

# A Model for International Continuing Education: Cross-Cultural, Experiential Professional Development

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There has been a rapid increase in the Hispanic population in the southeastern United States in the past fifteen years. The state of Georgia has seen its Hispanic/Latino population increase from only a few thousand fifteen years ago to an estimated half-million after the turn of the century (Akioka, 1998). Because there has been little history of the Hispanic/Latino population throughout the state, social service agencies lack experience with Hispanic persons. Therefore, there is a significant need for bilingual, culturally competent social workers to serve this rapidly emerging population. Until very recently, the professional schools of social work in the state have offered no formal education for work with this population, aside from some cultural diversity classes. In addition, there is a need across the United States for culturally competent social workers who understand positive aspects of increasing cultural diversity and can provide leadership in their communities and to the profession in moving toward an open, healthy society with opportunities and appreciation for all ethnic groups. In this article is presented one model for developing such abilities among practicing social workers.

As early as the 1980s, culturally sensitive social work practice was widely discussed (Chunn, Dunston & Ross-Sheriff, 1983; Devore & Shlesinger, 1981). More recently, there has been an increasing interest in cross-cultural counseling with minorities (Acosta, Yamamoto & Evans, 1982; Sue & Zane, 1987) and in developing ethnically and culturally competent practitioners (Green, 1982; Leigh, 1982). Experiences beyond the traditional BSW and MSW curricula, including intense exposure to cultural diversity in the classroom and internship settings, are important to developing social workers who can serve Hispanic/Latino clients effectively. Cultural awareness and bilingual ability are important components in cross-cultural practice (Applewhite, Wong & Daley, 1991). Across the nation, there historically has been a shortage of well-trained professional social workers

who are bilingual and culturally competent (National Coalition of Hispanic Mental Health and Human Service Organizations, 1980).

Social work professionals in the United States place high value on sensitivity to cultural differences, and on educational experiences which can provide a knowledge base about various cultures, both within the United States and abroad. The rapid growth in numbers and the increasing visibility of diverse ethnic and racial groups are challenging the social work profession to educate students for ethnic-competent practice in cross-cultural settings (Chau, 1990). The literature on these issues is found under the topics of cross-cultural, multi-cultural, and international social work education (Holmes & Matthews, 1993). Curricular issues have received attention in the effort to develop a culturally and ethnically sensitive social work educational experience. However, little has been written about cross-cultural continuing education which utilizes experiential learning, or about international cross-cultural experiences (Holmes & Matthews, 1993).

It is commonly accepted by persons active in cross-cultural education that the experience of coming to know persons from another culture on a personal level reduces ethnocentrism. This kind of experience is especially beneficial when it occurs in the context of a structured cross-cultural learning program (Holmes & Matthews, 1993). Mio (1989) used experiential learning as an extension of a class on cultural sensitivity and found that students' educational experiences were greatly enriched by direct contact with members of other cultures. Holmes and Matthews (1993) paired foreign social workers with MSW students in the United States during a four-month visit by health and human service workers from abroad. The visiting workers also participated in home stays with host families and ranked the experience of living with a host family as the most important part of the program in increasing their understanding of culture in the United States. Contact with local MSW students

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was ranked as the second most significant experience in increasing the understanding of American society.

Student exchange experiences are not new. In fact, the number of traditional academic exchanges involving North American students visiting Mexico has been proliferating (Statland de Lopez, 1993). It has been found that one way to increase the value of a study abroad experience is to offer predeparture orientation and preparation for entering into another culture (Martin, 1989). Such preparation allows the student the opportunity to explore new ways of learning when in a different cultural context. (The model presented in this study utilizes such a predeparture orientation.)

Effective learning requires the use of teaching approaches relevant to the subject. It is very difficult to help either traditional or continuing education students to learn to be sensitive to the experience of being a member of a minority group or of being an immigrant. Often students focus on the cognitive aspects of such learning to the neglect of the affective responses in dealing with an unfamiliar and threatening environment (Montalvo, 1983). However, experiential learning is an excellent technique for helping students to accept cultural differences and to appreciate cultural integrity (Chau, 1990) even if such learning results in some feelings of discomfort. When students experience the accumulated strains of relating to the challenges of an unfamiliar environment, they experience culture shock. Nevertheless, it is important for students to grow through this discomfort in order to gain new sensitivities (Montalvo, 1983). It is difficult to simulate this experience in a classroom or workshop in the home culture. Thus, the experiential approach of a structured program of cultural immersion is preferred for the person who wishes to grow rapidly toward cultural competence (Holmes & Matthews, 1993).

Finally, social workers in the United States can learn much about theory and practice from social workers in Mexico and other countries which are undergoing rapid development and urbanization. The learning process is not one-way and involves

more than cultural diversity, cross-cultural understanding, and appreciation of different customs. Where social workers can interact with each other, there are many possibilities for sharing of methods and theories (Martinez-Brawley, 1980). For example, rural areas of Latin America and rural areas of the United States share common dilemmas of high poverty rates and limited resources to deal with social problems (Martinez-Brawley, 1980). Latin American social workers have developed unique approaches to generalist social work with a strong emphasis on community development. Thus, meeting and relating with fellow professionals can have numerous benefits.

### **Development of the Model**

The pilot experiences for the model presented in this article were conducted in the summers of 1995 and 1996, with groups composed of both traditional students enrolled in social work programs and practicing social workers from the state of Georgia participating for continuing education credits (Boyle, Nackerud & Kilpatrick, 1999). From these two pilot experiences, the following elements were adopted into a standardized course offering available each summer.

### **Pre-travel Orientation**

Participants meet regularly with the group leader, a social work faculty member from the University of Georgia (UGA) with extensive international and practice experience. The first session covers essential health, safety, and travel issues: immunizations, passports, payment of tuition, group dynamics/introductions, and release of liability forms. The second session covers the geography and climate of the state of Veracruz and lifestyle traditions in Mexico: male/female roles, appropriate dress, behavior with host families, etiquette, gifts for hosts and friends, etc. The third session finalizes travel plans, deals with any anxiety about entering a new culture, and assigns readings from two texts available from the UGA bookstore. Each participant is expected to read *Introduction to Mexico* (Youth for Understanding International Exchange, 1992) and to prepare one chapter of

translation to share with the group from *Sociología y Servicios Sociales* (Woodford & Schmitt, 1993) in order to learn social work vocabulary in Spanish.

### **Cultural Immersion**

Immersion in Mexican culture and Spanish language is the primary method employed to develop culturally competent social workers and to promote the development of an international social work community. Cultural immersion involves staying in the homes of local people in the city of Xalapa, the capital of Veracruz, and speaking only Spanish in the daily, language school sessions.

### **Family Home Stays**

Upon arrival in Xalapa, assigned host families meet the bus and take the participants immediately to their homes. Since most of the host families speak no English, the language immersion phase begins immediately. The morning of the second day is allotted to cultural acclimatization in a meeting with the group leader and a staff member from the School for Foreign Students, *Escuela para Estudiantes Extranjeros (EEE)* of the University of Veracruz (UV), for a walking tour of the downtown area and an orientation to the city. Participants spend approximately ten days in the homes of the host families. Three daily meals are provided in that context. Daily seminars, led by the group leader in the afternoons, allow participants to share their impressions of family structures, patterns of interaction, family rules, and any adjustment issues.

### **Language Study**

Participants attend Spanish language classes, offered by the EEE, for three hours each day. The emphasis in these classes is on acquiring skills for everyday functioning in the new environment. A special focus on developing specialized vocabulary relevant to social services distinguishes the UGA program from other offerings at the EEE.

The teachers, natives of Veracruz with graduate degrees in language instruction and experience living in the U.S.A., utilize discussions of current events, reports on various aspects of Mexican cul-

ture, grammar exercises, and vocabulary drills. Homework includes excursions to the market, discussions of visits to social service agencies, notations of the significance of cultural differences, and practice of some of the more technical aspects of language acquisition, such as verb conjugations.

### **Site Visits to Social Service Agencies**

Site visits, planned by the language school instructor, include a model public school, a women's hospital, a public hospital, and several agencies associated with DIF (Development Integral de la Familia or Social Services Department), such as a senior citizens center, a home and school for street children, a psychiatric hospital, and a diagnostic center for developmentally disabled children. The participants also accompany representatives from several departments of UV on a daylong visit to mountain villages to observe the activities of a model program for sustainable social development.

In several of the agencies, there are professional social workers on staff. During site visits, participants enjoy the opportunity to compare professional practices and exchange ideas on social work theories and methods. These times of interaction greatly enrich the visitors' understanding of the similarities and differences in social work preparation and practice in the U.S. and in Mexico. It is common for participants to exchange professional materials and to plan to maintain contact in the future. The UGA participants carry small gifts for each social worker as an appreciation for their sharing their time and expertise.

### **Cultural Experiences**

Local hosts usually invite their guests to attend concerts, symphony and folk dancing performances, community fiestas, family fiestas, and church services. During the weekends, participants visit pre-Colombian pyramids, art galleries, a botanical garden, volcanic waterfalls, picturesque pueblos, coffee plantations, and other sites of cultural significance. Of particular note is the visit to the anthropological museum in Xalapa for an in-

depth look into the history, cultural roots, values, and mores of the diverse native peoples of the state of Veracruz.

### **Continuing Education Curriculum**

During the daily seminars, the group leader or another UGA faculty member covers the following topics to ensure the content for continuing education credits: *Entering a Different Cultural Space*, *Social Justice in Mexican Society*, *The Mexican Social Service System*, *Social Development Theory*, *Social Work Methods with Mexican Clients*, *Cultural Diversity in Mexico*, and *Social Work Ethics in the Context of Mexican Society*. Participants also share their translated chapter and discuss vocabulary they are learning which may facilitate their work in Georgia with Latino clients.

### **Evaluation**

During the 1995-96 pilot phase of the program, empirical data of both a qualitative and quantitative nature were gathered. Data collection focused on an assessment of the program objective of increased cultural competence for program participants (Boyle, Nackerud & Kilpatrick, 1999). Each participant kept a reflective journal. The journals provided qualitative empirical data which were analyzed through the development of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Patton 1990). Using an inductive process, patterns and themes were identified by the faculty participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The exchange participants also completed the Multicultural Counseling Awareness Scale (MCAS), form B, (Ponterotto, Rieger, Barrett & Sparks, 1994), before and after the stay in Mexico. The data were used to answer the question: What effect did participation in an international social work exchange program have on the multicultural competence (knowledge/skills and awareness) of participants? Data from the pre- and post-completion of the MCAS:B demonstrated a gain of 18% in total score for the construct of multicultural competence 1995. Results for the second year (1996) were consistent with those of the first year (Boyle, Nackerud & Kilpatrick, 1999).

An analysis of the qualitative data emerging from journals of participants in the 1995 experience resulted in the identification of the following themes and categories: the impact of the physical environment (dramatically beautiful scenes, exotic plants, and pollution), the diversity in the social environment (cultural diversity within Mexico and the contrast between great wealth and poverty), the demands of living in a foreign land (the stress of noise at all hours, the extreme heat on the coast, and constant alertness to communicate in another language), the exposure to social work education and practice (many similarities, some differences in health settings where social workers do much health education, and many more hours in the field for students), the warmth of the Mexican people (the graciousness of the language instructor and the officials of UV, and host families who shared outings and fiestas), the general Mexican orientation toward groups (less separation by age, use of team approaches, and older children supervising younger children), the family as the basic unit of Mexican society (elders and children integrated into family life, little use of baby sitters, and the changing role of women with more employment outside the home), special learning opportunities through the cultural immersion experience (group cohesion during the language school, collegial UGA faculty leadership, and support of the group in dealing with stress). In 1996, a group journal was kept for each day of the experience. An analysis of the group journal showed remarkably similar themes and categories to those identified in the lengthy individual journals from 1995 (Boyle, Nackerud & Kilpatrick, 1999). Analyses of group journals from 1997-1999 have largely supported the accuracy of the themes found in the first two years, with the addition of noting the respect that children and younger people generally have for their elders. In 1999, the group was asked to identify strengths and recommendations for future years, as the last entry of the journal. Several participants noted that the opportunities to understand both the social work profession and Mexican culture exceeded their expectations, while a specific suggestion was to

place travel, health, and general preparation guidelines in a written manual to give to each participant at registration.

Each year, a post-travel session is held at a Mexican restaurant located in an area of the state that is central to all participants within two months of the completion of the program. At this session, the group shares photographs, memories, and verbal recommendations with each other and with the Director of Continuing Education and the Coordinator of International Programs for the UGA School of Social Work. These recommendations are then utilized in developing the next year's offering. UGA continuing education certificates either are handed out at this session or mailed within thirty days.

### Logistics

In August of each year, the Director of Continuing Education and the Coordinator of International Programs of the UGA School of Social Work review the experience of the group immediately past for recommendations and cost-effectiveness since the experience must be self-supporting, including paying the leadership costs. The Director then negotiates a date with the EEE and develops a brochure to be widely distributed at social work functions in Georgia. The Director develops an advertisement to place in several issues of newsletters of the Georgia NASW and the Society for Clinical Social Work, with the goal of generating adequate enrollment for the summer program, of practicing social workers who have studied Spanish for at least two years by the following March. The pilot phase was supported by a grant from UGA for the development of international programs. Two of the following years' programs were self-supporting from participant fees of \$1,200 each. One year, additional support from the continuing education budget was required, due to a small enrollment. An enrollment of twelve is necessary to pay all expenses.

Since Georgia is geographically a large state and participants come from all regions, the 1997 and 1998 pre-travel sessions were held via distance, uti-

lizing televideo conferencing from UGA facilities in Athens and Atlanta. In 1999, due to the geographic dispersion of the participants, the pre-travel sessions were held via Internet and teleconference. Basic information was shared from a web page developed for this purpose. Travel plans were negotiated via e-mail. Personal questions and group dynamics were dealt with by telephone conferences.

### Discussion

Social work educators have discussed for many years the importance of internationalizing social work education. They generally share the opinion that it is very important for social workers to be leaders in helping our society relate to other peoples and cultures with greater sensitivity to their customs and values. By 1986, over half of the schools of social work in the U. S. reported inclusion of international content in regular courses (Healy, 1988).

The innovative approach examined here adds the skills of bilingual ability and increased cultural competence to the regular social work continuing education offerings. The cultural immersion experience, when combined with the pre-travel orientation sessions, is effective in achieving the goals of increasing cultural competence.

Several findings from the ongoing offering of this continuing education experience will inform future endeavors. The predeparture preparation is a crucial aspect of the experience. The group itself has proven to be a source of support during the ongoing stress of engaging intensely within another culture. The syllabus and program outline need to be very specific for those receiving continuing education credit to assure that these activities actually occur.

Cultural immersion is a stressful experience. Time together as a group for seminars where learning can be processed must be made a priority. These times allow for making needed changes in arrangements. Flexibility is essential. For example, the schedule is sometimes so filled that adjustments have to be made to provide time to deal with

stress and to evaluate stress management plans made prior to departure.

Marketing to the professional social work community remains critical. The value of the package is unsurpassed: 35 hours of continuing education credits which meet the requirements of the Georgia Social Work Licensure Board for a two-year cycle, language and culture training, networking with international colleagues, and overall professional growth, for the price of \$1,200, inclusive of travel. The demand for such educational experiences continues to grow with the constant increase in the interface between social work practitioners and the Latino population of Georgia. However, the necessity of travel away from home and the scheduling of the event in May or June have made it difficult for some professionals, such as school social workers, to participate.

A strength of this model is that it has proven capable of replication. For example, the UGA Graduate College of Education has implemented a similar experience derived from the model with the same goals and time frames. It is also based at the EEE of the University of Veracruz for in-service education credit for teachers in public schools in Georgia, with the substitution of visits to schools instead of social agencies. Thus, this low-cost, effective model offers a chance for international continuing education for social workers, educators, and other human service professionals, as it is replicated under different conditions.

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