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Improving communication between international and U.S. students at MU

This study examined changes in students' cultural perceptions following learning exchanges between international and U.S. students. The goals of the exchanges were to improve communication skills of international students before they become teaching assistants and to teach occupational therapy students to work with people of other cultures more effectively. Another goal was for students to experience the research process as part of their class work. In order to measure the impact of the exchanges, we asked ourselves the following questions:

1. Will students' see themselves as better able to adapt after learning exchanges with students from other countries?
2. Are changes related to travel in other countries?
3. What value do the learning exchanges have for students?

We know that experiential learning activities and having students teach one another are two strategies for enhancing learning. We also know that positive contact between people of equal status (student-to-student) is one of the primary conditions for improving cultural competency. Finally, team-teaching and linking courses can enhance learning in related fields. We combined these three ideas by linking students in a graduate course for international teaching assistants with a professional communications course for occupational therapy students.

Methods:

Students gave their views before and after 5 experiential learning activities, which included social exchanges, conversation hours, interviews, microteaching, a ropes course, and role-playing.

The study included 39 teaching assistant students from other countries and 47 students from a health field. All students completed a questionnaire and took a pre- and post- Cross Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI) on their views of being able to adapt to other cultures. Occupational therapy students also completed journals. Themes were drawn from their answers to capture the meaning of the experience. Quantitative data was analyzed via a t-test for paired comparisons. A constant comparative method was used to analyze the qualitative data.

Results:

- 1) After students completed shared experiential learning activities, there was a positive change between the pre and post test scores on the CCAI ($p < .0001$; $N=86$).
- 2) Differences emerged when participants were stratified into three sub-groups: international students, U.S. students with international travel experience, and U.S. students without international travel experience. Those who benefited the most from the learning exchanges were the *U.S. students* with previous international travel experiences ($p < .001$). *The international graduate students* also experienced a significant change following the exchanges ($p < .005$). *U.S. students without any prior international travel* experience had no significant change.
- 3) Changes indicated after qualitative analysis of questionnaires and journals included: moving from 'initial nervousness' to being 'comfortable conversing,' 'learning to trust someone that you don't know,' 'understanding non-verbal communication,' and having to 'listen more' to cope with language barriers.

Implications:

Significant changes in cultural competency for international students and occupational therapy students with international travel experience indicate that experiential learning activities can be beneficial for these groups. The lack of change demonstrated by students who had not traveled abroad implies that international travel would be beneficial to these students. This study confirms the importance of contextual learning with conditions of equality, cooperation, shared goals, and faculty support in a peer-teaching process as underscored in contact theory.