

Transformative Experiences: A Phenomenological Study of Nursing Students in a Study Abroad Course

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Abstract

Reflective daily journaling was utilized to enhance students' intrapersonal growth and development. This phenomenological study utilized students' daily journals from university students enrolled in a study abroad nursing course to identify transformative experiences. All journals were coded by an undergraduate researcher and two faculty researchers producing a kappa coefficient of 0.98. The major themes that emerged were the overall impact of common experiences and discoveries, the number of overall participants that reported a common experience or discovery, and the top three themes for each of the daily journal questions. This study demonstrates that reflective daily journaling utilized in a study abroad course can facilitate the achievement of a set of course objectives for student success in post-secondary education. The findings of this study were utilized by faculty to improve future study abroad course offerings which would help impact personal and professional goals for future nurses.

Keywords: study abroad, nursing students, phenomenology, healthcare, daily journals

Introduction

Students at universities and colleges participate in study abroad programs for a variety of reasons, including personal growth, expanding one's global viewpoint, and learning new skills. Study abroad courses are increasingly becoming integrated into many nursing programs to help nursing students develop the core values established by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (2019) such as leadership, diversity, and inclusion. Employers respect these experiences and they actively seek graduates with international experience and qualifications (Green et al., 2019; Molony et al., 2011) further demonstrating the importance of study abroad courses and the impact that they can have on a student's future success (Maharaja, 2018). Nursing students and universities can utilize study abroad experiences to maximize the potential development of desirable characteristics. As nursing schools and colleges throughout the United States continue to recognize the impact study abroad courses have on students' future success, college retention rates, and the health industry, the utilization of evidence-based curriculum outlines for these courses will be essential. This study aimed to explore and capture the common discoveries and experiences of undergraduate students who attended a study abroad program.

In terms of student success after completing a study abroad program, students who participated in study abroad programs had higher overall graduation rates and the experience did not postpone their graduation (Haupt et al., 2018; Johnson & Stage, 2018; Malmgren & Galvin, 2008; Potts, 2016). Thus, the literature suggests that students who participate in study abroad experiences tend to graduate at a

higher rate, which is mutually beneficial to students and colleges or universities, as they have a vested interest in the overall success of their students. As students participate in study abroad experiences, the likelihood that the student's institution will benefit from the students' experience increases. Advocating for students to participate in study abroad experiences can benefit colleges as these experiences can "be a successful tool for advancing retention by creating a more positive feeling of institutional action" (Di Maggio, 2019, p. 339). Alumni who study abroad are over 60% more likely to provide financial assistance to their college than alumni who did not study abroad, therefore study abroad experiences can help colleges generate future funding (Mulvaney, 2017). The relationship between study abroad experiences/outcomes, retention rates, and funding may prove to be of interest to many institutions. The need for colleges across the United States to improve retention and fundraising continues to rise as state and federal funding relies more heavily on documentation of outcomes (Bell et al., 2018; Bifulco et al., 2019).

Study abroad experiences have the potential to positively affect not only students and colleges but the healthcare industry as well. These opportunities allow students to immerse themselves in social environments and clinical situations that are considerably different from their daily lives, which can aid in the development of reflective practice and clinical reasoning, two qualities that are highly appreciated in the health community (Mkandawire-Valhmu & Doering, 2012). The bridge between theory and practice can also be created as students apply what they learn during their study abroad experiences (Ruddock & Turner, 2007). This process allowed students the opportunity to determine areas of study that need further development prior to entering the healthcare profession. The research literature emphasizes the importance of incorporating reflective journaling into study abroad courses. Recognizing the importance of reflective journaling, faculty frequently employs this activity to promote students' enhancement of their developing professional skills and intrapersonal development. Reflective journaling enables students to process and analyze their experiences in an "organized and meaningful manner" (Elverson & Klawiter, 2018, p. 5). Additionally, the reflective journaling process allows students to explore the real-time impact of the study abroad experiences while considering the future impact, both professionally and personally.

Although a number of studies attempted to determine the outcomes of study abroad experiences for students, colleges, and various industries, only a handful of studies explored best practices for implementing these experiences. In the literature describing how to structure a study abroad course, very few studies describe details about the implementation of the recommended action, such as reflective journaling. Studies that described how their recommended actions were carried out at times fail to explain the effects of these actions on the students who participated in the course. This study provides an example of both recommended actions and the ways in which those actions affected the student participants.

Methods

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to identify the common discoveries and experiences of undergraduate nursing students who attended a study abroad program in Great Britain. According to Creswell (2015), phenomenological studies require between 3 to 10 participants. Given this standard, nine participants ($n = 9$) consented to the study and were enrolled in the Healthcare in Great Britain course. The study was conducted following the abroad portion of the *NURS 4902: Healthcare in Great Britain* course. Data was collected in the form of students' daily journals completed during the abroad portion of the course. The question posed by researchers was: "What are the common discoveries and experiences of undergraduate nursing students who attended a study abroad program?" Schmidt and Brown's (2016) three major themes of "Remembering/Understanding [What?], Analyzing/Applying [So what?], and Evaluating/Creating [What now?]" (p. 101) served as the guiding framework for the daily journal questions.

Each student's daily journals included answers to the following questions:

1. What are three words to describe today's experiences?
2. Would you please describe at least three key impressions and observations you made today?
3. What was the most significant or surprising information you learned today?

4. What challenge(s) did you face today? How did you cope with or overcome the challenge(s)?
5. What was the most interesting thing you learned about yourself today?

The current study was approved by the Texas Woman's University's Institutional Review Board with expedited review as the risk of participating in this study was minimal. The risks involved with this study included fatigue, loss of anonymity, loss of confidentiality, and possible psychological effects. Despite the fact that gender was not a factor in excluding anyone, the study's participants were entirely female between 20 to 35 years old. Electronic consent was obtained through the course Canvas site. To protect the privacy of the participants, the daily journals were de-identified by the faculty advisor before coding by the primary undergraduate researcher and the research team members which included the faculty advisor and another faculty researcher. While steps were taken to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, confidentiality could not be guaranteed as the internet and Microsoft Word were used throughout this study. To avoid any psychological effects of the study, participants were encouraged to share only to the extent to which they were comfortable. Each participant determined the extent and level of detail they used in answering each question in the daily journal.

Once the participants' daily journals were compiled and de-identified, researchers used NVivo 12.0 to complete the inductive coding of the daily journals. Inductive coding or inductive analysis "consists of reading through textual data, identifying themes in the data, coding those themes, and then interpreting the structure and content of themes" (Guest et al., 2013, p. 13). As researchers completed the inductive coding process, they coded common themes, topics, and emotions. While coding the daily journals from the course, Cohen's kappa coefficient was run once at the completion of 25%, 50%, 75%, and 100% of the data coding process to ensure accurate results and to illustrate the high-level agreement between researchers. The range for Cohen's kappa coefficient at each of these completion points was between 0.92 to 0.99, illustrating nearly perfect agreement.

When completing the inductive coding of the dataset, the daily journals were further coded under a specific category (or node) to determine the common experiences and discoveries of the participants. The main categories (or nodes) under common discoveries included: *Healthcare Evolution Over Time*, *Self-Discoveries*, *Health*, *UK School System*, *Mental Health Care*, *UK Culture*, *UK Healthcare*, and *UK Nursing School*. These nodes were further separated into subcategories, or child nodes, which consisted of a variety of topics relating directly to the node. For example, the node *Self Discoveries* was divided into 12 child nodes that included *Personal Growth Traveling*, *Learning Style*, *Living in Another Country*, and other components that may contribute to a participant's ability to identify self-discoveries.

Nodes under common experiences of the participants included *Travel*, *Attractions*, and *Challenges*. These nodes were again divided into child nodes to address the specific components of that node. For example, under the node, *Travel*, some of the child nodes included: *Within London*, *Bus Ride to Stonehenge*, *Navigating*, *Abroad*, and various other child nodes. The child nodes under both the common experiences and common discoveries categories were further divided as needed to provide additional details and clarity. Figure 1 below provides a visual illustration of the case, node, and child node breakdown.

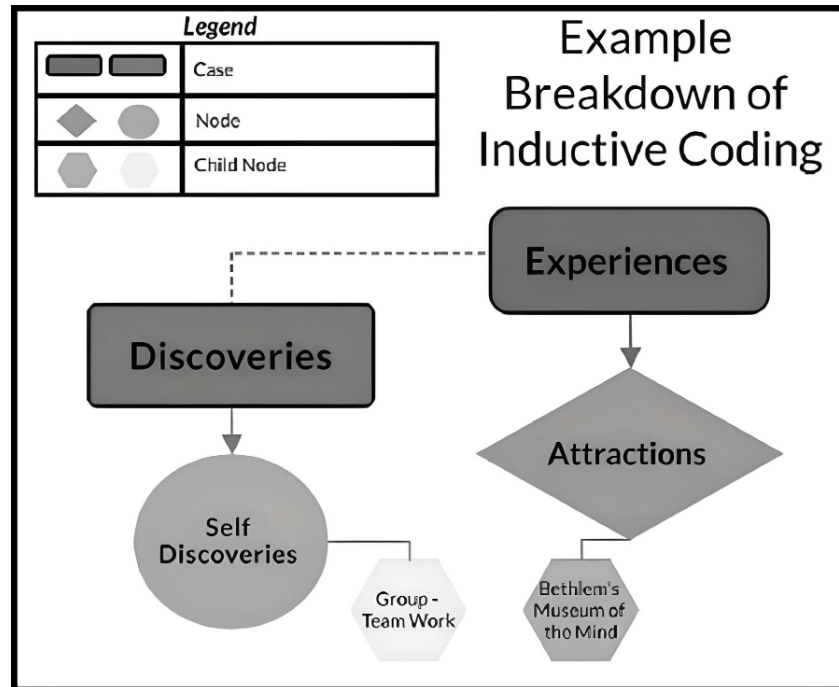


Figure 1: Example Breakdown of Inductive Coding

The completed inductive coding was reevaluated to determine the most frequently used significant words written by participants for each of the daily journal questions. Results from this process identify the themes of common discoveries and experiences for each of the individual daily journal questions. Significant words that were either synonyms or similar in relation to the subject matter, were included in the same category of data results. For example, the *Nursing* category included instances in which participants journaled discoveries or experiences related to *UK Healthcare*, *UK Nursing School*, *UK vs U.S. Nursing*, *Royal College of Nursing*, and several other topics that related to a common subject.

Findings

Three major findings emerged from the study. The first set of results relates to the overall research question, showing the percentage of codes in relation to each of the cases (or common experiences and discoveries; see Figure 2). The percentage of each node represented within its case quantifies the overall impact of each experience or discovery. For example, the coded attractions constitute 61.7% of the codes under experiences. Therefore, a majority of the reported experiences were related to attractions.

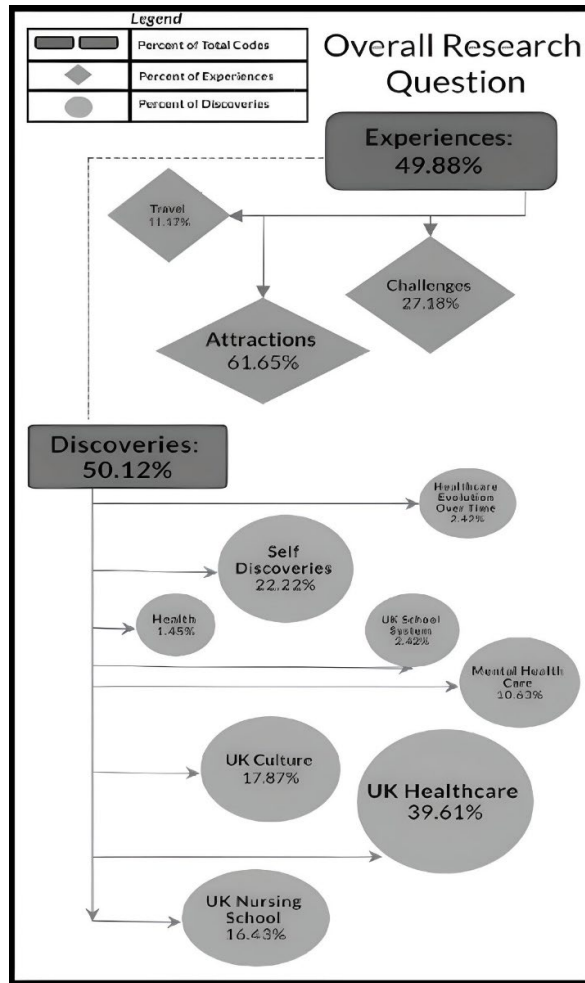


Figure 2: Overall Research Question Percentage Breakdown

While these results are a reasonable overall representation of the percentage to which each node was reported, the number of participants compared to the total number of participants should also be considered. The number of participants that coded that particular node was significant, due to concern that if one participant spoke of the same node ten times it would be coded ten times, thus potentially skewing the results.

Figure 3 shows the overall research question participant breakdown reported each node within each case (experiences or discoveries) for the overall research question. The findings are divided into cases and further into nodes. The nodes reported what the experiences or discoveries were related to, as well as the number of participants who reported an experience or discovery related to that node.

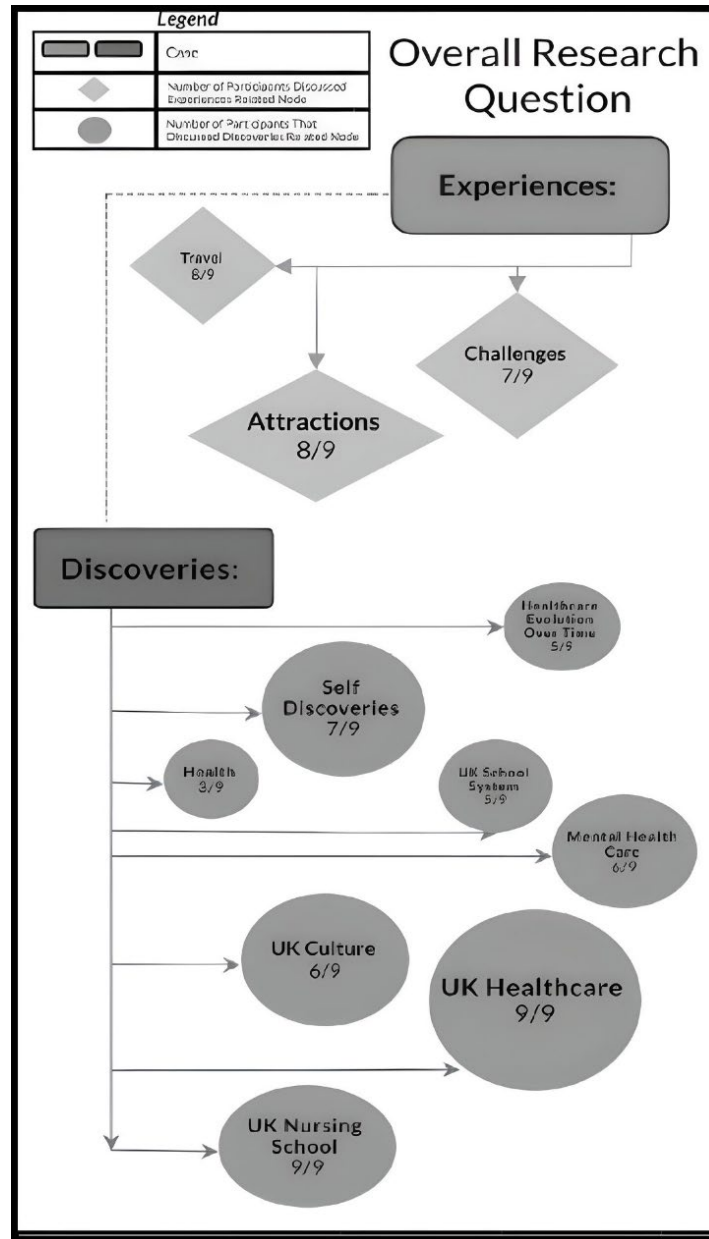


Figure 3: Overall Research Question Participant Breakdown

The three most common themes identified from the coded daily journal responses were analyzed to determine the number of participants that cumulatively reported these themes. Figure 4 illustrates the number of participants (of nine total) reporting each of the top three themes for each of the individual daily journal questions.

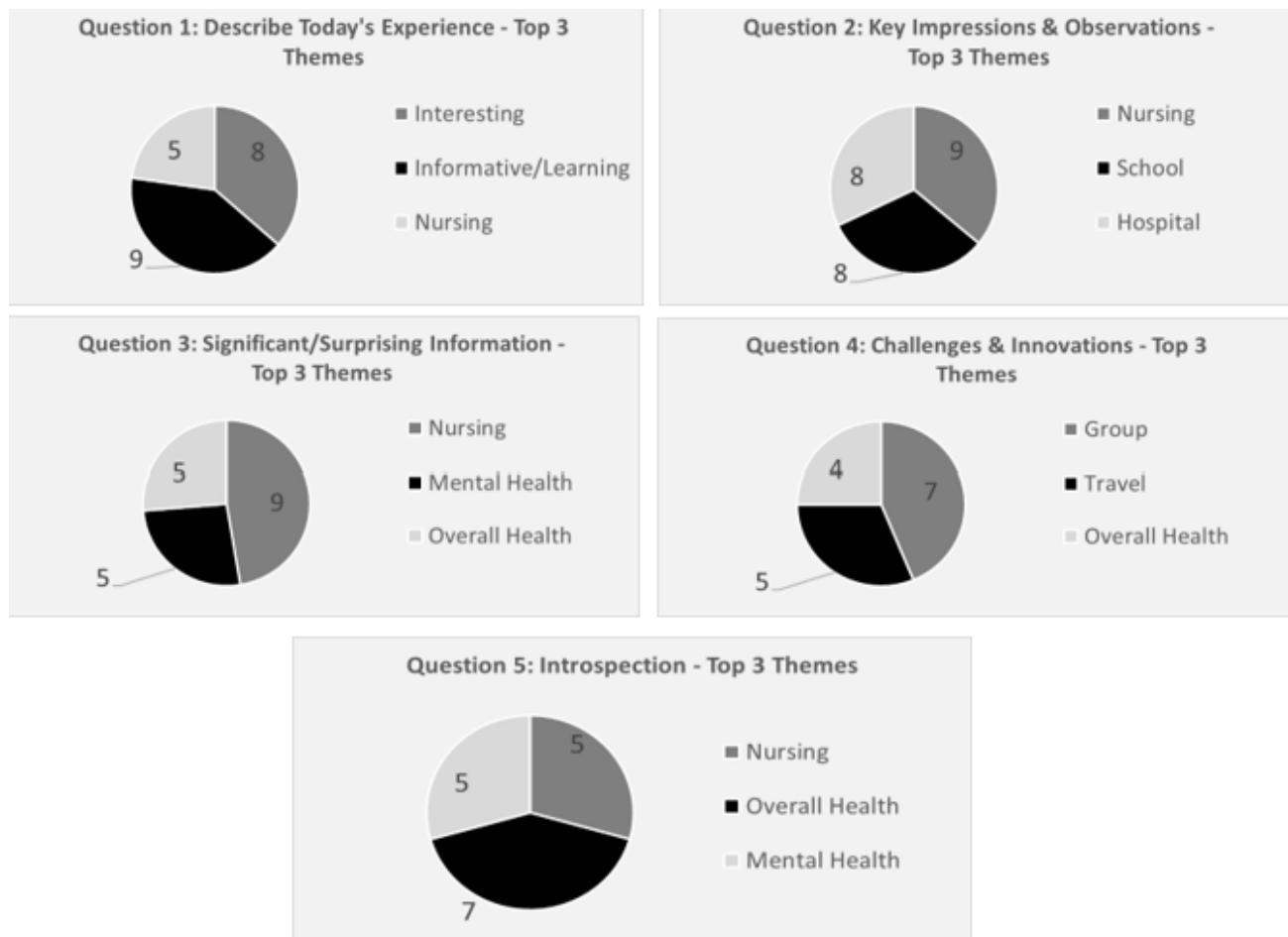


Figure 4: Individual Daily Questions: Most Common Themes

The data from which these results originate was obtained by using reflective journaling. From the results, we were also able to document the completed course objectives through specific examples provided by students' daily journal submissions. One submission that documented the completion of course objective nine for *NURS 4902: Healthcare in Great Britain*, "Analyze cultural, ethical and legal issues that affect health care in Great Britain", is outlined in the quote below by one participant.

Great Britain's hospital culture feels very different. There's still a sense of camaraderie, but it feels more formal than back in the US. They are still friendly to each other and seem to get along, but the feeling of teamwork seemed more professional and goal-based, as opposed to a more individual interest in each other's lives. Their patient loads are also much larger, though this may be attributed to being in London as opposed to another location.

During the coding process, the researchers noted a number of unexpected common discoveries and experiences described by participants. These discoveries and experiences included individual experiences journaled multiple times, unexpected discoveries or experiences, and descriptions of the differences between the UK and the US. In relation to *Individual Experiences*, two participants described individual experiences about which they continued to journal throughout the completion of the abroad portion of the course. One of the students was able to go to *Bath Abbey* and the other went to the (food) *Stalls of Tooting Broadway*. These two separate, but personally impactful, experiences enabled the individuals to make connections and discoveries that related to their experiences that they might not have

been able to otherwise. The two quotes below illustrate the effect an experience can have on one participant that was not experienced by the entire population of students.

When I walked into Bath Abbey today, I began to cry. I cannot explain why, I was just taken aback by the history and beauty of the abbey! I suppose I would say I was overwhelmed but in a good way. It was just so beautiful and ancient!

The most significant thing that I learned today was the history of Bath Abbey and how the bells work. I chose to take the tour by myself in my free time...I learned that I am comfortable doing what I want to and do not succumb to peer pressure. For example, just because no one else was interested in doing the tour with me, didn't stop me from going. I could have gone with the rest of the group out of insecurity, but I chose to do what I wanted to do for myself.

Forty-three unexpected descriptions of experiences and discoveries emerged from the data. These descriptions were unexpected due to the extent to which they described the subject matter including informative experiences, mental health, group challenges, *Travel*, *Walking*, *Time/Scheduling*, *Crowds*, the *Old Operating Theater*, *UK School System*, *UK Nursing School*, *NHS*, *HPV Vaccination*, *Healthcare Evolution Over Time*, *Architecture*, *Attire*, and *Smoking*. (The italicized words noted previously are actual nodes from the research). Journalled differences between the UK and the US related to various components of the culture, healthcare system, school system, and society in the UK overall. These reported differences included the degree to which *Walking* is a means of travel, the attitude towards *Time/Scheduling*, *Healthcare Evolution Over Time*, *Mental Health Care*, the *Attire*, the *Walking* pace, the attitude in relation to *Smoking*, the structure of the *School System*, and the structure or overall requirements of *Nursing School* in the UK versus the US.

Factors related to the participants' understanding and observations of the UK that could have affected the study relate to the time of year and season in London, differences in the structure of the healthcare system and educational system in the US and UK, and the overall difference in approach to healthcare. The participants were in London during the month of May, so they experienced milder weather and climate at the time. Weather in London may have contributed to the number of reported experiences and discoveries related to individual physical experiences and challenges.

Due to the overall difference between the structure of the healthcare system and the school system in the US versus the UK, there were a number of key elements that were repeatedly reported. These elements included: the cost of nursing education being lower in the UK, the duration of nursing school being shorter in the UK, and that nursing pay is lower in the UK than in the US. One element that many participants journalled in their responses was that the UK nursing students select a specialty at the beginning of their nursing program rather than specializing upon graduation from their program. Another significant difference noted by the participants was that UK care appeared less proactive than in the US, hospital rooms are not private in the UK, and there are different approaches to encouraging individuals to receive vaccines and annual checkups.

The results of the study identify common experiences and discoveries as journalled daily by students who participated in *NURS 4902: Healthcare in Great Britain*. This evidence further establishes the achievement of course objectives through the course activities and various individual components. Additionally, this study highlights itinerary components abroad that support course objectives. Following the completion of the inductive coding, analysis process, and review, results were conveyed to the course faculty to provide supportive documentation of the course's ability to achieve the desired student learning outcomes.

Discussion

This study explored the specific elements that contribute to the transformative nature and personal impact of studying abroad. This is important to the success of students in postsecondary education as these findings support the benefits of studying abroad to students' future success that can further positively affect colleges and universities (Bifulco et al., 2019; Di Maggio, 2019; Green et al., 2019; Maharaja, 2018). Nursing students who took part in the short-term study abroad program were

provided the opportunity to engage in self-reflection after their participation. All participants who took part in the study (n = 9) reflected on their own personal development of cultural awareness and acknowledged the distinctions that will have an impact on their success as future nurses. The participants did this by viewing the world from the perspective of a local, acknowledging the truths of history, and viewing studying abroad as an experience that can change their lives. Students were able to realize the larger position that nurses play in a new country due to the fact that they arrived from a situation of not knowing what to expect. These findings are similar to those of other research that has demonstrated that nursing students who participate in short-term study abroad programs reap the benefits of improved cultural understanding (Elverson & Klawiter, 2018; Kohlbry, 2016; Mkandawire-Valhmu & Doering, 2012; Ruddock & Turner, 2007; Schmidt & Brown, 2016).

The students articulated the awareness that the challenges faced by the UK are also challenges faced by many countries around the world as they related their experiences of participating in teaching sessions and sharing their observations of interacting with members of the local community. The majority of the students described how they had been affected by a defining moment in their study abroad experience that shifted their perspective on world access and the success of being a student nursing and future nurse. These students recognized that the experience would inform how they provide health care as future nurses.

Historically, students' self-assurance, independence, professional knowledge, and abilities have all improved after studying abroad (Bifulco et al., 2019; Green et al., 2019; Maharaja, 2018; Ruddock & Turner, 2007). One possible outcome is a shift in perspective toward people of diverse backgrounds. The issue is that undergraduate students seldom have the opportunity to study abroad since nursing school is so rigorous with two years of required courses and little room for electives, and because many schools do not provide such study abroad programs. Prior research indicates that a growing number of nurses are pursuing careers with an international or multicultural focus, thanks in large part to the chances available from study abroad programs (Bifulco et al., 2019; Halcomb & Bird, 2020; Haupt et al., 2018; Schmidt & Brown, 2016). According to research conducted by Foronda et al. (2016) as well as Elverson and Klawiter (2018), the characteristics of self-awareness, supportive interactions, self-reflection, and critique are important to students as they learn and grow. During their time spent studying abroad, the participants in this study showed a number of these characteristics by engaging in activities such as questioning, sharing, and instructing various groups of individuals. The results are consistent with the findings of other studies that highlight the life-changing effects of international travel on nursing students and practicing nurses (Kohlbry, 2016; Prater et al., 2016). Students who participate in study abroad programs can benefit from experiential and transformative learning, as demonstrated by our findings, which show that a study based on cultural attunement can help achieve these goals.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the small sample size consisting of one university. Due to the limited number of participants and only female students participating in this study, study results may not be generalizable to other populations. Participants' prior travel experience may have affected their encounters with unexpected events, challenges, and feelings. While the level of previous travel experience may have contributed to the discoveries and experiences reported, the degree to which this factor affected the overall results is unclear. Finally, the data for this study was obtained from the inaugural course of *NURS 4902: Healthcare in Great Britain* at the university.

Future Research

Faculty integrated findings from this study to make improvements in the course, with potential application to other future education/study abroad courses. Due to the number of variables associated with a study abroad course, participants, and qualitative research, researchers need to be intentional when considering their future research questions and the questions they seek to address. Future research in this area may be focused on the re-evaluation of this study's conclusions via replications with a larger or more diverse population, analysis of the final course reports from the participants of this study's related course,

or a longitudinal study to determine the impact of the common discoveries and experience on participants' future, both professionally and personally.

Additionally, the participants' final course reports could be analyzed and compared to this study to determine which form of documentation provides a more conclusive overview of student experiences. This proposed study could determine any nuances that could be lost in only using daily journals or final course reports. Of note, the course associated with the current study will continue to have future cohorts of students. Therefore, the potential exists for a comparative study of these results in a future cohort. The possible complications, implications, and intricacies of each of these potential research projects would need to be carefully considered before commencing.

Conclusion

The transformative nature of studying abroad has been previously noted (Mulvaney, 2017). This study addressed a gap in the literature by exploring the specific elements and personal impact of study abroad courses. This study analyzed students' daily journals to identify the common discoveries and experiences of undergraduate nursing students who attended a faculty-led study abroad program. Through reflective journaling, participants were able to enhance their personal development and explore the real-time and future impact of studying abroad. Through this study, we were able to show that a set of course objectives in the form of experiences and discoveries can be facilitated through reflective journaling across a group of individuals. Discoveries such as these have greater and wider implications as reflective journaling could be incorporated into other courses to document the completion of course objectives.

As course instructors consider whether to implement reflective journaling into their courses one important factor that will take time to address is the questions incorporated in the journals. These questions could be created with a framework, such as Schmidt and Brown's (2016), in mind to ensure students in the course can go through a process that facilitates individual growth and desired outcomes effectively. With the potential of applying reflective journaling as a form of documenting outcomes in mind, further research needs to be conducted to further evaluate the application of this research study's findings in other populations, in different environments, or within populations of another discipline.

Declarations

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Compliance with Ethical Standards: This study follows compliance with ethical standards.

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors of this study declare they do not have any conflicts of interest.

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