Impact of Service-Learning Pedagogy on Students' Learning Outcomes

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1. ABSTRACT & KEYWORDS

International service-learning (ISL) has become a common practice of higher education institutions around the world. Research demonstrates a positive impact on students' growth in multiple areas after participating in an ISL course. Literature finds student growth linked to certain ISL course designs but there has been limited comparison of courses from an East Asian perspective. Instead, much of the literature and frameworks developed around ISL comes from a North American perspective. This study mainly focused on students' growth in five categories: Self-reflection, Working in Diverse Groups, Civic Engagement, Critical Thinking, and Cross-Cultural Awareness in the context of a University at Hong Kong.

The study utilized qualitative individual interviews with a total of 16 students across four courses in Cambodia in the early summer of 2018. The study found that the service project itself was the most important component that contributed to student growth. Service project natures such as participation in cultural learning sites visits and interactions with local communities promoted students' cross cultural awareness. Although some areas of growth were appeared to be lower than other areas, there was no question that students learnt and benefited from ISL. Limitations of the study, and implications for future research were discussed.

Keywords: International service-learning, Student growth, Hong Kong

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2. INTRODUCTION

International service-learning (ISL) has become a common practice of higher education institutions around the world to engage students in experiential learning. ISL serves to facilitate and strengthen educational institutions as they strive to meet pressures to produce well-rounded students whom have a global perspective and social awareness beyond their immediate surroundings. Research (Crabtree, 2009; Kiely, 2004; Yang, Luk, Webster, Chau, & Ma, 2016) demonstrates a positive impact on students' growth in area of personal, academic, social, and civic engagement after participating in an ISL course. There has been increasing attention to ISL in East Asia (Xing & Ma, 2010; Yang et al., 2016) where many universities are providing mandatory service-learning courses and demonstrating positive results on students' growth (Chan, Ngai, & Kwan, 2017; Sato, McCarthy, Murakami, Nishio, & Yamamoto, 2010). However, there is continued debate over best practices in ISL. Literature (Chan et al., 2017; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Yang et al., 2016) finds student growth linked to certain ISL course designs but there has been limited comparison of courses from an East Asian perspective. Much of the literature and frameworks developed around international service-learning comes from a North American perspective. Many service-learning researchers in the United States define the motives of ISL with the orientation of social justice awareness and often, through a critical lens aimed at examining and disrupting power (Crabtree, 2009; Kiely, 2004). This study considers the context of a university in Hong Kong, and which for the purposes of confidentiality, will be referred to as Service-Learning University (SLU).

2.1 Categories of growth

Recent studies such as Yang et al. (2016) build on older research (Eyler & Giles, 1999) findings demonstrating a connection to students' participation in service-learning experiences to increased awareness of social issues, a heighten commitment to civic engagement as well as increased empathy while retaining a charitable attitude rather than one of reciprocation. Yang et al. (2016) found that students from two universities in Hong Kong experienced different levels of self-conception based on their views of their service-learning experience. In particularly, students' interest in service versus personal goals from the international experience and their engagement with the community appeared to impact their ability to reflect on their own values.

For this study, we explore students' growth in five categories: Self-reflection, Working in Diverse Groups, Civic Engagement, Critical Thinking, and Cross-Cultural Awareness. Self-reflection refers to the ability to examine one's own strengths and weaknesses as well as position in relation to others. Many ISL courses strive to build students ability to work with a diverse group through effective communication, tolerance, and leadership (Oracion, 2010; Yang et al., 2016). Growth in civic engagement reflects an increased interest and commitment to serve people in need as well as striving to become a more responsible member of the community (Kiely, 2004). Critical thinking is demonstrated through the ability to engage in problem solving by considering larger issues within the phenomenon (Kiely, 2004). Cross-cultural awareness is a process of changing and

moving from one cultural frame to another by learning, respecting, and accepting sharp cultural differences. Although past research has demonstrated students experienced a substantial growth in these categories after their ISL experience (Bracci, Bella Owona, & Nash 2013; Nickols, Rothenberg, Moshi, & Tetloff, 2013), most of them were conducted in an American context and research from an East Asian context remains scanty. Therefore, this study will examine whether students undergo a change of perspective (i.e.: disrupting an us vs them mindset and moving away from the "tourist gaze") and how, if at all, students' cultural awareness have increased in the context of a University at Hong Kong.

This study seeks to examine: To what extent do students report growth in the five categories (Self-reflection, Working in Diverse Groups, Civic Engagement, Critical Thinking, and Cross-Cultural Awareness) from their international service-learning experience?

3. METHODS/ANALYSIS

This study employed qualitative individual interviews to explore how students self-report growth from participating in an international service-learning course at SLU. Four courses, from different academic disciplines and conducting different service-learning projects, brought students to Cambodia in the early summer of 2018. All courses carried three credits, and had a 40-hour service component that is closely linked to the academic focus of the subject. Students' reflection was required, and their performance and learning were assessed. For the study, a total of 16 students (two male and two female students) from each of the four courses were interviewed at the end of their service-learning experience. Drawing on Yin (2009), this study used focus individual interviews. A focus interview permits for an in-depth exploration of a defined topic. Semi-structured, open-ended questions were used as a guide during interviews with the students. The duration of each individual interview was a maximum of 60 minutes. Each interview was conducted in a private place and all interview data will be held in confidentiality. The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participant.

The data collected was analyzed into themes by using deductive and inductive coding. All audio recordings of interviews were transcribed and translated into English, as necessary, and uploaded to Dedoose software. The Dedoose software assist to organize and analysis the data. Descriptive deductive codes were identified based on the research questions and frameworks related to each area of growth such as: Process Model of Intercultural Competence for cross-cultural awareness; Bloom's Taxonomy for critical thinking skills; Perry's levels of meta-cognition for self-reflection; and models of civic engagement (Clayton, Bringle, & Hatcher, 2012). After going through the data once to apply deductive codes, each researcher reviewed categories of codes for a phrase of inductive coding. Inductive codes are codes developed based on themes that emerge from the data but was not part of the original deductive coding (Yin, 2009). The codes revealed themes to address the research question.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the findings of this study, the service project itself is the most important component that contributes to student growth. This study found that this particular ISL model, one in which students worked on diverse teams, and tasked

to design and implement a service-project in a foreign community, was pivotal in student reported growth. The implementation of the service-project allowed students to develop and apply several skills: critical thinking, problem-solving, working in groups and teams, leadership skills, and addressing scarcity in a low-resource environment. Students articulated growth and increased self-awareness in these areas.

Certain components of the nature of the service project facilitated growth in cross-cultural awareness. Students reported exposure to a new environment along with participation in cultural learning sites visits, interactions with local communities, and working on diverse teams changed their cross-cultural understanding and attitudes. Equal roles among the Khmer and Hong Kong peers appeared to enhance cultural awareness among the Hong Kong students. This is in line with the Contact Hypothesis developed by Allport (1954) which emphasizes the need for equal status in order to develop intercultural competencies. Direct interaction or service heighten students' exposure to the context but demonstrate more complex critical thinking skills or self- reflection in cross-cultural awareness.

Virtually all students expressed increased empathy and the desire to provide service as charity in the future, for a short-term. However, there was no other means of civic engagement that the students expressed interest in being part of upon their return to Hong Kong. This could be due to the Hong Kong context and how civic engagement is thought of in China. There was an absence of a critical analysis or a commitment to social justice. This is not surprisingly as this is not the motivation for the courses set by the instructors nor is a critical lens brought into classrooms.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY AND PRACTICE

There is no question that students are learning and benefiting from the ISL at SLU. While some areas of growth were lower than other, this is not necessarily unusually or different from student growth observed in other global ISL programs. Additionally, research on this model of ISL could be beneficial as there is a commitment to the community that is often not seen with other ISL courses as well as some evidence in other countries (See Spear & Chapman, nd) that there is a positive impact on the community recipients. However, like all models, there is room for improvement. Instructors could benefit from trainings on cross-cultural awareness and reflection, with the consideration of their student profiles. Limitations of the study, and implications for future research will also be discussed.

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