

THE LEARNING IMPACT OF A SOCIAL WORK STUDENT'S INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

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A social work professor describes the learning impacts of a social work student's international education experience. Student learning outcomes were identified by analyzing the student's travel journal and post-travel course papers, as compared to skills described by the practice literature. In a short period of time, the student seemed to acquire strong cultural-competency skills, yielding change in the faculty member and, potentially, in a social work education program.

This narrative highlights the learning impacts of an international education placement. Women of a rural, mountainous region in India taught an undergraduate social work student about culturally competent social work practice. This took place during the time the student's 13-week study abroad program. When the student returned to the U.S. to complete her undergraduate social work degree, she taught the educator about development of culturally competent practice in an international setting. The educator continued this reciprocal teaching and learning process by suggesting to colleagues that there is a need for international service learning experiences in a social work education program.

It is tempting to describe this expanding learning process with the common system theory metaphor of throwing a stone into a pond, with subsequent extended surface ripples. The truth is that it was more like being immersed and tossed about in an eddy—swirling in multiple directions and connecting, all with surprising force and depth. It was powerful and transformative. The educator struggles to find words to describe this learning process, however vicarious. One MSW student said it best in her attempt to relay the depth of her learning after a day of interaction with Ghana villagers: "I don't know if I have the words to describe it, but I will try" (Dozier, Boateng, Rabbiatou, & Jabrilla, 2007, p.55).

Part I: An Educator's Early Exposure to International Learning Opportunities

Our social work faculty were preparing for a CSWE accreditation site visit. We talked about preparing students to become culturally competent practitioners. Faculty agreed that culturally competent practitioners demonstrated self-awareness of their own cultural background and biases. They went beyond their own ethnocentric frames of reference and understood that there are numerous ways to view the world. They listened to the viewpoints of people within systemic contexts, (i.e., individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities). They maintained a stance of humility and described how deeply cultural contexts can influence human development. Culturally competent practitioners knew about the many differences *within* diverse groups. Rural contexts would be included since many of our students practiced, or were likely to practice, in rural areas.

The faculty agreed that the students should learn how to communicate with people of diverse backgrounds in a respectful manner. We wanted students to use a strengths-based and empowerment approach to practice, with great attention to relationship development. Finally, we agreed it was important for students to become passionate and committed advocates of social and economic justice for people who live with poverty, discrimination, and oppression. "They need to understand poverty," said one colleague, "I mean understand poverty within an environmental and structural framework, not just a 'blame-the-victim' perspective. They need

to know how policy and privilege affect people's lives, *especially* for women and children."

Near the end of the meeting, a newer colleague casually mentioned that she was the program academic advisor for a student who was a double social work and Spanish major. She said the student had asked if it were possible to have a field placement or internship in a South American country. When faced with application of a student placement within a *specific* international context, faculty members concluded that they thought it had great potential for helping the student acquire culturally competent practice skills, e.g., increasing knowledge of a global economy and learning what it is like to be an "outsider" from the dominant culture. However, faculty members also expressed concerns about student's safety, liability, fit with existing curricula, costs, distance oversight, access to field instructors, and potential ethical challenges.

The facilitator suggested we make a list of benefits and challenges. The social work faculty international education discussion content that follows is drawn from this meeting and several follow-up faculty meetings. The content is further supported with evidence drawn from the practice literature.

Social Work and International Education

Benefits of international education. Social work international education and research are rapidly expanding (Rai, 2004). Participation in international educational experiences has grown to one of every five social work students (Panos, Pettys, Cox, & Jones-Hart, 2004). Similarly, international research is an expanding area for social work educators (Lalayants, Tripodi, & Jung, 2009). The Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) in the U.S. has educational policy and accreditation standards which declare that social work is to be guided by "a global perspective" (CSWE, 2008, p. 1). Experiential service is central to international education. Cox, Falk, and Colón (2006) refer to the 400 or more hours of internship time required for each social work student when they say, "From its beginnings, social work education has included a hefty dosage of experiential learning" (p. 64).

Social work is a good fit with international practice, especially given the profession's long commitment to the person in environment, social justice, and respect for diversity (Lindsey, 2005; Rotabi, Gamonley, Gamble, & Weil, 2007). Social workers can collaborate with vulnerable people toward social actions intended to decrease the growing global economic gap between rich and poor people (Barbera, 2006; Prigoff, 2000). Barbera (2006) says, "Social workers have the skills, the contacts, the vision, and the values to be significant players in social movements to bring about significant change [to] contest and counteract the negative consequences of economic globalization" (p. 295). In fact, people living in poverty are among those frequently served by social workers (Krumer-Nevo, Monnickendam, & Weiss-Gal, 2009). Across the world, rural poverty is particularly widespread and those who are most poor are often women and children (Cox & Pawar, 2006; Ginsberg, 2005; O'Hare, 2009; Riebschleger, 2007; Riebschleger & Fila, 2009; USDA, 2004; Wetzal, 2007).

The international practice literature reverberates with descriptions of students who were "transformed" by their international education experience (Ford & Ericson, 2003; Lough, 2009; Panos, et al., 2004). Students reportedly acquired "open minds" (Lindsey, 2005) and new "lenses" (Lough, 2009; Rotabi, et al., 2006) for viewing the world. With these lenses, students viewed privilege, power, and oppression; some students committed or re-committed to seek social justice for vulnerable people (Cox et al., 2006; Gammonley & Rotabi, 2007; Panos et al., 2004). The student experience was described as "humbling" (Dozier et al., 2007; McGadney-Douglass, 2007). Some reported that students exhibited newfound levels of respect for impoverished and oppressed individuals, families, groups, and communities (Dozier et al., 2007; Panos et al., Rotabi et al., 2006; Zunz & Oil, 2009). Ford & Ericson (2003) said that post-international internship students reported they were more aware of global issues, followed the news more, believed social work in the U.S. could learn from other countries, and sought out more diverse people. Lewis and Neisenbaum's research (2005) described that outcomes of international service

learning included students' reportedly taking courses outside their major, traveling abroad again, showing increased interest in interdisciplinary studies, and understanding more about the impacts of globalization.

Challenges of international education. While social work may be a good fit with international education and practice, some argue that the profession has been slow to move to the "paradigm shift" of international cultural competency, especially as applied to learning within developing nations (Lough, 2009; Lowe, Dozier, Hunt-Hurst, & Smith, 2008). Perhaps the profession has lagged most in considering a *reciprocal* knowledge exchange between people of different countries, particularly knowledge provided by developing-to-developed nations (Hokenstad & Midgley, 2004; Johnson, 2004; Payne & Askeland, 2008).

It is critical to recognize that there are a plethora of legitimate challenges to overcome in order to construct and maintain effective international educational experiences (Lough, 2009). Some frequently reported challenges of international education include: (1) developing relationships with international host organizations; (2) accessing social work supervisors; (3) scheduling the learning experience to integrate with campus course schedules; (4) having sufficient institutional resources (administrative time, program time, finances); (5) being concerned about health and safety risks; (6) having adequate time for developing international placements; (7) finding student living accommodations; (8) having a support network for international students; (9) overcoming language barriers; and (10) arranging transportation (Gammonley & Robati, 2007; Lough, 2009; Polack, 2004; McGadney, 2007; Panos, et al., 2004; Rai, 2004; Wetzel, 2007; Zunz & Oil, 2009). The learning experiences must be of sufficient duration for the student to acclimate and then acquire sufficient understanding of the host country's cultures so as to avoid replicating neocolonialism (Wehbi, 2009), or becoming "Ugly Americans" (Rotabi, Gammonley, & Gamble, 2006). Farrell (2007) notes university struggles with "cost, quality, and oversight" (p. A49).

The vote. After exploring international education benefits and challenges, faculty

members were pressed to decide whether the double major student might be able to participate in an international field placement in South America. The voting process led to faculty divided into "mostly pro" and "mostly con" camps. Since most of the faculty stated they recognized numerous potential benefits and challenges of such a placement, the issue on the table was whether to go ahead with exploring the internship option at that time. Since we had a lot of accreditation work to complete, I was not sure if we could take on one more program task. I settled on a "good-idea-for-later-but-absolutely-not-now" position. By default, I aligned with the "mostly con" camp. Ultimately, the faculty settled on a "trial" international field placement for the student. She chose to delay her graduation for one year and her internship took place in a South American country.

Part II: An Educator's Exposure to a Student's International Learning

Several years later, I was a faculty member at another university in the midwest region of the U.S. An undergraduate student, Brittany Fila Anderson, asked me if I would allow her to have an "honors option" for a practice course I was teaching. This meant she would have additional course learning objectives and assignments. I would oversee them and communicate with the university honors program.

It seems she had spent some time in India working with a nongovernmental organization (NGO) and rural women living in an isolated, impoverished mountain area. We agreed that she would write an additional course paper and deliver a formal presentation to university students. We would meet monthly to plan and track progress. Over the fall semester, we met and talked about India. There was an opportunity for a second presentation in the spring semester and we continued to meet and talk about India, albeit less frequently. We submitted an abstract for a national social work conference and were accepted. As the process continued, the student talked about India, shared her travel journal entries, showed her souvenirs, and forwarded papers written for other courses, including the study-abroad, service-learning course. At the end of spring semester, she submitted her honors

course paper. Evidence of the student's learning is drawn from these sources.

The student wrote formal papers, informal journal entries, and poetry. I could feel, see, and hear the student's early cultural immersion process:

*Going to a village with an Indian student...
Twelve people stuffed in a jeep.
Riding through Delhi...
Seeing sights, smelling smells.
How do I begin to describe?
Streets as bathrooms,
Fields of laborers,
Rich and poor.
Oh, there's a water buffalo.
Street shops and handicrafts.
Stopped at a corner, oranges, ten rupees?
So little, but so much,
Around the corner,
One may be really happy.*

As I read more, I got a sense of the learning sequencing. I approved of the NGO's actions to educate and immerse Ms. Anderson in the culture before sending her out to work with Indian people.

For the first four weeks I studied Indian history, culture, and language. I attended lectures and visited historical sights. On weekends, I stayed in the homes of Indian families and traveled to adjacent regions. Next, I participated in a six-week, intensive service-learning project sponsored by a grassroots NGO. The agency's mission was to support a better quality of life for the rural, mountain people, especially women. I lived and worked in the north Himalaya region. My internship was the anchor of my international learning experience. Although the NGO had many ongoing projects, I worked primarily with women's self-help groups. I traveled to other parts of India for the last three of 13 weeks.

I remained a bit skeptical about how much could be done by an undergraduate student

within six weeks in an unfamiliar culture. I asked for more detail on her assignments.

I worked in the villages of the northern Himalayas. The NGO encouraged village women to form mutual aid or self-help groups. I met many women participants of self-help groups that shared their skills, labor, knowledge, and money. They developed their own "credit union" of sorts when they used their pooled resources to help members start new businesses. For example, one group of women loaned money to buy a cow so that a woman could sell milk to support her family. These "micro-credit" or "micro-finance" activities generated income for impoverished women, children, and families (Singh, 2004). The NGO also helped bring women from the villages together to plan economic and social development activities for the larger region.

During the regional and village meetings, I joined in the song and dance. This built friendship across women of every generation. The women modeled leadership to the children. Some of the children also participated in the meetings. The women said some groups now had a voting membership on the village councils. This was impressive given India's gender-oppression history and practices. Mutual aid was one real method to alleviate poverty and to empower women, children, and families. I learned that the groups began five years prior with facilitated community education and organization efforts of the NGO. The groups were now entirely led by the women from the villages.

The student was assigned to observe and talk to the women to assess the development of the self-help groups and member satisfaction. The student was also assigned to ask the women what kinds of activities they wished to begin in the future and how the NGO could help them move toward implementation. I had to brush up on terms and concepts. Micro-finance and

NGOs were cognitive, sketchy concepts derived from the one chapter of international content reading within social policy courses that I took as a student and (I admit with chagrin) taught as a faculty member.

I was pleased that the NGO asked students to learn some Hindi. I also made a mental note to think about the need for more language courses in liberal arts backgrounds of social work students. I noted that the language was a factor in Ms. Anderson's struggles with immersion.

Living in another culture, constantly trying to understand "why?" and "how?" is exhausting. Every second of every day is spent listening, watching, and carefully analyzing everything...I can not understand the conversation going on next to me in the train station...I feel like not a single person understands me here.

An Educator's Realization

At one point, I suddenly realized that Ms. Anderson's words about her international service-learning experiences reflected many of the learning constructs described in the faculty meetings and the practice literature. There was much evidence that she learned to communicate with people of diverse backgrounds in a respectful manner, to identify strengths, to devote great attention to relationship development, and to describe structural poverty from the standpoint of those living in poverty. She identified privilege, oppression, and marginalization processes. She seemed to employ new lenses to view the world, respect for others, a call for international reciprocity, and an increased awareness of global issues. She demonstrated the ability to become a passionate and committed advocate of social and economic justice for people who live with poverty, especially women and children. The richness and intensity of her learning experience appeared to be transformative.

Ms. Anderson's learning outcomes were demonstrated with accompanying written evidence. For example, I was impressed with her ability to overcome the barriers of language with the people she met in India.

The cultural barriers, especially language, were enormous. As my culture shock ebbed, I learned how to communicate through tone of voice, expression, and touch. Some topics were off-limits. For example, it was inappropriate to ask questions about social caste or human trafficking.

Many times she discussed the importance of song and dance to facilitate communication between and among the women of India and herself. She described using a few words, touch, gestures, and other nonverbal communication for the critical task of building relationships.

The women in rural villages were less intimidated by the barriers than I was. During a self-help group meeting, one elder woman held my hand and commented we are "same, same." People that recognize commonality break through barriers.

Ms. Anderson demonstrated great attention to relationship building: "People are okay with vagueness, but also seem to really open up once you get deeper. Once you build a relationship, they open their real insides. In the U.S. it is similar, but it is different." She described shared activities as a powerful way to develop relationships, e.g., gathering wheat in the fields or shucking peas with a new friend. She described helping the caretaker of her living quarters carry water when the tap water ran out. "Afterwards the woman said, we really are part [of India and one another] because we have carried water and 'Things happen like these.'"

The description that made me most appreciative of the student's sharing-activities-as-relationship-building was:

We visited an organization in the desert this week. The women we visited were carrying dirt in large bowls on their heads, filling the bowls at the bottom of the hill and bringing them to the top to dump it, creating what they called a "drudge stop." The women asked if we

came to help, and we said, "Okay!" It felt good to work hard, even though we only worked for an hour or less. We raced up the hill so hard we fell. The women were so impressed. Joining them, meeting these women where they were at, created a connection, a bond of trust that went beyond culture and language barriers.

Within relationship building, she mentioned the need for respect for others:

Also respect is a big thing. I need to be careful and aware. I think it will help to ask questions. As I learned in social work courses, I need to value their culture and learn from them, using their knowledge as a resource. They are most obviously the experts.

Similarly, she engaged in multiple assessments of strengths of the people she met, such as "India's special and supported extended family structure," and "the cohesiveness that women added to their villages." One journal excerpt was quite poignant:

The women wanted to share their duties. They took pride in themselves: cooking chipatis, taking care of children, and just showing us around. These women are powerful. They guide children, support families, garden, and harvest.

Over and over again, Ms. Anderson described the depth of poverty of many Indian people with clear ties to social structures that discriminate, marginalize, and oppress people, especially women and children. For example, she recognized some of the gaps between rich and poor, rural and urban (Riebschleger & Fila, 2009).

India is a country of new wealth generated by rapid industrialization. At the same time, India has severe levels of poverty, especially in rural areas. The rural-to-urban population is 72.4% to 27.6% (At a glance, n.d). According to the United Nations Children's

International Fund, 35% of India's people live on one dollar or less per day (Census, 2001). The rich are very rich and the poor are very poor. Because daily life in poorer regions varies so much from wealthier regions, urban India and rural India feel worlds apart. Migration of young people to metropolitan jobs hurts families in rural areas as intergenerational kinship ties and cultural traditions dissipate. When youth leave, the agrarian rural economy lacks enough people to work the land.

The social welfare system is insufficient to meet the crushing forces of poverty. Some groups are particularly marginalized. Social justice and economic resources are often denied to people who are women, children, lower caste, tribal, and rural. Women are viewed as lower status than men. Many work in difficult jobs for very low pay. Despite current laws to uphold human rights, long held traditions of early marriage, female infanticide, widow shunning, dowry deaths, bride burning, and family violence continue. Children are oppressed.

I remembered a saying I heard once, "Poor people across the world are more alike, than different." I noted much overlap between the descriptions of the people in India and the thousands of clients I've served that were living in poverty in northern rural Michigan. I thought of some teenage mothers who came to me for mental health counseling. They drove over icy, snowbound roads to see me, babies in tow, in rattle-trap vehicles or borrowed rides. I remembered their worries about desperately needing diapers, heating fuel, and child care. Ms. Anderson spoke many times of the desperation of people living in poverty.

Because many people in rural India do not have enough family income to provide even wheat chapatis...Parents and children are desperate and vulnerable...Food, clothes, and shelter are necessary to

survive. When people are not provided with such, they must go to desperate measures... Women, children, and families are vulnerable to harmful events. Child trafficking, dowry demand, and female infanticide are but a few harmful examples.

Ms. Anderson expressed anger at the way some people were marginalized:

"Pimps" are lurking in the busy streets of big cities in India and many developing countries... Children are subject to heartless labor, physical abuse, inadequate nutrition, and sexual abuse. While jobs lure parents and children to business men, jobs are not what these defenseless people receive. On the rare occasion that a man is true to his word... job training includes beginning a life of servitude and prostitution.

She also expressed much dismay. My reaction was to feel a sense of horror when I read her words.

So going downtown [in the city] was expected to be a leisurely time. But the sellers hoard us and there are so many beggars. The smells are horrendous and almost unbearable. Lurking in the tunnels was the smell of urine. The poor, desolate, and wretchedly sad people with missing limbs are affecting me more and more. I thought I would get used to it in a sense, but no... An old, dirty lady tapped me on my skin. She looks so sad and desperate. I cry inside and ignore the touch, killing me softly.

I felt better when she turned to more cognitive processing of the encounters with beggars. I was pleased she tied these events directly to social oppression:

As we walked in the streets, there was a little girl that persistently clung to me, asking for chapati, touching her mouth. I feel horrible ignoring her and terrible paying attention to her and then

denying her food. I feel like I'm running away from her, like she's somewhat less of a person than I am. Afterward, we (U.S. students) talked about how each of us felt and responded to the situation, which led to a larger discussion about oppression and empowerment.

Clearly Ms. Anderson was confronted with her own cultural and social class privilege. That is such a difficult thing to teach some of my middle-class Caucasian American students. Her awareness was supported further:

A lady came to our room today. We didn't know what to do while the lady cleaned and our neighbor and caretaker (whom we called "Mama") told us to stay in the room when we were supposed to be at lunch. (Later, we realized it was because we were supposed to be watching over our belongings.) I felt awkward watching her clean our dirty floors and wipe literally under our feet as we talked with some students... One of my goals is to talk to her or ask her something in a respectful way as I learn Hindi. I'm not sure if it is culturally okay to talk to her or not. From my perspective, it appeared she wasn't respected very well from her motions (shying away and looking at the ground) and the way people acted toward her. She was ignored.

These powerful experiences seemed to bring about new thinking. Ms. Anderson relayed that there are many ways to view the world. She said, *"My perspective is only one."* She mentioned the need for international knowledge exchange: *"What things can India and the U.S. learn from each other?"*

New experiences, new thinking, and awareness of social problems at a global level were followed by Ms. Anderson's passionate commitment to social justice:

Near the end of my travels, I met an older Indian man who told me, "To see, to watch, to feel, to discuss, to

conclude; that is to study." The part of the world I experienced is unknown to most Americans. I know that I will never understand India in a few short weeks of residency. There is more to know than could be understood in one lifetime. But I will never forget the lessons of India. I gained a broader perspective than the small world around me. My deep-felt desire to gain knowledge to push toward social change is overflowing. Because I lived among the people of India, I move forward in the next step of my life with stronger social work practice skills and a renewed commitment to social justice, equality, and service.

She talked about her feelings of great responsibility to represent her country, nation, university, family and faith. She was clearly humble in her approach.

The president of the NGO and the village people asked me to provide suggestions for improving the rural educational system. I felt honored, humbled, overwhelmed, and challenged...How am I justified to do this task? I'm from the United States of America and know nothing about education in India, even less about rural India.

I was surprised how much this student accomplished in her learning experience. After talking to many Indian key informants, she concluded that they wanted to increase the access of children, especially girls, to a quality education.

Throughout India and particularly in rural areas, women are far less likely to be able to read and write (Dreze & Kingdon, 2001). More than 50% of girls drop out of school by the time they are in middle school. They are often caring for children and siblings, helping with household responsibilities, and/or employed to support their families. The women from the self-help groups said repeatedly that the villages lacked

access to a quality education, especially for girls.

She even presented her work to the leaders of the NGO.

Rural residents said they wanted to improve their educational systems. I wondered if they could build on their strengths of a shared vision of youth education and organizational skills drawn from previous mutual aid endeavors. I proposed a step-by-step collaborative model for the NGO and village residents to begin to address the problem of an inadequate education system in northern rural India. At the end of my internship, I presented the system change community organization proposal to the president and secretary of the NGO and the leaders of regional programs. They agreed that the education program at the NGO needed to be expanded. The NGO leaders committed to moving ahead to help women, teachers, and parents organize for local educational system improvement, with particular emphases on...inclusion of girls.

The longer I discussed India with Ms. Anderson, the more remorse I felt for having doubted the cost-benefit of international field placements for students. I was overwhelmed by the amount of learning assimilated by the student in her international field placement. In less than one semester, this student learned more about social work than a legion of professors could attempt to convey. The student left for India as a young woman of a middle-class family with limited exposure to diverse cultures. She came back with the knowledge, skills, and values of a culturally competent social worker.

As I try to make sense of what I have learned as an educator from my student's international field experience, I still feel like I'm swirling about in a swift and tumultuous eddy. In some ways, I feel connected to a group of people in India whom I've never met. My student's descriptions of her work in India affirmed my social work values and practice experiences. The people of India taught me

about cultural competency. I, too, am transformed.

I am now working at another university as a social work practice educator. Recently, the university set a goal to increase student participation in international educational experiences. The social work faculty began to explore the idea of integrating international education into the social work curriculum. A few of my faculty colleagues expressed concerns about potential field problems, safety, and liability. This time, I'm ready to take the barriers on. I'm solidly aligned with the "pro" voters.

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