

# EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS: EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES FOR PUBLIC HEALTH AND NURSING STUDENTS

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*ABSTRACT:* In this paper we will share successful teaching techniques for creating effective learning experiences for adult learners in an international context. We studied the experiences of two groups of Chinese undergraduate students from public health and nursing in short-term study abroad programs in the United States. We used the experiential learning theory described by Kolb (1984) to understand which teaching and learning strategies were considered meaningful by Chinese undergraduate students. We found that they preferred activities which involved opportunities for building relationships with American colleagues such as community engagement, shadowing, and learning English language. They considered lectures about public health topics informative but less meaningful as compared to more interactive and hands-on learning activities.

*Keywords:* public health, nursing, study abroad, teaching, learning, strategies

In the past few years, just before the global pandemic, the number of Chinese undergraduate students in short-term study abroad programs increased substantially, especially in the field of public health and nursing. These programs are designed to enhance skills related to cultural competence (Huang, et al., 2018; Powell & Biederman, 2017). This new trend of study abroad programs in the public health field could transform global health practices. In this study, we sought to develop a deeper understanding of the learning and professional development needs of Chinese undergraduate students who participated in a short-term study abroad program in the fields of public health and nursing at an American university. We studied students' preferences regarding teaching and learning strategies in public health and nursing study abroad programs. This work is particularly important now since the global pandemic has spotlighted the importance of learning from and about different countries' public health systems. This study fills the gap in the literature about cross-cultural learning experiences in the field of Public Health. The findings of this study will help administrators and faculty in organizing effective study abroad programs in the future. Furthermore, this study provides better understanding of experiential learning and how experiential learning can be orchestrated and measured in terms of its effectiveness in international contexts.

## Literature Review

Extensive literature has been produced about the experiences of nursing, medical, and pharmacy students in the last two decades (Edmonds, 2012; Kokko, 2011; Kulbok, et al., 2012; Maltby, et al., 2016).

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Many of these are case studies which focused on the impact study abroad experiences have had on students' personal and professional lives (Edmonds, 2012; Fairchild et al., 2006; Gilboy & Bill, 2011; Kokko, 2011; Kulbok et al., 2012; Larson & Allen, 2006; Maas & Ezeobebe, 2014; McComb et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2019). Most of these studies focused on learning outcomes and rarely mentioned or discussed successful teaching strategies for creating effective and meaningful learning experiences for health-related fields during their study abroad program. However, the following studies mentioned teaching and learning strategies which were used during these programs. Fennell (2009) discussed a five-week public health study abroad for American students in Europe. Fennell (2009) argued that the program had a profound impact on their worldview. In terms of teaching and learning strategies, Fennell (2009) mentioned site visits, interactive lectures, and discussions. The first two weeks were spent in lectures at a university in France, two weeks were spent on site and cultural visits, and during the last week students prepared short presentations on public health issues. Additionally, students prepared portfolios, and the program concluded with final exam and participation in HIV/AIDS musical festival in Paris. In another study, McComb et al. (2019) presented the study abroad experience of American students from Public Health and Engineering programs in Rome, Italy. The purpose of the program was to create an intercultural immersive educational experience for students. McComb et al. (2019) used online lectures, case studies, hospital visits, discussion sessions with colleagues and faculty, industry and cultural tours, reflection, and team projects in their study abroad program. Dyjack et al. (2001) discussed an experiential public health study abroad program. They focused on developing understanding of public health issues locally and globally, learning about the social and behavioral roots of public health problems, understanding linkages of public health problems with different aspects of life such as technological advancements, urbanization, industrialization, and skill development related to public health. All these studies claim that these experiences had a profound impact on students' worldview and some studies claimed deep learning and transformative experiences for students during these programs. In terms of strategies, all these programs had lectures and site visits in common, however, there was no mention of the effectiveness of these teaching and learning strategies particularly from students' perspectives.

Kulbok et al. (2012), in their extensive literature review about international experiences in nursing, mentioned that research on two-way exchange experiences is lacking and most studies are from Western countries – particularly a larger share of programs and studies originated from the U.S. Many of the studies are about experiences in higher income countries such as Europe and the United States. (Ailinger et al., 2000; Anders, 2001; Carpenter & Garcia, 2012; Charles et al., 2014; Foronda & Belknap, 2012a; Foronda & Belknap, 2012b; Gilboy & Bill, 2011; Hagen et al., 2009; Hu et al., 2010; Larson & Allen, 2006; Maltby & Abrams, 2009; Sandin et al., 2004). There are a few studies where participants from developing countries travelled to developed countries (Wang et al., 2008). Hagen et al. (2009) argued that the literature represents the outcomes of these experiences from “the guest students' point of view, never from the students and faculty from host institutions” (p. 477). This means what we know about study abroad in public health and nursing fields is interpreted and presented from Western perspectives and how students from developed countries perceived and interacted with other countries' healthcare systems and cultures.

In recent years, short-term education abroad programs in the United States and other Western countries have become increasingly popular for Chinese students in the fields of public health, nursing, and medicine (Yue & Wu, 2013; Zheng et al., 2016) in part due to the creation of Chinese policies to strengthen their international education. There are several studies available which compared Chinese learners to Western learners. However, Wu (2015) argues that these studies often contrast Chinese learners with Western learning conceptions and practices. Wu (2015) mentioned that these studies used Western assumptions and notions of learning and as a result the findings present “a distorted understanding of Chinese students” (p. 753). By including Chinese students’ perspectives, we address the social justice issue of representation of the student population from the East in a body of literature that is heavily populated with studies presenting student populations from the West.

### **Theoretical Framework**

An important aspect of this paper is our attempt to advance our conceptual knowledge of experiential learning. Kulbok et al. (2012) mentioned that “out of 23 studies reviewed only three included a theoretical framework for analysis of nursing students’ experiences during international placements: two used Campinha-Bacote’s (2002) model of cultural competence and one used Bennett’s (1993) continuum of intercultural sensitivity” (p. 17). Our study will provide clarity and add to our conceptual understanding of experiential learning and how experiential learning is orchestrated and perceived by the students in terms of its effectiveness in international context. Several scholars from the fields of adult education and human resource development have tried to conceptualize the relationship between experience and learning, such as Dewey (1986), Lindeman (1984), Kolb (1984; 2014), Jarvis (2015), and Fenwick (2003). We particularly focus on the experiential learning process presented by Kolb (1984) to understand the cross-cultural learning experiences of our participants. Kolb (1984) mentioned that learning is a process “whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38). Kolb (1984) presented four stages of learning: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. We used Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) as our theoretical framework and tried to understand how experiential learning works on the ground and how it is perceived by students in cross-cultural context.

### **Research Design**

#### **Participants and Context**

This paper explores the study abroad experiences of 29 Chinese undergraduate students from China Eastern Medical University (pseudonym) participating in an eight-week study abroad program in the United States in the summer of 2019. The 15 undergraduate students majoring in public health and 14 students in nursing participated in the healthcare professional program. The students are aged between 18 and 21 years old. There were three male and twelve female students in public health and one male and twelve female students in the nursing program. One student was in her freshman year and the rest of the students were either in their sophomore or junior year. The public health

students came from three majors: public health administration, food hygiene and nutrition, and preventive medicine.

### **Data Collection**

We used a variety of data collection strategies such as program evaluations, surveys, interviews, a focus group, and reflection papers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Since this is an ongoing study, our preliminary findings are derived from program evaluation data from nursing and public health students and in-depth interviews from public health students. Merriam (2009) suggested using interviews as the best technique to understand participants' perspectives. We conducted individual interviews with our participants that lasted for 60 minutes each. The questions focused on students' perceptions of teaching and learning activities during their study abroad program. We also collected students' reflection papers and journals at the end of the program. The students were encouraged to reflect on their professional learning experiences in their reflection papers especially during shadowing in the county health department. The reflection papers were written in English and the average length of the papers was five pages. Journals were a record of students' daily activities, including any findings or reflections, and were written in Chinese. Since this was a group experience, it was important for us to understand the group perceptions of learning. We conducted a focus group at the end of the program. Due to busy schedules only six students could participate in an-hour long focus group. All the data were collected in the USA during the eight-week study abroad program. Overall, employing multiple techniques to collect data helped us examine our research participants' experiences and understand their perspectives at various points during the program. Also, the variety of data collection strategies provided students several opportunities to express themselves in different forms both written or spoken in English or Chinese. This was important in a cross-cultural setting especially when research participants were using more than one language.

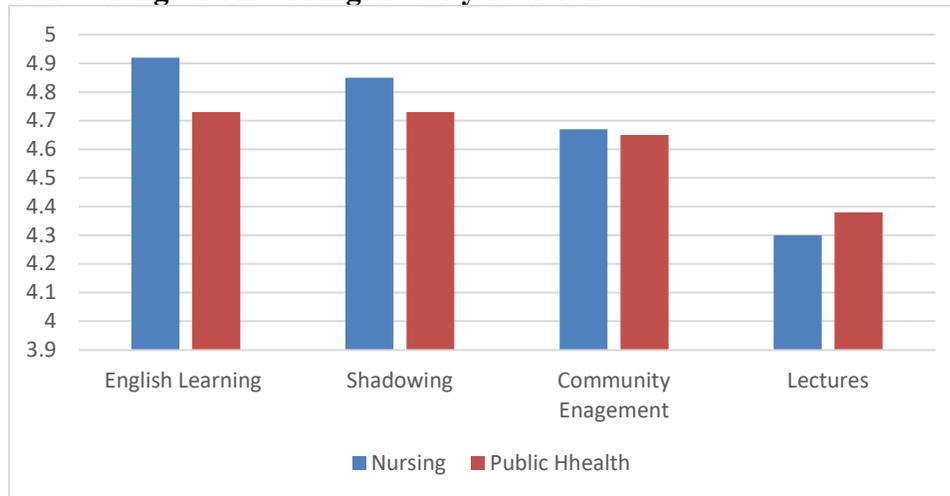
### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis is an interactive process and starts from the very first interview or observation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 2009). The data analysis process included the researchers' monthly meetings which continued over a year. In our meetings we discussed initial findings and our impressions to develop our collaborative interpretations. We read and re-read all the data and identified key themes. We used a thematic analysis technique because it is helpful to identify patterns within and across data to better understand participants lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Findings**

Students were asked to rate all the activities they participated in during the program. Students rated each activity on a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest. Figure 1 shows students' average ratings of different activities. They rated learning English language as the highest, shadowing the second, community engagement third, and lectures fourth as meaningful activities for their learning during the study abroad program.

**Figure 1. Teaching and Learning Activity Preferences**



Note. Ratings of various teaching and learning activities by public health and nursing students

### **1. English Learning**

Learning English was rated the highest by both groups. Learning and practicing English was an important goal for almost all students. They were provided formal English learning classes to improve their written and spoken English. Since building relationships was an important aspect of their learning, English helped them communicate with others. Zhang shared,

*Generally, English is an essential language for now. For me, it is English. Use English to understand others. As long as I can understand what other people say, I will be able to converse a bit. I have observed different ways of saying Hello to each other. It is embarrassing if we don't understand each other. It is obvious to me that I was not able to speak anything to Alpha at the beginning, but later on, I was able to chat with him. Zhang*

Also, many students mentioned that this activity greatly improved their writing and speaking skills which increased their level of self-confidence. They also mentioned that learning English improved their sense of self. For example, QiFei shared that he was able to overcome his fear of talking to foreigners. QiFei was also very strategic in his own learning process since he systematically started asking one question a day to improve his confidence.

*Having overcome the fear of communicating with foreigners, now I no longer think that speaking English is tough work. And I have grown in the following ways. First, I developed my habit of speaking English with my roommates. Second, I started to raise at least one question every day. Third, I tried to speak as loudly as other people can hear and paid attention to my pronunciation to ensure people can clearly understand what I mean. This experience has shaped my good habits and self-confidence. In the future, I will continue practicing my spoken English and encourage myself to interact with people more. Qifei*

## 2. *Shadowing*

Shadowing was the second highest ranked activity by the students. They considered shadowing a useful teaching and learning technique because it helped them develop holistic understanding of their profession. It provided them hands-on experience to gain knowledge and skills for their profession. They also mentioned that shadowing provided them an opportunity to learn about American health professionals' values and attitudes towards their colleagues, patients, and health issues in their society. The students considered this important because it helped them to reflect on the public health system in China and think of ways to improve their system back home. Wu mentioned shadowing helped her develop a holistic understanding of her major:

*Shadowing gave me much valuable experience. Let me jump out of the traditional class and know more about public health. And it helps me realize that my major is not only about medical management, and public health is related to everyone's daily life. Wu*

Binbin mentioned in her interview:

*Shadowing should be full of five points, because we can learn a lot of knowledge when we include teachers and professors in the textbook, but if the knowledge is not used for practice, only the knowledge in the textbook is just the text. But shadowing gives us an opportunity to see more of the knowledge and written knowledge of these books, how they can be applied to real life by their very experienced staff. So, this is a good opportunity." Binbin*

## 3. *Community Engagement*

Community engagement was rated the third meaningful learning activity because it allowed students to communicate with locals and learn about their culture. Public health and nursing students participated in five and two community engagement activities respectively. We analyzed ratings for the two activities in which both groups took part. Public health and nursing students volunteered at county office and presented traditional Chinese medical practices for senior citizens to stay active and healthy. Zhan preferred community engagement activities because he liked communicating with locals and building relationships:

*This is the best part, I think. We went to the communities, participating in various activities, communicating with the elderly, knowing the life here, some of their experiences and feelings here. Some of their stories are inspirational to me. Zhan*

Fang also shared similar sentiments for community engagement activities:

*This is an opportunity for in-depth communication. We can reach more people in the local communities, whether it is older adults or other groups. It is a great way for us to communicate with each other. An opportunity to learn, and then gave us a chance to volunteer here in the United States, I feel good about it. Fang*

#### 4. Lectures

Public health and nursing students attended 13 lectures about topics such as global health, aging and living, global maternal leave and childcare, U.S. nursing education and practice, complementary nursing, nursing theory and history, the American health care system, and philosophical and historical perspectives of health and disease. Lectures were rated the lowest in terms of meaningfulness by both groups of students. Although they rated lectures lower as compared to other above-mentioned activities, they considered lectures a valuable teaching and learning technique. They mentioned that lectures improved their knowledge about health issues in the United States and China. It also helped them improve their English language skills and increased their confidence levels. However, they faced some challenges understanding lectures for example:

*I may give four points, because I am a Chinese student after all, that is, listening to a lot of English information (is challenging). At the time of getting information, there is still a Chinese and English in the brain. The process of conversion. Then, when there is more information, it may be impossible to remember, that is, the meaning of knowing when listening is completely clear, but it may not be left in the mind, just after the lecture or two days later, then when you think about it again, the information you may remember is not as much as that heard in direct Chinese. However, the lectures have a wide coverage and many professional knowledges can be covered, but it is also very good. Bibbin*

#### Discussion

We found that participating in a study abroad program as an experiential learning as mentioned by Kolb (1984) was a significant learning experience for our participants.

The Chinese students perceived learning from a holistic perspective. They were not narrowly focused on their field of study, rather they approached learning from a broader and lifelong perspective. Their conception of learning was not confined to textbooks or lectures, and they considered learning was beyond textual knowledge. What constituted valuable knowledge was not in books or lectures but in human interactions. They defined “text knowledge” and information “learned in books” as less needed as compared to “real life knowledge” which gave them the opportunity to communicate with others and build relationships.

Additionally, sense of self and emotions were important in the Chinese students’ learning process and were deeply interconnected. Many students mentioned different feelings associated with their learning experience such as shame, embarrassment, courage, strength, losing face, feeling uncomfortable, feeling envious, and feeling warmth and respect. Sense of self is also deeply connected with social relations and human interactions.

Furthermore, building human connections and relationships were the most important aspect of the Chinese students’ learning process. Communication was important for building these relationships. Understanding others and being understood by others was important for them. The students preferred communal and interactive learning activities

over passive and individual learning activities. They rated learning English as the highest and most effective learning strategy because it provided them confidence and skills to communicate with American colleagues and locals. They ranked shadowing and community engagement as second and third respectively. The common factor in all these activities was the chance to communicate with others and build relationships with different people. Lectures and reflection were rated lower than the above-mentioned activities by the students.

In terms of discussion about Eastern and Western perspectives of learning, Merriam and Kim (2011) compared Western and non-Western perspectives on learning and knowing. Our findings provide empirical evidence and confirm Merriam and Kim's (2011) analysis of Western and non-Western approaches to learning and knowing since they mentioned that non-Westerners have a holistic approach to learning which "recognizes the relationship among an adult learner's body, emotion, and spirituality" (p.386). Merriam and Kim (2011) also mentioned that non-Western perspectives of learning "place more value on learning embedded in everyday life because non-Westerners believe knowledge is embedded in everyday life experiences. They do not value what is learned in formal school setting more than what is learned in daily life" (Merriam & Kim, 2011, p.386). In terms of the communal aspect of learning Merriam and Kim (2011) mentioned that lifelong learning is seen as a journey with community and learning occurs through observations of others and through practicing what is learned.

In a conceptual paper, Trinh and Kolb (2012) discussed Eastern and Western conceptions of experiential learning and argued that Eastern ways of learning are essentially embedded in Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) as presented by Kolb (1984). Trinh and Kolb (2012) mentioned that Confucius believed that learning, thinking, and acting are significant components of learning. Trinh and Kolb (2012) argued that Kolb's (1984) ELT also encompasses all functions of being human such as thinking, feeling, acting, and reflecting similar to the Confucian holistic conception of learning. Although Trinh and Kolb (2012) argued for the similarity between Eastern and Western conceptualization of experiential learning, we argue that Kolb's (1984) ELT does not place strong emphasis on communal learning and building relationships. Also, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning process does not address the emotional aspect of learning particularly in cross-cultural context. We argue it is important to learn about the conceptualization of learning in different cultures and create learning experiences which can be inclusive of all learners. Merriam and Bierema (2014) also argued that it will be more beneficial to merge Western and non-Western approaches to teaching and learning to achieve highly effective learning experiences for diverse learners in cross-cultural contexts.

## **Conclusion**

Our study shows that there are some commonalities in conceptualization of experiential learning between Western and non-Western approaches; however, they may have different philosophical underpinning in different cultural contexts. So, it is important to consider cultural values and conceptions of learning to cater to the needs of diverse learners. We argue that merely participating in a study abroad program is not enough for effective student learning experiences. There is need to further create opportunities for

human interaction through social-cultural engagement, application of knowledge, and deeper reflection. For public health study abroad programs we suggest the following teaching and learning strategies for creating deep learning experience for students in cross-cultural context.

- Provide support for learning and practicing English language for students coming from non-English speaking countries.
- Include a socio-cultural learning component in the program along with professional knowledge.
- Provide opportunities for students to engage with the local community and health professionals.
- Include lectures about important health related issues to provide students background contextual knowledge of the health issue.
- Conduct regular debrief sessions throughout the program to answer students' questions and address their assumptions.
- Provide reflection opportunities in non-verbal forms such as writing journals, papers, art, videos, vlog etc. to cater to diverse learners.

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