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A photovoice analysis of experiences during a short-term study abroad trip to Belize

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to use Photovoice to examine meaningful experiences and learning for Education and Health and Community Wellness students ($n = 9$) on the short-term study abroad trip to Belize. The study used Photovoice and journal reflections as a way to learn about the perceptions of the participants and gain deeper understanding of their experiences while on a short-term study abroad trip. Seven main themes emerged from the photographs chosen by participants and corresponding reflections: (1) teaching; (2) gratitude; (3) poverty; (4) community; (5) education; (6) cultural pride; and (7) environment. Conclusions: The results are consistent with previous Photovoice research and quantitative research with short- and long-term study abroad trips. Overall, this study provides insight into perceptions of learning experiences from the perspective of rural, undergraduate college students studying abroad in a novel country and culture.

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Higher education research provides initial support for the benefit of studying abroad in another country through international health electives (IHEs) (Homeyer et al., 2017). Much of the quantitative research on IHEs indicates the benefits including gains in cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, improved communication, self-confidence, and compassion (Green et al., 2008; Jeffrey et al., 2011). However, qualitative research has found mixed results regarding the benefits of study abroad programs and IHEs (Sawatsky, 2010). It is necessary to continually assess learning and perceived benefits for students in IHEs, such as through short- and long-term study abroad programs. Furthermore, it is necessary to bridge the gap between theory and practice through student-led evaluation, which can be accomplished through study abroad programs with experiential learning (Sroufe et al., 2015).

One theoretical framework and methodology for student-led evaluation and participatory action research (PAR) that provides researchers the insight into community perceptions is Photovoice (Wang et al., 2000). PAR is further complemented by transformative learning theory (TLT), or a method to promote learning in different locations through reflection, inclusivity, openness, and emotional change (Kumi-Yeboah & James, 2012; Mezirow, 2011). Students who study abroad gain real-world experiences in

a novel context, promoting critical reflection and growth (Bain & Yaklin, 2019; Perry et al., 2012). In a review of the TLT and study abroad programs, students who engage in cross-cultural experiences gain a deeper meaning of global citizenship, or the way in which various factors influence all humans, impact values, beliefs, responsibility, and behaviors (Stone & Duffy, 2015; Tarrant, 2010). Photovoice is grounded in education for critical consciousness and community-based approach to documentary photography (Wang, 1999). Photovoice involves individuals taking pictures, telling stories, and informing researchers and policymakers about issues of concern in the community (Wang & Burris, 1994). The three main goals of Photovoice are to allow community members to record and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses in the community, provide open dialogue between individuals and the community, and reach policymakers on areas of needed change (Wang, 1999). Photovoice has been used to address a wide range of public health and disparity issues such as disease epidemics, chronic disease, and discrimination (Graziano, 2004; Grosselink & Mallykangas, 2007; Oliffe & Bottorff, 2007). A systematic review indicates the effectiveness of Photovoice in serving as a catalyst for community action for change and indicates a positive relationship between community members and researchers (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). Overall, Photovoice can be used to strengthen public health research and community relationships, promote community advocacy, and be used to research in a flexible, community-specific manner (Catalani & Minkler, 2010).

While studying abroad, Photovoice allows students to capture and reflect on their experiences related to their undergraduate major concentration in a novel context and culture. Reflecting on personal experiences throughout the study abroad educational trips is one of the most important aspects of transformative learning (Bain & Yaklin, 2019). In order for reflection to successfully promote global citizenry and cultural integration, the study abroad trip and reflection practices must be grounded in evidence-based pedagogy (Stone & Duffy, 2015). Effective pedagogy to promote reflection includes journaling, capturing experiences through photography, small group discussion, and listening to experts from another culture (Kamdar & Lewis, 2015; Woolford et al., 2012). Journaling through photovoice is an important component of learning in that students process cultural differences, effective and unique ways of interacting with the world, and how to best teach or work with different cultures (Guthrie, 2015)

The College of Education at the University of West Georgia has taken multiple groups of students on a short-term study abroad trip to Belize. During the study abroad trip, students worked in a local school, facilitating a community health fair and clinic, and interacting with Belizean students and families, all of which pertain to the students' major concentration. While students have gained hands-on, experiential learning through high-impact practices, little research has been conducted on the experiences of the students. The purpose of this study was to use Photovoice to examine meaningful experiences and learning for students studying in both Education and Health and Community Wellness during a short-term study abroad trip to Belize. What are the perceptions of health and education in Belize from the perspective of UWG students?

The project examined the learning of students' through their perceptions of community education and health while on the short-term trip to Belize. As this was an exploratory study, it was difficult to hypothesize on what students would perceive as facilitators and barriers to health and education. However, it was hypothesized that students would

become aware of health and education in a novel culture and their ability to reflect on such awareness because they are taking photographs and journaling daily. This project provides images of meaningful experiences related to health and education in Belize as well as major themes based on the corresponding journal entries.

Methods

Participants

Nine undergraduate females participated in the photovoice project. Undergraduate students consented to participate in the photovoice project that was being conducted through the short-term study abroad trip to Belize with the University of West Georgia. The photovoice project took place during the participants' summer break in the Summer of 2019.

Measures

Image capturing

An Amazon Fire 8 device was given to each participant and used to capture the photographs while on the short-term study abroad trip to Belize.

Procedures

Prior to the study abroad trip, three faculty members who attended the trip held bi-weekly meetings with participants to discuss the trip, expectations, and train in Photovoice. Participants were undergraduate majors in either education ($n = 5$) or health and community wellness ($n = 4$). Participants were asked to take pictures that captured their experiences during a short-term study abroad trip in Belize. Participants were asked to capture at least one photograph each day that best represented their study abroad experience. Participants were then asked to reflect on each photograph once they returned home, which served as a caption for each photograph. Participants uploaded the photographs and corresponding journal entries into a password-protected shared-drive. Overall, the purpose of this project was to provide a visual and thematic representation of the perceptions of health and education of students in a novel country.

Data analysis

Participatory analysis of the data included a three-step process (Wang & Burris, 1997). Step one included photograph selection in which participants chose photographs they thought best reflected their experiences while on the short-term study abroad trip. Step two was contextualizing in which participants told stories about their chosen photographs through journaling and captioning. The third step was codifying, or identifying and sorting data into meaningful themes.

Results

Seven major themes were revealed from the photos and journal entry captions. Each of the themes pertained to (1) teaching; (2) gratitude; (3) poverty; (4) community; (5) education; (6) cultural pride; and (7) environment. Each of the themes are discussed below with representative quotes and photographs selected by the participants.

Theme 1 (Teaching)

Participants discussed the impact the short-term study abroad trip to Belize had on their teaching ability. Participants mentioned the impact of teaching abroad had on their perspective of teaching in the USA. Participants also discussed how their hands-on-experiences with teaching provided them knowledge in lesson plan development, improving their confidence and passion to pursue such a profession (see [Table 1](#) for examples).

Table 1. Quotes for Theme 1: Teaching.

'This moment was so precious, I did not want to capture it because I was afraid it would not be as special. I thoroughly enjoyed spending time with the children and seeing their eagerness for learning. When I thought I couldn't be further touched by their excitement, I was proven wrong watching the older children work with their younger peers. When we spend time mentoring our youth, we gain more knowledge than we could imagine.' (see Image 1)
'It was truly a learning experience. I had never taught a lesson, and the first day, I tried one way and developed a good way to teach that lesson. The last day it was much easier, and I love it. I loved teaching. It was so heartwarming that the students were excited and had a good time putting together the geometrical shapes. It was a wonderful experience, and playing with the kids saying goodbye was hard. It made me very emotional.'
'I've always said that if I could choose a topic/subject/concept to teach, it would definitely be language arts! This is my most favorite subject! The trip to Belize made this dream come true! The children in Belize assisted me in making this lesson a successful one. I was a grateful type of shocked, I would teach them every day if I could! They paid attention with so much intent, they were answering on top of each other, and overall had a love to learn the material. It surely made my heart full!'

Theme 2 (Gratitude)

Participants discussed in length the impact the short-term study broad trip to Belize had on their perception of gratitude and appreciation of life in the United States. Participants mentioned how students, teachers, living conditions, food availability, and the environment all contributed to their feelings of gratitude (see [Table 2](#) for examples).

Table 2. Quotes for Theme 2: Gratitude.

'I think that the kids in Belize had beautiful spirits. Compared to the living situations in the US. These children seemed to appreciate the very little things a lot more, such as playing a parachute. Something so simple and small put the biggest smiles on these wonderful children's face even a simple a hug.' (see Image 2)
'He is always smiling and he has a heart to serve. He really inspired me to be grateful for life and those who are in it. As he shared his story with me, there was a small moment for tears, and I noticed that he got vulnerable with me. It made me think that so many students will need me to be their outlet, their confidant, and sometimes I will take the role of "school parent" and that is all okay.'
'The staff cooked fresh food for us daily. Not only did we eat healthy, but we also made some connections while eating together. Many students do not have this luxury of family time. Having this time also cultivates an attitude of gratefulness. I believe this is a strength factor for my family. It is easy to talk about things that are bothering us around the dinner table. This was a very high point of the trip.'

Theme 3 (Poverty)

Participants discussed cultural differences in poverty. They mentioned how the poverty in Belize was not quite what they expected, and how they have more in the United States. This theme related to the previous theme of gratitude. Participants described the differences in job opportunities, access to educational resources, socioeconomic status, and living conditions between Belize and the United States (see [Table 3](#) for examples).

Table 3. Quotes for Theme 3: Poverty.

'This house shows the poverty in Belize. Poverty can cause mental, physical stress for students. Who then cannot fully commit to school when in the classroom. This problem exists in Belize because of the economy and jobs are not paying a lot. The houses that I saw there were a lot like shacks. It made me thankful to live in America. What I consider being poor is nothing like what they live in.' (see Image 3)
'Seeing this stand and the kids going up to the stand to buy snacks really does something to me. It does something to me because the students don't get a proper meal for lunch nor are they getting the proper nutrition that they need. All of the students I see they still stay hydrated with the 25-cent water pack.'
'Here in this photo we have some local drummers promoting their program "Drums not Guns" which is a program for youths to keep them out of trouble in their leisure time. As well as an avenue for them to expand on in which they can make money giving street performances for tourists, or even professional events ... Being that Belize is poverty stricken, giving children and adolescents a skill that they can provide with is very impactful.'

Theme 4 (Community)

Students discussed the multi-faceted nature of building a community, and how the cities in Belize seemed to support community growth and equity. Participants mentioned the opportunities available when a community works together with one goal and how a community is needed to create a sustainable future of Belize (see [Table 4](#) for examples).

Table 4. Quotes for Theme 4: Community.

'The San Ignacio market was one of my favorite places to visit. This is a large market filled with many vendors from all over Belize. This market brings a positive outcome to the surrounding communities because many people are able to purchase local produce and fresh meats that are freshly harvested. You can also find clothing and other accessories that are fairly priced and this helps the local vendors sell their products to provide for their families.'
'I just love how not just at St. Matthews, but everywhere in Belize, it seemed like everyone worked together to get the job done. Team work really does make th' dream work, and it was so evident in Belize! I aspire to be surrounded with those whose common goal is to get the job done in excellence, especially for the sake of our future leaders.'
'Mrs. Martinez is a truly inspiration to society. She had a wonderful presentation and I was very motivated to follow her steps. She is a mother, a teacher, an activist. She truly loves what she does and she was able to awaken my purpose to be able to have a positive impact to my community. She makes a huge positive impact in her community. Her speech was very profound, knowledgeable and motivating.' (see Image 4)

Theme 5 (Education)

Participants discussed the ways in which teachers, parents, the city, and government advocated for education and learning. Participants described enjoyment in learning about the Belizean education system, noticed the importance of the teachers in tailoring

education to each student, and how education impacted the community, development, and culture of Belize (see [Table 5](#) for examples).

Table 5. Quotes for Theme 5: Education.

'I feel like every system should have a mission and vision, and if you have the right team, you will see that vision and mission being applied and worked out amongst your student, staff, and parents. I was so delighted to see that this was not just lip service, but something all of the staff really put appropriate pressure on! I saw this being displayed most on our very first day through the devotion that the students had, the level of community and love that was in that entire area really made my heart smile.'

'The education system is Belize was beautiful to me. They use standards as a way to measure their student's growth. While it is important to maintain your education level and move continuously, it gives those who struggle a chance to learn with different groups and pace themselves for the path they need. There are people in every education system who struggle with learning ... Belizeans prioritize their children's education which made me very happy to see.'

'This is the pledge of Belize, this is what the students recited during devotion. I loved every line of this pledge! It was so clear that these children take so much pride in their country, their faith, their community, and their education. This pledge is so personal and I loved how they said it with so much passion. "I am the hope of Belize" is so true, these children are the future and it is our job to prepare them and then propel them to be the very best versions of themselves!' (see [Image 5](#))

Theme 6 (Cultural Pride)

All participants mentioned the importance of culture, and that they learned how culture can guide future generations while on the study abroad trip to Belize. Participants described how history and knowledge of culture can help a community embrace where they've been and also their future (see [Table 6](#) for examples).

Table 6. Quotes for Theme 6: Cultural pride.

'Drums not guns is a Garifuna based duo by two brothers who have been playing together for 13 years. Drummers are a huge part of the culture of Belize. I was captivated by their music and art. This is something positive for future generations because these two brothers are portraying a positive message to future generations. Drums not guns' message is to embrace their culture by shifting the focus of many young kids. Their main goal is turn violence into music by encouraging kids to learn to play and to pass on to other generations.'

'This photo represents a dinner prepared as part of the Belizean culture. I was amazed by the time and preparation these ladies put into each meal they served. I absolutely enjoyed mealtime. This is something the Belizean culture could teach us in America. The food is a beautiful part of their culture. If I could only have one take away from this trip, I would definitely change my eating habits. I was able to see the importance of growing food and keeping it as natural as possible such as no added preservatives or added sugar. While not all Belizeans eat this way or have good health, overall, they have cleaner practices of eating than families I have seen in America' (see [Image 6](#))

'While visiting this site, I learned a great deal about the culture of their ancestry and how it ties into their culture today. These ruins are a great reminder of what life was like and how things have changed into what they are today. Also, I hope this keeps children/students of Belize interested in school matters such as History and Science. Historical sites are great for applying knowledge already learned and testing new ideas and theories'

Theme 7 (Environment)

Lastly, participants described differences in the environment from the United States to Belize. Participants noticed differences in conservation efforts, cleanliness, stewardship. They also described the need to take what they learned in Belize and applying it to life in their community regarding protecting the environment for future generations (see [Table 7](#) for examples).

Table 7. Quotes for Theme 7: Environment.

'After walking through Monkey Bay while I've been here, it means so much to me. It is true that there is no planet B. To me, it means that there is no other Earth, no other world that we get to cater to, serve, love, and exist. While I have that in mind, it pushes me to hold myself accountable in regards to being a good steward of my environment.'
'Today, as we went to the San Ignacio market there was a lot of trash that people left behind. It was very interesting to me how there was a trash bin but people still decided to just throw away their waste on the ground. This is a problem and it affects not only the people of Belize but the entire planet. I believe it's very important to educate people about the simple things they can do to help our Mother Earth and keep the roads as clean as possible for the benefit of our natural resources and future generations.' (see Image 7)
'This is a picture of two of the students picking up trash around the village. This picture shows me that they really care about village cleanliness and even the school yard. A lot of people in America tends to litter and nobody wants to pick up the trash such as the trash that be thrown on the highways. As students get older they will learn that littering is not good and it's always good to keep the village clean.'

Discussion

Overall, the purpose of this project was to provide a visual and thematic representation of student learning while on short-term study abroad trip to Belize. Students who were studying Health and Community Wellness as well as Education participated in the Photovoice project. After reviewing the photographs taken as well as journal entries and group discussion, seven major themes of learning were revealed: (1) teaching; (2) gratitude; (3) poverty; (4) community; (5) education; (6) cultural pride; and (7) environment.

First and foremost, this project helped validate the importance of and value in short-term study abroad trips. Participants expressed learning about health and education from a holistic perspective, as evidenced by the seven themes. Many of the themes described by participants are consistent with previous Photovoice projects across health, equity, and education (Hunleth et al., 2015; Woolford et al., 2012). The themes from this project are consistent and contribute to previous quantitative research on the benefits of studying abroad (Green et al., 2008; Jeffrey et al., 2011). This project also supports the need for and benefit of autonomous learning through engagement, discussion, and reflection while studying abroad (Lee, 2011).

Furthermore, the short-term study abroad trip provided new opportunities for students, many of which had never traveled outside of the United States. Participants were able to experience a new culture, individually grow, and develop a global mindset (Kamdar & Lewis, 2015). This is consistent with previous research regarding the impact studying abroad can have on students from rural communities (Ross, 2011). Participants became aware of what they take for granted in their home communities, such as education and school, environment, access to resources and opportunities, and ability to pursue their dream of teaching. Participants learned to express gratitude in their day-to-day life by serving others, engaging in their passion of teaching, and experiencing a new community in a novel culture. Much of what was learned is consistent with prior Photovoice and study abroad research (Wainwright et al., 2017).

Limitations

As with all research, this study had certain limitations. First, the study took place over the course of one week. Future research could assess the long-term impact of a short-term or

long-term study abroad program. The current study only included females as only females participated in the study abroad trip. Future studies could include males and females to compare perceptions of learning during a study abroad program. Furthermore, a larger sample size or a comparison between study abroad trips at the university could provide information on differing cultural experiences and learning.

Conclusions

The results of this study provide insight into the perceptions of learning experienced by students on a short-term study abroad trip. Photovoice is a useful tool to engage students in retrospection and reflection, gain insight into community well-being, and advocate for change. These photographs aid in assessing learning, with journaling and discussions helping to contextualize such experiences. The photographs can also serve as documentation and souvenirs for the students to remember the trip, and serve as reminders to live, learn, and teach with gratitude.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Dr. Duke D. Biber is an Assistant Professor of Health and Community Wellness at the University of West Georgia. He earned in PhD in Exercise Psychology at Georgia State University. He enjoys teaching and mentoring students in sport and exercise psychology, mental and emotional wellness, and health coaching. He is the co-research director of the Wolf Wellness Lab, which provides leadership, education, advocacy, and services to develop and promote a culture of health and maximize the well-being of UWG students, faculty, staff, and the citizens of the surrounding community.

Mrs. Gina Brandenburg is an instructor in Health and Community Wellness in the Department of Sport Management, Wellness, and Physical Education at the University of West Georgia. She retired from her full-time position as Program Manager for Tanner Health System's Get Healthy Live Well initiative in July 2017 and began as a full-time instructor in the fall semester of 2017. Mrs. Brandenburg is a Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES), a Certified Wellness Practitioner (CWP), and has completed a multitude of health and wellness certifications/specialized trainings.

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