

# The Transformative Effects of International Education at an HIV/ AIDS Clinic in South Africa

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## Abstract

In recent years, more psychology programs are offering study abroad courses. These courses have the additional benefit of increasing student cultural competence. The goal of this study was to examine the impact of international education on a group of graduate students in psychology who participated in a 5-week travel abroad program to South Africa. Using a small convenience sample, a qualitative research design was used to explore student perceptions of engaging in clinical work in a cross-cultural setting. The study is framed within multicultural education and transformative learning theory, both of which inform the findings. Several themes that were categorized as personal, professional, community, social/cultural, and political emerged from in-depth individual interviews with participants. They reported a deeper cultural understanding of self and others with a stronger appreciation and respect of the uniqueness of individuals and their worldviews and the importance of validating these cultural differences. Participants reported that direct contact with others who were culturally different helped them develop key clinical skills of compassion and empathy. Overall most participants found that the international experience was 'life-changing' and provided them with opportunities to transcend the limits of regular classroom instruction. Some students were

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inspired to make meaningful changes in their lives when they returned to the U.S. by increasing their involvement in community activities that provided services to the disenfranchised. Although not generalizable because of the small sample, this study demonstrates that international education can engage students in active learning and provide them with opportunities for practical application of knowledge.

### **Keywords**

adult development, transformative education, transformation

Be the change you want to see in the world  
Mahatma Gandhi

## **Introduction**

Increasing globalization and dramatic international changes triggered by immigration and a changing economy have tested the insularity and ethnocentrism of psychology as it is practiced in the United States. It has prompted the inclusion of international courses in graduate psychology programs. Study abroad courses internationalize psychology while increasing student sensitivity to the multiple variables of culture (Savicki, 2008).

Although several authors (Dirkx, Spohr, Tepper, & Tons, 2009; Lyons, 2002, Savicki, 2008) believe that cross-cultural and international programs can transform student motivation, attitudes, values, meaning perspectives, and self-identity, research that systematically examines the experiences of graduate students who have participated in short-term study abroad programs are scant. This study addresses this gap in the literature by investigating the experiences of psychology students who participated in an international education program focused on developing their multicultural and clinical skills.

The goal of our study was to examine the impact of international education on graduate students in psychology who participated in a 5-week travel abroad program to South Africa. Using a qualitative research design and a small convenience sample, we sought to explore the perceptions of students 1 and 2 years after completion of the program which was offered biannually. All students who participated in the program had unique opportunities to engage in clinical work in a cross-cultural setting where extreme trauma was prevalent; this experience increased student clinical and cultural knowledge.

International education programs offered at academic institutions provide opportunities for cultural immersion, meaningful interaction, and cultural exchange while promoting professional growth development. Additionally, the length of such programs support adaptation and have the potential to make a lasting impression on students. Most importantly, the experience of international education allows for a testing of previously held values and assumptions. As students explore different environments they may find old patterns, and established values and personal attitudes challenged. However,

maintaining openness and flexibility allows them to transcend ethnocentrism and establish international professional linkages. Direct contact with individuals from other communities breaks down misleading stereotypes of those who are different from one's own cultural group (Stitsworth, 2001). Students who study abroad have consistently had positive reports about their experiences (Duffy, Farmer, Ravert, & Huittinen, 2005). They often cite benefits of personal growth, increased tolerance, improved self-understanding, greater openness and independence, and increased sophistication (Carty, O'Grady, Wichaikhum, & Bull, 2002; Scholes & Moore, 2000).

For example, in one of the few studies on international programs, Duffy, Harju, Huittinen, & Trayner (1999) found that white North American nursing students who participated in a travel abroad program had the rare opportunity to occupy a minority status. Because their education was culturally inclusive, students were better equipped to provide culturally competent nursing care after their return to North America. Other studies have found similar results; international education improved students' cultural competency and clinical practice (Carty et al., 2002; Scholes & Moore, 2000). Students reported several personal gains: Becoming more self-reliant, making better career and life choices, a deepening appreciation of diversity and stronger commitment to social justice (Wheeler, 2000).

However, intercultural education programs are often time consuming; they require careful planning and development. Moreover, some students experience culture shock, stress, depression, and homesickness while at international locations (Duffy, 2001). These difficulties are likely to be exacerbated by climate, accommodation and food changes, language and other cross-cultural differences (Ryan & Twibell, 2000). In a globalized world with major technological advances, multicultural interactions are both common-place and accessible; the curricula of academic programs must be modified to reflect these changes (APA, 2003).

In this article, we first provide a brief overview of the basic framework of multicultural education and transformative learning theory, both of which informed the findings of this study. This is followed by a description of the international program and research methods and an overview and interpretation of our findings. We conclude with limitations of the study and recommendations for future studies.

## **Multicultural Competence Theory**

A major goal of counseling programs is to develop students' multicultural competence by specifically focusing on the three important areas of multicultural competence: awareness of personal assumptions values and biases increased understanding of the worldview of the client and developing skills for working with culturally different clients has become a major goal of counseling programs (Sue, Bingham, Porche-Burke, & Vasquez, 1999). However, developing cultural competency skills and enhancing cultural sensitivity among students are ongoing challenges for educators who wrestle with how to transmit knowledge in a way that does not instill defensiveness among students (Duffy, 2001; Kirkpatrick & Brown, 1999). The challenge is

to foster a meaningful learning experience that is process rather than content driven (Lee & Greene, 2003). Education that includes practical application is one way to circumvent this challenge since it becomes more than an intellectual exercise of providing knowledge, but increases awareness, and several other skills simultaneously. The barriers of racial and ethnic stereotypes are dissolved when students engage directly with others who are culturally different and inhabit unfamiliar environments. They quickly learn that interpersonal exchanges can have multiple meanings and include different ways of behaving (APA, 2003). This cultural immersion creates a balance of knowledge and practice that has major benefits for students (Pedersen, 2000). Multiculturalists believe that all human service providers must develop the appropriate skills to work effectively with culturally diverse clients and advocate on their behalf (Arredondo & Perez, 2006). International education provides a venue for students to increase this multicultural sensitivity. Most importantly, it triggers a transformational process (Gorski, 2008).

## **Transformative Learning Theory**

Transformative learning involves more than an accumulation of factual knowledge; it entails making knowledge meaningful and promoting change in the learner (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006). Educators who practice transformative learning encourage students to criticize assumptions, beliefs, and values and consider multiple viewpoints. The core of transformational learning theory is similar to Paulo Freire's (2002) concept of "conscientization" and Habermas' (1981) "emancipatory action" domain of learning. A critical awareness of how assumptions constrain perceptions and understanding of the world transforms the learner's perspectives; introspection develops a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrated perspective.

Traditional education practices rely on transactional education principles. In contrast, transformational education engages students in learning through interaction, inquiry, and critical thinking. According to Mezirow (1991), even though all learning creates change, all change does not necessarily result in transformation. It is only when students engage directly with educational material, an engagement that is possible in practical application, that the goals of transformative learning can be achieved. Teachers who use transformative learning principles create a structural shift in students' thoughts, feelings, and actions that dramatically and irreversibly alters their interactions with others since social constructivism is the theoretical underpinning of transformative learning. Transformative learning theory postulates that learning is transformative when learners are able to critically examine, question, validate, and revise their frames of references and assumptions (Mezirow, 2000).

## **The Program**

Biannually the first author has taken graduate students in counseling psychology from a private institution located in the northeast area of the United States on an

international travel program to South Africa for 4 weeks. Students are based in a clinic, at a public hospital, that largely provides services to children and families affected by HIV/AIDS. The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) Report on the global AIDS Epidemic in South Africa is illuminating. In 2009, according to the UN report, 5.6 million people were estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS in South Africa and 310,000 South Africans died of AIDS; these statistics surpass those of any other country. South Africa's HIV/AIDS epidemic has had a devastating effect on children in a number of ways (child abuse and neglect). HIV in South Africa is transmitted predominantly through heterosexual sex, with mother-to-child transmission being the main infection route (UNAIDS, 2010); an estimated 330,000 children under 15 were living with HIV in 2009.

The travel program gives students the opportunity to learn innovative community and counseling therapy approaches with clients who present with a wide range of psychological traumas such as parental loss, sexual molestation, rape, physical assault, interpersonal violence, and community violence. At the same time, they gain opportunities to work with clients who are racially, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse. Students are thus able to develop trauma-focused clinical skills with clients affected by multiple stressors and gain multicultural competency skills at the same time. The program consequently blends conceptual learning with practical experience. Students were required to engage in clinical activities for 25 hours a week (Monday to Friday) and attend twice weekly seminars (90 min each). The seminars were led by the first author who was the instructor of the international education program; it included didactic instruction, current trends in posttraumatic stress studies, the traumatic consequences of HIV/AIDS on children and families, and culturally different coping and healing mechanisms. The seminar also provided opportunities for students to get feedback and supervision.

The pedagogical approach adopted by the instructor encouraged students to view the traumatic responses of their clients as expressions of pain and efforts to cope with unacceptable environmental demands and stressors that are usually grounded in cultural systems of meaning making (Dass-Brailsford, 2007; Dass-Brailsford, 2011). The primary goal of the course was to develop student skills in locating and utilizing the strength and resilience inherent within children, families, and communities so that they could support them in healing and recovery.

Further, to develop and refine student's multicultural skills in trauma intervention, students were taught to examine the role that social, cultural, historical, and political factors played in the lives of their South African clients. Interventions thus included particular attention to the role of these external stressors in clients' lives. The instructor shared practical tools for developing a self-reflective stance toward traditional psychotherapy and other ethical, cross-cultural, and clinical issues. As cultural outsiders, students had to learn and develop familiarity with language nuances and other systems of a culture (Ryan, 2007).

**Table 1.** Participant Demographic Data

Demographics	
Number of participants:	Female: 9 Male: 3
Race/ethnicity	White: 10 African American: 2
Mean age	35
Age range	25–55

## Method

### *Specific Aims*

The goal of this study was to examine the impact of an international education program on graduate students in a counseling psychology program. The specific aims of the study were as follows:

- a. To assess whether participation in an international education program would increase students' multicultural competency.
- b. To describe the transformation, if any, that students who had participated in an international program would report 1 and 2 years later

### *Research Design*

This formative study used a qualitative research design. The research was largely descriptive and endeavored to discover important processes and relationships, not to test them (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The primary data source was the semi-structured interview which was conducted individually with each participant. This method of research allowed for focused, conversational, two-way communication. Interviews began with general questions with the flexibility to probe for details and/or discuss responses made by participants. Since this was a convenience sample of two student cohorts (from two separate trips taken 2 years apart), some participants were interviewed a year and others 2 years after participation in the program. A secondary data source was participants' final papers which were written 3 weeks after their return to the United States. After gaining institutional review board approval, students who provided informed consent were enrolled in the study and participated in individual interviews that lasted between 90 and 120 min. Each participant was asked the same five questions (see Appendix). The interview questions were tested for feasibility and fidelity in discussions with three students, who also participated in the travel abroad program but were not included in this research study. These students were subjectively identified by the primary researcher as thoughtful and introspective individuals capable of providing valuable insights and

feedback. All interviews were conducted by the first author. Tape recordings of the interviews were transcribed by a research assistant and the transcriptions were analyzed by the second author.

### *Participants*

Participation in this study was voluntary and sampling was purposive (Patton, 2002). Twelve graduate students (out of a total of 18 students from 2 cohorts) agreed to participate in this study. Some students had moved after graduation and were unreachable because of changes in locator details. Three men and nine women were interviewed. The mean age of the participants was 35 years (range 26–55). The demographic data of participants, most of them were in the second year of a 3-year master's degree program in counseling psychology, are illustrated in Table 1. None of the students had participated in an international program prior to taking this course. Some interviews were conducted in person ( $n = 8$ ) while others, because of geographic and time constraints, were conducted telephonically ( $n = 4$ ).

### *Data Analysis*

The interviews and final papers were transcribed into separate documents. Content analysis of transcripts was conducted by a research assistant, trained in qualitative data analysis and supervised by the first author who reviewed half of the transcripts to identify salient themes. Code classification was based on the most important points of the interview and focused on five different areas of impact: personal, professional, community, social/cultural, and political. Transcriptions were coded by two members of the research team using the codes created. The coded data were entered into NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis software that helped with data analysis and interpretation by selecting the most important coded quotes.

### **Results**

Several themes emerged from participants' responses in the interviews and information provided in their final papers. These were codified into the categories of personal, professional, community, social/cultural, and political. Each category is outlined below and illustrated through excerpts from participants' responses.

*Personal.* All the participants in this study had positive opinions on the life-changing quality of the program. It clearly had personal benefits and some students yearned to repeat the experience:

*I am a different person as a result of the trip. My life course has changed . . . . Ever since I have longed to go back and I hope that I will someday design a special program for the HIV-infected children and orphans.*

The emic approach of the course combined high academic standards with personal growth deepened student learning and extended their engagement with the host culture. Participants reflected on the lasting personal and professional life-changing qualities of experiential learning:

*The richness of the course went beyond the academic. Personally I am a richer person for the experience and I would not trade it for the world; it is a part of own personal development. Not a day goes by that I don't think about the South African trip and the HIV-affected children we worked with . . .*

Further, participants noted that the experiential focus and practical component of this course provided them with an experience that could not be duplicated in the classroom. Besides opportunities to develop trauma skills in a short period of time, students described the hands-on-focus of the program, their direct contact with clients, and exposure to different levels of trauma as experiences they could not duplicate in the US.

*It's very important that people experience what it's like to live and work in another culture. Everyone needs their world altered and changed. Direct experience is very special. Things have changed inside of me, it is hard to articulate and describe the change, I do not have words to describe it.*

*An immersion experience is the best; it increases compassion for others; you can read about experience but until you have lived the culture you don't really "know."*

Also on a personal level of transformation, participants reported that the international program changed some of their characteristics. Living in a foreign country for a short period of time tested their ability to adapt to a different standard of living. They reported positive changes in self-esteem, self-worth, and self-confidence:

*I came back feeling very proud of myself. In showing my family pictures of my trip I realized how much I had accomplished—my sense of self confidence and assurance grew tremendously from the experience.*

Several participants reported a new appreciation for what they have in the United States. They were humbled by the experience of living in South Africa, observing firsthand difficult living conditions in the townships and squatter camps. Thus, their self-perception of basic needs of food and safety in the United States took on new meaning and ceased to be taken for granted:

*My whole perspective has changed; I don't just swing by the corner store to buy a bottle of water anymore; instead I find that I plan ahead and don't take things for granted since the trip. In South Africa shopping for necessities had to be done in a planful way because stores close at a particular time and transportation is not always available; I continue to practice a similar routine here but most importantly, I appreciate my lifestyle here.*

Direct contact with others who were culturally different and witnessing their pain and suffering first-hand developed important clinical skills of compassion and empathy; these skills are often a challenge to teach in the traditional classroom setting. The real world setting played a key role in promoting this skill development.



*After seeing the tenacity and resiliency of the people I interacted with in South Africa, especially the children who had lost parents to AIDS . . . . when negative things happen to me now I compare it to people who are more badly off.*

Not surprisingly, some students were caught by the travel bug and were inspired to see more of the world. However, at the same time they perceived their new role not simply focused on individual pursuits but playing an important ambassadorial role at the same time. In this way the course appears to have broadened students' horizons to look at global goals and how they can play a part in executing them.

*It has increased my desire to do more extensive traveling. There is so much work to be done in the world and I see myself as a bridge between the U.S. and other cultures.*

**Professional.** Participants reported remarkable professional growth and development through interaction with culturally diverse clients. Additionally, working with traumatized clients in South Africa improved their understanding of the challenges their U.S. clients faced; a transference of knowledge occurred:

*Working with the downtrodden in South Africa taught me sound lessons in poverty. I have developed views that all clients don't share my socio-economic status; I find I relate better to my clients who are poor. South Africa gave me a window into a new experience and I can appreciate the struggle the homeless and those with HIV/AIDS go through.*

The practical application of the program provided students with novel opportunities for learning that was not always possible in a classroom setting. The hands on experience made the theory come alive.

*All I could sometimes do was just be there with a client, providing a holding place and a container for their traumatic experience; it was something we talked about in clinical skills class in the U.S. but I truly grasped the concept when I was in South Africa.*

Despite the challenges of working in an unfamiliar environment with extremely traumatized clients, participants viewed it as a productive and strengthening experience that increased their clinical and professional understanding:

*I could make a difference even when we did not speak the same language as a client; I learned that I can do something even with minimal resources. My work in South Africa influenced my decision to work at a clinic that provides services to HIV/AIDS clients when I returned home. It was a transforming experience that I will always treasure.*

**Community.** Since the course focused on community approaches to helping, it was not surprising that several participants reported meaningful changes in this area. It instilled in many of them, the positive value of giving back to one's community by engaging in volunteer activities:

*I came back with a strong commitment to give back to my own community in the U.S. I now volunteer at a local prison.*

**Social/cultural.** Participants reported a deeper cultural understanding of self and others. Repeatedly, participants' comments indicated that their cultural understanding of others was based on a stronger appreciation and respect of the uniqueness of individuals and their worldviews and the importance of validating these cultural differences.

*I have a newly found understanding that there is a culture in everything; we have to know and accept that everyone has a culture. In the past I tended to make assumptions. That will no longer happen. It is crucial to observe and understand an individual and community before acting. The trip clarified some of shortfalls of American culture for me.*

Besides professional growth and development that emerged through cross cultural engagement with a clinical population, several participants reported personal change exemplified by ongoing contact, even when the course ended, with peers who participated in the program. They felt that the shared travel experience cemented strong bonds of friendship and intimacy that surpassed regular graduate school attendance. Relationships with peers took on a new shared meaning that many wanted to nurture upon their return to the U.S.

*I have stayed in touch with some of the people I went with on the trip. Because of the level of crime and violence in South Africa we needed each other all the time; these were familiar people in a new environment and we have remained close; the experience really deepened our relationship.*

Additionally, some reported continued long distance relationships with supervisors and other South African colleagues. These relationships were nurtured despite the geographic distance; they were able to transcend the limitations of time and place to establish international social networks.

*I still write to my supervisor in South Africa and send her books and other material for the special project we began for women who experienced child loss.*

A fundamental shift occurred in student's sense of self and their relationship with the broader world; their frame of reference or particular way of making sense of being in the world, was fundamentally altered. Because of the racial make-up in South Africa, most participants experienced a cultural shift in their North American majority status. They reported having an opportunity to examine White privilege and the meaning it held for them in a country where racial differences were so marked. As a result, their perceptions of racial and ethnic differences were modified and they had a new cultural understanding:

*I think I felt more comfortable being a minority; I felt more comfortable sitting with a client who is different and asking questions about cultural differences; I just ask the question and don't hesitate in doing so.*

**Political.** Participants' motivation for going on the travel program varied from the personal to the political, but even those who went for personal reasons came back with increased political awareness as the following comment indicates:

*It taught me about the haves and the have-nots and how political the whole issue of HIV can be. I went because I had the travel bug and wanted to see more of the world. I came*

*back with a greater political interest in our country and how we are in the world. Being in a country that was so politically active made me ask questions about my culture and my political place in it. I have followed the elections in the U.S. more closely this time around.*

## Discussion

International education is increasingly recognized as invaluable in deepening the multicultural experience of U.S. students. This study investigated the impact of international education on counseling graduate students who had participated in a travel abroad program. Participants' responses provided useful insights into the role of international education in promoting student transformation and cross-cultural appreciation. Clearly, participation in a travel program can create opportunities for immersion in another culture that education within one's own country cannot duplicate. Several important themes worthy of discussion emerged from the findings.

First, students found themselves examining their North American majority status as they assumed a temporary minority status in South Africa: for example, "for the first time that I was the only White person in a room; it felt a little weird in the beginning but after a few days it did not feel like a big deal." Questions about white privilege and middle-class status could not be ignored in a country where race and poverty was "always in your face." Perceptions of marginality, adopting an outsider perspective and breaking cultural boundaries were expectable and invaluable benefits to personal growth that was directly attributed to studying abroad.

Second, this study demonstrated the potential for international education programs to widen the lens of students and expand their worldview. For example, students reported increased cultural and political understanding; extracurricular activities illuminated social injustice and inequalities and exposed the truth about political regimes that are based on power relationships. It contributed to students' commitment to becoming social justice change agents.

Third, the program achieved the goal of international education which is to allow participants to learn more about life in a different culture while at the same time reflecting on their own cultural values and increasing their awareness of their place in the world (Dolby, 2004, p. 150). Theory and practice constantly interacted as students negotiated the demands of the classroom, the host culture, and their own culture (Hopkins, 1999).

Fourth, it is tempting to view student transformation in this 5-week program as having lasting effects. In one of the few studies that looked at the life-changing potential of a travel course, Stitsworth (2001) found that personality changes did not occur immediately after completion of the course but after a period of time had passed and students had assimilated their travel experiences. This did not appear to be the case with our participants. A comparison between the content of their final papers written soon after the completion of the program and the interviews conducted 1 and 2 years later showed similar responses. Several factors may account

for this: The course itself was an intense one that may have resulted in more remarkable and immediate changes; the program offered students opportunities for a deep immersion experience and students began processing their experiences while on-site in the weekly seminars. The fact that these changes were sustained over a 2-year period, for some of the participants, was significant. The true educational value of this travel abroad experience may therefore lie in its potential to foster self-learning and self-awareness among participants.

Fifth, society is constantly confronted by issues of social injustice and inequality and an unbalanced distribution of material resources with political power residing in the hands of a few (Lee & Greene, 2003). International education courses can play an important role in changing international global relationships. South Africa with its striking history of political turmoil provided students with several opportunities to assess the role of power and oppression in their own lives as well as the lives of their clients. Similarly, their South African clients and colleagues had opportunities to interact with counselors from the United States, people they would not otherwise have had contact with; opportunities for establishing positive global relationships were numerous for both students and those individuals they interacted with in South Africa.

Sixth, transformative learning has two layers that sometimes appear to be in conflict with each other: on one side are the cognitive, rational, and objective aspects and on the other are the intuitive, imaginative, and subjective aspects (Grabov 1997). Both play an equally important role in transformative learning. The value of a travel abroad program is that it allows both aspects to harmoniously coexist; as students connect factual aspects of education with subjective ones by using feelings and emotions in critical reflection (Taylor 1998). In the clinical setting of the hospital, students worked with an indigent population which increased their understanding of clients' socioeconomic and sociocultural challenges; but it was the weekend visits into the township that solidified their classroom learning and offered a window into the reality of clients' lives that was not possible in regular classroom instruction. These findings have important implications for our theoretical understanding of both multicultural education and transformative learning; direct contact with others who were culturally different is a prerequisite for transformation. It is only through this direct contact that students are able to test their cultural understanding rather than act on the beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others (Mezirow, 1991). A critical examination of one's own culture and the development of cultural knowledge are unavoidable when individuals find themselves challenged by the presence of other ethnocultural groups or social environments. In cross-cultural social encounters, issues of cultural misunderstanding and tension because of dissimilarity are common (Lee & Greene, 2003).

Most academic activities are individually focused and measured on individual performance. In contrast, international education programs offer opportunities to engage in group projects that require student collaboration. Some students in this study organized a day long clinical workshop; for many it was their first time making presentations to a clinical audience. Peer and professional relationships were mutually strengthened.

Small learning groups give students a sense of community and provide powerful contexts for transformative learning (Dirkx & Smith, 2009; Kasl & Elias, 2000). Having students directly participate in experiential learning exercises, in a group format, and focusing on personal observations and reflections are effective teaching strategies to facilitate the development of cultural sensitivity among students (Weaver, 1998). Instructors must be cognizant of this aspect of international education to increase student awareness of the emotional dynamics that inevitably develop and characterize such group experiences; it often represents powerful opportunities for self-work and transformation (Stapley, 2006). Coming to a deep sense of awareness was a fundamental transformative learning task that was at the heart of participants' experiences engendered through this international education program (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003). It played an important role in developing students' capacity to get to know themselves better by testing the limits of their tolerance, adaptive abilities, flexibility, openness, and patience within a short period of time.

However, to support the group process, instructors have to establish an environment that builds trust and facilitates the development of sensitive relationships (Taylor 1998). Students should understand that they will spend a lot of time together as a group and that they may have limited access to customary resources. Preparing them to expect that their lifestyle in the international setting will require personal adaptation and predicting that their level of stress can increase under these circumstances will be valuable in the long term.

Finally, the program followed an integrated rather than a prescriptive curriculum, focusing on the formative aspects of student development, which required ongoing communication between teacher and student to make learning a collaborative endeavor. As members of a community of knowers and learners, they shared the responsibility for constructing and creating the conditions under which transformative learning was possible; for example a student who had film making experience developed a commercial on the trauma of HIV/AIDS with a group of teenagers.

## Limitations and Recommendations

Although the results of this study are encouraging, a major limitation is that it was a small and convenience sample which limits the generalizability of findings. Additional research is recommended to strengthen and expand on these findings using a larger group of participants. A further limitation is that participants were not chosen through random selection. The question of what change, if any, occurred among those who did not participate in the study remains unanswered. Because more women than men participated in the study, the results may be skewed. As Pope-Davis and Ottavi (1994) inform us, women tend to display a greater comfort with discussions of cross-cultural interactions. Carter's (1990) findings in a study that compared male and female reactions to discussions of racial issues were similar.

Students were exposed to two potentially transformative experiences at the same time: Conducting clinical work with HIV/AIDS clients and living in a foreign

country. It is difficult to discern which contributed more strongly to their “life-changing” experiences: Working with HIV and trauma patients or being in a different culture. Although we cannot predict their responses, it would have been helpful to ask participants, in the semistructured interviews, to differentiate between these effects.

Perhaps, the primary limitation of this study was use of self-reports. This method of data collection makes it difficult to determine whether participant responses were true indicators of change or of an aspiration to appear in a positive light; participants may have made socially desirable responses rather than those indicative of actual behavioral or attitudinal change. In future studies, it would be important to gather baseline data before a travel abroad program, so that causal statements about the curriculum as the change agent are possible.

## **Conclusion**

Intercultural exposure through travel abroad programs can play a major role in increasing the multicultural competencies of students, especially those who have had minimal interaction with culturally diverse populations. Shifting the teaching context in this way becomes a mechanism to promote student change and learning. Moving out of the classroom engages students in active learning in authentic contexts and provides them with opportunities for practical application of knowledge.

In a growing global community, it is crucial that we extend our students and ourselves beyond the familiar to make connections with others in geographically different areas; opportunities for building international relationships increase, and students can gain a sense of where they fit in the world. As student perspectives are widened, a deeper understanding of the learning process becomes possible. Education is essentially about the promotion of personhood that allows for the full development of the human potential. By exposing students to the challenges of interacting with different social and educational systems, international education plays a significant role in helping them become whole human beings.

## **Appendix**

### *SA Travel Course Questions*

1. What area of your life has changed most dramatically as a result of the SA travel course?
2. Describe an aspect of the course that you find you currently use in your work.
3. How has the course changed your cultural understanding of yourself and others?
4. Name an experience that made a lasting impact on you.
5. Would you recommend the course to others? Why?

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