Motivations and Reasons for Participation: Professional Development Study-Tour to Mexico

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Abstract
In late February and early March of 2007 a group of Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service Educators and community partners from counties across Indiana participated in a nine-day cultural immersion trip to Mexico titled “Experience: The Culture of Mexico.” Through the collection of data from qualitative interviews, the study aimed to identify the role that a short-term international immersion experience could play as a professional development tool. This paper looked at what participants identified as the motivations and reasons they chose to participate. The findings identified that many participants shared motivations for choosing to participate. Seven motivational themes emerged. It is recommended that participant motivations be used to guide the program planning process for international experience programs. It is suggested that participant motivations be a tool for selecting whether the participant attends the program.

Keywords: international extension, andragogy, professional development
Introduction

One of the challenges facing many small to mid-size communities across Indiana is the rapid influx of Latino immigrants over the past two decades (Levinson, Everitt, & Johnson, 2007; Ludwig & McGirr, 2003). In 2005, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 277,558 Latinos lived in the state of Indiana. Of this number, 41% of Indiana’s Latino population was foreign born, first generation immigrants (Kinghorn, 2007). According to a report by the Indiana Business Research Center, the number of Latinos living in Indiana increased by 31 percent between 2000 and 2005 (Kinghorn). This rapid growth has provided significant challenges for Indiana communities to integrate and accommodate the growing Latino population (Levinson, Everitt, & Johnson). These challenges are exacerbated by the differences in language, culture and socio-economic status (Levinson et al.). As a reaction to these challenges, Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service has started several community-based initiatives.

In late February and early March of 2007, a group of Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service Educators and community partners from counties across Indiana participated in a nine-day cultural immersion trip to Mexico titled “Experience: The Culture of Mexico.” The trip was organized through the International Extension Program at Purdue University which has three areas of emphasis: to help Extension workers improve their abilities to provide services to immigrants in Indiana, to help Indiana agricultural and business sectors to remain competitive in a global economy, and to provide opportunities for Extension educators to build the knowledge and skills to create globally focused programming (International Programs in Agriculture, 2008). The objectives of the Mexico trip were to promote: (1) cultural understanding through experiential learning; (2) cross-cultural competency; (3) cross-cultural engagement, both locally and internationally; and (4) cultural advocacy for Latinos by understanding their contributions and challenges (Tharp, 2006).

The “Experience: The Culture of Mexico” trip exposed participants to a variety of locations and situations, such as visits to well-known tourist attractions as well as poor rural villages. The trip focused on youth, families, health, and nutrition, which followed closely with many of the professional goals of participants. The study-tour was designed for participants to see the realities of the daily lives of the people of Mexico that are often overlooked in tourist travel. This research study aimed to identify the motivations and reasons that these adult learners chose to participate in the professional development trip and to discover what they hoped to gain from the experience. The research was grounded in adult learning theory.

Adult learning cannot be separated from the social circumstance in which it takes place (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). The global economy, mobility of people, and rapid transfer of information have created new challenges for communities across the United States to not only compete and actively engage in a world context, but also to adapt and cope with the new challenges brought about by increased global interdependence of our economies (Castles, 2000; Ludwig & McGirr, 2003; Olson & Kroeger, 2001). One way to view adult learning is through the lens of andragogy. Andragogy is defined by Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (2007, p. 84). Developed by Malcolm Knowles in 1968, the concept of Andragogy was to present a model of assumptions with regard to adult learners and the field of adult education (Merriam et al.). The Andragorical Model outlines six major assumptions about adult learners: (1) The need to know, (2) the learners’ self concept, (3) the role of the learners’ experiences, (4) readiness to learn, (5) orientation to learning, and (6) motivation (Knowles et al., 2005). According to Knowles et al., these assumptions should be taken into account when planning programs for adults. When developing programs such as
international study-tours, considering the special educational needs of adults enhances the program planners’ ability to reach desired learning objectives.

Programs developed for adult learners generally incorporate change as a primary objective (Caffarella, 2002). Knowles et al. (2005) believed these objectives for change could be divided into three categories: individual change, institution change, or societal change. These categories were later expanded to include five typologies of programs: personal enrichment, helping people adjust to life changes, job training and professional development, organizational change, and programs that focus on community and social change through the promotion of civic responsibility (Caffarella; Knowles et al.). These programs should encourage the acquisition of new knowledge, development of new skills, and critical assessment of one’s own values and beliefs (Caffarella). The “Experience: The Culture of Mexico” trip falls into the latter category.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the study was to analyze the reasons participants chose to take part in the “Experience: The Culture of Mexico” study-tour and identify what they hoped to gain from the experience. The study aimed to reveal commonalities and themes in participant responses. Additionally the study aimed to identify difficulties or challenges participants were experiencing in their professional setting as a result of changing demographics in their communities and linking motivations and reasons for participation to the principles of Andragogy.

Methods

This study utilized entirely qualitative methods of inquiry and analysis with an underlying epistemology of interpretative research (Creswell, 1998; Mertens, 1998; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Data were collected through in-depth interviews, which took place during the months of March and April, 2008. The researcher traveled to various locations around Indiana and conducted face-to-face interviews with each of the participants. Using phenomenology as a theoretical backbone to this research, the study aimed to document participants’ individual experience through in-depth qualitative interviews (Mannen, 1990; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Less focus was given to the objective and factual events and activities and more on acquiring a rich description of the meaning and quintessence of the subjective experience of each participant (Charmaz, 2002; Mannen, 1990; Patton, 2002). The qualitative interviews conducted by the researcher attempted to capture the unique and subjective experience of each participant through a narrative description of significant thoughts, feelings and events that occurred before, during and after the trip.

Population

The population, all in Indiana, for this study were 14 of 19 participants for the “Experience: The Culture of Mexico” trip. The study included six Purdue Extension Educators, two educators from the State’s Head Start program, three participants with The Sigma County Community Foundation, one person from the Sigma Chamber of Commerce, one middle-school guidance counselor and a reporter. The participants were from rural counties containing several small towns with the county seat for each being a larger town. Of the participants four were male and 10 were female. Half of the participants had little to no international experience. These individuals had never traveled out of the country, or had only short border crossing experiences with Mexico or Canada. Three of the participants had spent a significant time abroad, which would constitute anything longer than three months living abroad, however of those three only
one spent that time abroad as an adult. The remaining four other participants had participated in a short-term international trip prior to the Mexico trip. However, it should be noted that one of the participants, who had never traveled outside of the U.S., had spent a significant amount of time working with Latino communities in Texas.

Of the 19 people who participated in the trip, 15 were interviewed. The funder, coordinator, and their spouses were eliminated from the study before the interviews were conducted. This was to avoid a possible conflict of interest in which they might bias study results. One of the participants was dropped from the study after the interview because she was invited as a technical advisor on the trip and was not participating for her own professional development needs. This resulted in a final population size of 14.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

After the completion of interviews each was transcribed in its entirety. The transcribed interviews were then imported to Microsoft Excel™ where each line was numbered. The investigator searched the text of each transcript and coded significant statements into categories (Richards, 2005). The location code of the text for each statement was then placed in an outcome matrix. The matrix helped identify commonalities and themes found in participant statements. Statements were assigned to multiple categories when relevant.

**Validity**

In qualitative research ‘validity’ is one of the most discussed topics, because it deals with the existence of objective reality and accuracy of statements about it (Richards, 2005). Validity must be established by showing the researcher has taken a “firm, sound, and logical progression” (Richards, 2005, p. 139) from one step to the next step and that it is well constructed and that the steps taken are clear.

To increase validity the study incorporated coder checking to ensure consistency in coding (Richards, 2005). Coder checking is the process of having another individual review the coding and interpretations of the text that were done by the researcher to confirm coding consistency and to provide possible alternative interpretations (Richards, 2005). The researcher provided copies of the code matrix and coded statements to another researcher to validate coding patterns.

**Results and Conclusions**

Seven themes emerged regarding motivations or reasons for participating in the “Experience: The Culture of Mexico” trip. These were: Population/Demographics, Professional Position, The Latino Experience, Cultures and Communities, Conflict, Drivers of Immigration, and Educating/Sharing with Others.

Of the 14 participants, 13 mentioned rapid growth rates or a large Latino representation in their county (92.9%) as a reason for choosing to participate on the trip. For example, Participant 1 stated s/he participated “because of our large Hispanic population in our school and our community here.” The one individual, who did not mention population as a motivation, did refer to the fact that there was a large Latino population, but not as a motivation for their participation in the program.

Of the 14 participants, 13 highly ranked their current professional or volunteer role (92.9%) as a reason for choosing to participate in the program. Participant 2 worked with a celebrate diversity project, which was a volunteer role. Participants 4 and 7 saw this program as directly relating to the tasks of their jobs.
Smaller percentages of participants gave reasons for motivation that fell into the remaining five themes. Participants were motivated to learn more about the culture (64.3%), learn more about the communities and ways of life (64.3%), develop an ability to educate and share with others upon their return (64.3%), and to talk with people, see the “real” Mexico, and gain firsthand experience (64.3%). For example, Participant 14 stated, “I really wanted to understand their culture. Again, a better understanding of the Mexican culture, a better understanding of why they move here and specifically I wanted to know their nutritional needs.”

Participants were also motivated by an interest in learning more about why Latinos come to Indiana and wanting to know more about the driving forces of immigration (57.1%). Participant 15 stated this as “I just wanted to understand a little bit more why they were coming to live in our community. Extension really needs to be kind of on the pulse for what families need and so I thought if I could understand a little bit about—you know—why they wanted to be here and some of the situations that they were living in that made them want to make the change in their residence, and—you know—maybe we could meet their needs a little bit more.”

Half of the participants noted practical applications that they hoped to gain as a result of the trip, these included learning more about the Latino experience in the United States, to help ease transitions, to better serve Latino clients, to be better able to provide conflict mediation, or to bridge cultural divides in their work place. Participant 13 spoke of the conflict in this way: “There are also a lot of native people that are not really comfortable with the Hispanic people coming to our community, so it’s a challenge for us also to meet.”

Analyzing the reasons participants chose to take part in the study-tour, and identifying what they hoped to gain revealed that most of the participants were experiencing difficulties or situations in their professional setting that they felt needed further exploration. It appeared that many of the participants were struggling to either understand how to deal with the challenges brought about by demographic shifts, or how to better understand the new Latino residents for whom they were trying to provide services and outreach. There was a strong desire to gain knowledge, information and insight into how to deal with issues that they were experiencing in their communities.

The majority of participants noted their current professional or volunteer position and wanted to learn how they could better serve or reach out to Latino residents in their counties as influential reasons for choosing to participate. There was a desire to better understand the dynamics currently underway in their local communities and to gain firsthand experience of what life is like in Mexico. Almost all of the participants indicated that current demographics and/or demographic shifts had some influence on their decision to participate.

Participants’ interest in learning more about the cultures, communities and ways of life in Mexico showed a gap between current levels of understanding and knowledge and what they felt was needed to better function in their professional role. Participants’ desire to share with others upon their return gave the impression that this knowledge and understanding was missing from the general consciousness of their community, friends, and co-workers. Participants identified a cultural disconnect and hoped this trip would provide the needed knowledge and skills for them to better understand issues in their community and provide new insight into bridging cultural divides.
Educational Importance, Implications, and Application

This research revealed participants brought with them personal goals and objectives that they hoped to accomplish as a result of the trip. These are important components in the design and implementation of programs for adults and follow the Andragogical assumptions about adult participants (Knowles et al., 2005; Merriam et al., 2007). Specifically, program planners should take into consideration participants’ motivations and reasons for choosing to participate when designing international experience programs. This will address the learner’s need to know, orientations towards learning, motivations, and readiness to learn.

For a program that has already set objectives and design, using these Andragogical principles in selecting participants could be a useful method in ensuring participants are open and receptive to learning and to the objectives of the program. Although it could be argued that people without the Andragogical criteria would benefit, there seems to be a strong indication that relevancy to personal learning objectives shows a correlation to what a participant gains from the experience.

It would be beneficial to explore the relationship between a subject’s motivations for participating and professional development outcomes and how to maximize the cognitive process of moving participants from observations and experiences to relating those back to their own attitudes and perceptions. People have the proclivity to accept and incorporate experiences that adhere to their current frames of reference (Mezirow, 1991). Critical reflection may be a key component in moving people from simply observing an experience to making the deeper connections to their own values and beliefs by questioning assumptions they have about the world (Mezirow). Therefore, program planners must guide participants towards critical analysis and reflective discourse in order to distinguish their international experience from most tourist programs (Kambutu & Nganga, 2008).

References


