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AN EXAMPLE OF SUSTAINABILITY

Introduction

What does it mean to be an educator in a developing country? How should one proceed to construct a course that is useful for its students? Will the final learning experience be sustainable for the concerned community? These were only a few of the questions swirling in my head, as an educator preparing for a rehabilitation technology course at the Institut Supérieur des Sciences Infirmières et de Physiothérapie in Haiti. My preparation for this learning experience spanned over two years and resulted in many positive outcomes. The most important advice that I have for those who choose to undertake such an overwhelming, yet rewarding task is to always contemplate whether your choices promote sustainable development. In other words, the educator needs to reflect on whether the provided learning experience meet the needs of the current students, their community, and country; along with the future needs of all parties.

Sustainability

Historically, countries have found it difficult to maintain sustainable development for third world countries, like Haiti. The United Nations (UN) understood the serious nature of interactions between countries at different levels of development. The UN general

assembly debated such involvement, culminating in the *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*.¹ Within this document, they emphasized that "sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".¹

Importance of Global Education

In order to minimize any negative effects and maintain a balance, one needs to make responsible, innovative decisions. During the 2005 world summit, the UN general assembly furthered their commitment to sustainable development by publishing the *United Nations Millennium Declaration*. This declaration was developed to identify principles on sustainable development, using three main domains: economics, environment and social sustainability. Out of seventeen goals, the third goal focused on the promotion of health and well-being – "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages".² In addition, the fourth goal highlighted the importance of global education – "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all".³

Both of these goals are being addressed in Haiti through the presence of the Institut Supérieur des Sciences Infirmières et de Physiothérapie. The mission of this institution is as follows:

The school's educational mission is to train quality professionals as nurses and physical therapists who are capable of meeting the objectives of the national health system and advance their respective professions while improving the health care services provided in Haiti.⁴



Figure 1. Institut Supérieur des Sciences Infirmières et de Physiothérapie

As an educator for the physical therapy (PT) program, I carefully planned all elements of my course with the idea of sustainability always in the back of my mind. This course, entitled *Rehabilitation Technology*, provides the student with lecture/lab experiences to acquire knowledge and skills for assessment, management, and development of wheelchair seating, orthoses, prostheses, assistive devices for activities of daily living, communication systems, and other adaptive equipment for patients of all ages.⁴

Resources and the Environment

My first concern was related to available resources. What materials are available in Haiti? Should I bring over resources typically used in the United States of America (USA)? If resources are brought over, what impact will they have? Because of the immensity of these questions, I chose to go on an information seeking trip one year ahead. This first trip was very productive!

Not only was I able to discover an abundance of raw materials such as cardboard, sticks, tires, PVC pipes, and bicycle parts, I discovered individuals, who could provide services. For example, the community bicycle man, Nicholas could create upright devices out of PVC pipes. In addition, he was able to take

bicycle parts to create a tri-wheelchair. In addition to the available materials, we were able to access services performed by community members, such as Nicholas.



Figure 2. Nicholas, the bicycle man

Students and their Community

My next big concern was with my students and their community. How effective will my teaching be with an interpreter? Would the community welcome new ideas and support my students? Did my students have an appropriate background to understand my material? My preliminary visit answered my first two questions. I had an opportunity to observe others teaching my students with the use of an interpreter. Even though this way of teaching slows one down, it promotes a more careful selection of words. I believe that this teaching experience made me a better teacher for both my Haitian PT students and my PT students from the USA.

I also found the community to be very supportive of the PT school in numerous ways. The area hospital provided space and clients for the PT students to have integrated clinical experiences. An area orphanage and



community PT clinic had multiple clients that will be utilized for formal clinical affiliations. Other available learning experiences in the community would include resident homes, prosthetic/orthotic clinic, and a local school.



Figure 3. Dr. Deborah George and her students, Waguens & Rebecca

My question regarding the preparation of my future students continued to be a concern mainly because my future course, which typically are presented over a full term, would only be scheduled for one week. To deal with this issue, I divided the material in thirds and created power points with in English and French language, along with lot of pictures. Each module was given over a month in the summer before my visit in the fall. In addition, an assignment with critical thinking questions was provided for each module. By ensuring this foundation, I was able to focus more on application of the material and lab work.

Positive Outcomes and Future Commitment of the Country

Through careful planning and a conscious effort to consider sustainability of PT education in Haiti, positive outcomes were observed. My students performed well; 100 % passed their assessments, including a lab practical. All of them showed interest in the presented material, as evidence by their questions, the desire for more education, and

interest in gathering more resources. For example, after my students learned how to create splints for the hand, they inquired how to obtain the equipment and materials. A conversation concerning donations and grants ensued. Various web sites with supportive organizations were shared.

The community also gained in a positive way. One member, “the bicycle man” gained several jobs to create two tri-wheelchairs. Available materials from the area was used to create various pieces of equipment, such as walkers out of PVC pipes; reachers out of sturdy sticks and a hook; and a tri-wheelchair out of bicycle parts. Networking amongst other community organizations occurred, such as services to a local orphanage and collaboration with area prosthetic/orthotic clinic.

Most certainly individual clients benefitted, as physical therapy was nonexistent prior to the existence of the university. Active learning experiences were provided to the Haitian students in the clients’ home setting, as well as the area hospital/clinic. Not only did the students benefit, but the clients gained much needed treatment. For example, a client was seen in her home for an assessment, positioning program, and home exercises. Ordinarily, she would not receive such services, as physical therapy had been non-existent. Another example was the creation of a word board, in which a student took home to use with a family member.

Finally, I as an educator had positive outcomes. My experience with teaching in another culture with another language forced me to think about what is most important to teach; what are the essentials for this particular community, given the available resources. I have reflected more on how I present my material, pushing me more into active teaching, whereby I try to gain more real-life learning experiences for my American



students. I believe that I have also developed a confidence to be more creative, both as an educator and as a therapist. For instance, my use of simple materials, such as cardboard and silver tape, has increased for very practical situations need by clients.

Now that I have experienced teaching in Haiti, I wonder about the country and its commitment to both lifelong learning for my PT students, as well as health and wellness for all individuals. Only the future will be able to answer this question. However, I had a rewarding glimpse into whether or not the PT school and its education of PT students would be beneficial. I most definitely have a positive belief about the future of physical therapy in Haiti!

References

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