



Editorial

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Service-learning is an experiential pedagogy that combines academic learning with service in the community and critical reflection. The experiential nature of service-learning gives it the advantage in that it provides an immersive and contextualized context in which students can learn and practice their knowledge, which is not often easy to do in a purely classroom setting. As such, service-learning has been shown to be effective in achieving a wide range of learning outcomes, including intellectual, social, civic and personal development (Celio et al., 2011; Chan et al., 2019; Conway et al., 2009).

There is much evidence that helping other people is beneficial to oneself. Schwartz and Sendor (1999) showed that providing support to others has a demonstrable impact on personal well-being. Grant (2008) explored the relationship between pro-social behavior, including service to others, and well-being. Wilson (2000) provided a comprehensive review on the benefits of volunteering, including its association with increased well-being and life satisfaction. These benefits extend into situations where the act of helping others is performed in the context of a learning activity (i.e. service-learning.) For example, Eyler and Giles (1999) discussed the benefits of service-learning, including its impact on personal development and well-being. In a longer-term context, Sax et al. (1999) studied the effects of volunteerism during their undergraduate studies on graduates four and nine years after graduation, with the finding that the direct effects of undergraduate service participation continued at least for five years after graduation. Both affective and cognitive outcomes were present, and the effect extended to educational outcomes such as enrollment in graduate school and the acquisition of higher degrees.

From its originating context in North America, service-learning has grown in popularity worldwide. Today, it is widely adopted around the world, both in K-12 and higher-education institutions. It has also been the focus of much research over the

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last three decades, and, to a large part, its benefits, in particular to students, are well-known. However, much of this research has been undertaken in the United States, and the generalizability to other contexts is questionable. A similar argument has been made in the field of human psychology and behavioral sciences. Henrich et al. (2010) argued that much of the current research in the field has been based on samples drawn almost purely from so-called “WEIRD” (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) countries, which they claim to be “among the least representative populations one could find for generalizing among humans” (p. 61).

Education is highly dependent upon human psychology and culture. For example, Herbert et al. (2022) showed that there exist cultural-specific differences in teaching effectiveness. Given this, it makes sense to expect that most educational theories that are drawn from studies in the West also need to be verified when the same pedagogy is adopted in other contexts. Indeed, Stigler and Hiebert (1999) stated that teaching is a “cultural activity”, which needs to be “understood in relation to the cultural beliefs and assumptions that surround them” (p. 2). This is especially true for experiential pedagogies, which draw heavily on the environmental context. For service-learning, which involve affective learning outcomes targeting students’ preconceptions, attitudes, and beliefs, one would expect even more differences in different cultures and contexts.

Much of the current guidelines and principles in service-learning were developed in North America where the pedagogy originated. It should be questioned whether these same guidelines and principles work in other cultures. Taking an example from previous work, “youth voice”, which encourages teachers to involve students into the planning, development, and implementation of service-learning project, is often cited as a good practice in service-learning. We studied this in previous work (Ngai et al., 2018), in a large-scale study involving over 2,000 Hong Kong university students across a diversity of service-learning subjects, disciplines, and project types. The study investigated more than a dozen potentially impactful process factors along with the four commonly-cited learning outcomes. We found that student autonomy was a minor, though still statistically significant predictor, of the intellectual learning outcomes, but not of the social, personal, or civic learning outcomes. At the same time, other impactful process factors were identified which had not been hitherto mentioned in the literature: “perceived benefits to people served”, and “preparation for service”.

This is just one example, but it is an important reminder as to the need for research whenever service-learning is adopted in a different context. In fact, it suggests a need for *continual* monitoring, as cultural norms and practices shift and expectations change. Recent years have provided us with a textbook example in the COVID pandemic, which accelerated the adoption of technology and telecommunications in education. Many service-learning programmes shifted online, or adopted online technologies in various forms. Similarly, it behooves us as educators and researchers to study the efficacy of these online service-learning activities, to understand if, and how, they impact students’ learning, and their impact upon the served communities.

This special issue was motivated by the aforementioned concerns. Shek et al. (2022) evaluated e-service-learning projects implemented in mainland China during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, and studied the programmes from sev-

eral angles: student learning outcomes, the performance of the serving students, and the quality of service, demonstrating that e-service-learning is capable of delivering quality service and effecting positive student learning outcomes. Lin et al. (2023) investigated the impact of online service-learning projects in mainland China during the COVID-19 pandemic upon different student groups. They report correlations between positive youth development and service leadership qualities and also found that gains in these qualities were positively correlated with students' perception of course effectiveness.

Crossing boundaries is a part of service-learning, and Hong Kong and mainland China provides a unique context within which to study student learning in these environments. Due to historical reasons, Hong Kong, though part of China, possesses a very different linguistic, political, and cultural context. In a cross-institutional study, Yu et al. (2023) delved into the perceptions of students navigating this boundary on short-term study programmes including service-learning. Using qualitative analysis, researchers explored the impact of the programmes on students, and the process factors contributing to or hindering students' learning.

The last several years have brought about rapid advances in technology, with the result that computational thinking and digital literacy are considered to be necessary components of a modern-day education. This creates opportunities for the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines to be involved in service-learning. Wang et al. (2023) investigated the experiences of students enrolled in a computer science service-learning course. Thematic analysis of reflection reports, final essays and interview transcripts reveals a diversity of benefits of embedding service-learning in computer science education.

As service-learning becomes more well-known, it is expected that there will be an interest in adapting existing programs in other contexts. As we have previously argued, it is necessary to evaluate these programmes to ensure that they have been properly adapted to their new context, and to uncover and document any new findings and good practices. Zhou et al. (2022) shared their experience with adapting a positive youth development programme that brings mainland Chinese university students to serve minority adolescents, showing positive gains both for the service providers and the service recipients.

Unlike other types of community engagement learning activities, a key principle of service-learning is reciprocity (Jacoby, 2014), which emphasizes the partnership between service-learning educators and the community, recognizing their respective assets and needs, and stressing that the learning activity benefit both equally. It is therefore appropriate that this special issue includes two papers which report on the impact to the *community* from service-learning. Li et al. (2023) evaluate changes among over four hundred primary school students who were service recipients in a e-service-learning project conducted by undergraduate students in a Hong Kong university, and find that the service-learning programme was successful at promoting the holistic development of the children. On a wider scale, Abenir et al. (2023) surveyed 46 community partner organizations which had previously collaborated with a Philippine university in online service-learning projects, and find that online service-learning is successful at bolstering partner organizations' capacity. Simultaneously, they also identify discouraging barriers and challenges faced by partner organiza-

tions, and propose enabling best practices to cultivate effective online collaborations for service-learning.

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Declarations

Competing interests I have no known conflicts of interest or competing interests to declare.

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