education* ([American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2008](#)). We will explore use of a self-assessment of cultural competence and an assignment focused on cultural learning to use during the preparation phase. Because we had positive outcomes, we plan to continue use of the strategies outlined by [Schmidt and Brown \(2016\)](#) to engage our students in reflection on their service learning.

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