




Outcomes and Factors of International Service-Learning From Student Perspective: A Qualitative Study in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Purpose: Academic programs that combine experiential learning with international education and community engagement are widely practiced in higher education. International (or global) service learning is an example. The study explores student outcomes and factors of international service-learning programs, drawing from students' perspectives.

Design/Approach/Methods: This qualitative study is based on in-depth interviews with undergraduate students ($N = 18$) who participated in international service-learning programs involving multiple disciplines and project locations in a public university in Hong Kong SAR, China.

Findings: Four types of student outcomes are discussed: interpersonal, personal, civic, and academic. Interaction with host communities, intersubjective reflection, and meaningful service were identified as key factors in international service-learning's impact on students. Teamwork with peers and teachers' influence are matters less discussed in literature, which emerged in the study as important factors for students.

Originality/Value: The results of the study corroborate other studies and help shed light on gray areas. The study not only investigates outcomes but also factors that influence outcomes. Implications of the study and student suggestions for more effective international service-learning programs are set forth.

Keywords

Hong Kong, international service-learning, learning outcomes, peers

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Introduction

Service-learning is a civic, experiential pedagogy which immerses students in communities through projects that apply their academic learning to address community needs (Kraft, 1996). The practice of service-learning has taken root in universities around the world and is being adopted by more institutions in Asia—a much-welcomed trend through which higher education is responding to the call to contribute to social justice and to creating a more equitable world (cf. Li & Jha, 2024). International service-learning (ISL) refers to service-learning with projects in nonlocal settings, “a structured academic experience in another country in which students participate in an organized service activity (and) learn from direct interaction and cross-cultural dialogue with others” (Bringle et al., 2011, p. 19). ISL programs typically involve immersive experiences in foreign environments and thus hold a strong potential to cultivate intercultural competencies and global citizenship in students—*that is*, when programs are designed intentionally and delivered effectively (Bringle et al., 2011; Hartman & Kiely, 2014).

There is abundant literature about ISL theory and practice. It is evident from systematic reviews of ISL literature that research in the field largely draws from Western contexts, is written from the perspective of academics or program designers, and focuses on program outcomes or experiences. Besides, empirical studies are often based on single programs or disciplines (Dixon, 2015; Hawes et al., 2021).

This study investigates what makes ISL experiences fruitful and meaningful from “the horse’s mouth,” that is, from the perspective of students who are primary stakeholders of service-learning. While there are studies about students’ ISL experiences (e.g., Hatcher et al., 2004; Niehaus & Crain, 2013), more research is needed to better understand what students value most in ISL programs and consider critical for their learning. The present study will contribute to the literature through research that originates from a non-Western context and engages student participants of ISL programs from different academic disciplines. Moreover, the study will not only report ISL experiences and outcomes, as many studies do, but will also look into factors that influence outcomes.

As a qualitative study, the article gathers undergraduate students’ views about ISL programs through in-depth interviews conducted in The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) between 2017 and 2018. Two research questions (RQs) are investigated from the students’ perspective:

RQ 1: What impact or outcomes did ISL programs have on students?

RQ 2: What elements of ISL programs contributed most to student outcomes?

Students’ perspectives about these questions will lend support to outcomes and critical factors identified in ISL literature. At the same time, aspects of ISL programs that matter to students but are seldom addressed in the literature will be discussed. Student suggestions for improving ISL programs will also be presented.

Literature Review

This section recapitulates the concept of ISL, its outcomes, and factors of effective ISL programs. A helpful way to understand ISL is to note how it combines three educational practices, namely, “service-learning, study abroad, and international education, and draws from the strengths of each strategy” (Bringle et al., 2011, p. 14). Notice that what ISL brings together are “high-impact practices,” understood as engaging learning experiences which “provide experiential connecting points between course content and out-of-classroom experiences” (Finley & McConnell, 2022, p. 1).

The learning outcomes associated with educational practices fused in ISL include academic, personal, interpersonal, and civic outcomes (Astin et al., 2000; Conway et al., 2009). Whether domestic or international, service-learning brings students in close contact with underserved communities and facilitates personal and social development by challenging students' values, reinforcing their self-efficacy and motivation to help others, decreasing stereotypes, and increasing tolerance for diversity (Niehaus & Crain, 2013). Service-learning in international settings involves additional challenges and dissonances for students, vesting ISL with greater potential for transformative and lasting outcomes (Kiely, 2004; Tonkin, 2004). In other words, ISL experiences can magnify and expand service-learning's outcomes, particularly by adding global citizenship (Bringle et al., 2011) and intercultural competencies (Nickols et al., 2013; Tillman et al., 2016) to the list. Niehaus and Crain's (2013) quantitative study compared domestic and international service-learning programs and found "significant and meaningful differences in students' experiences of international and domestic (programs)" (p. 37). They claimed that ISL students scored higher in variables predictive of student outcomes, such as community engagement and learning from the host community and about social issues, more frequent reflection, and more interaction across differences. Niehaus and Crain (2013, p. 38) invite more "in-depth qualitative research (to) help researchers come to an even greater understanding of students' experiences."

Letting ISL's potential outcomes fall through the cracks of poorly designed or implemented programs would constitute not only a grave loss of learning opportunity for students but also a waste of time and resources that go into planning, coordination, and travel (Crabtree, 2013; Nickols et al., 2013). Recognition of the fact has fueled studies about factors that influence students' learning outcomes, which attempt to pin down components of effective ISL programs.

Speaking about service-learning in general, factors identified in the literature include a tight link between academic learning and service, structured and regular reflection, and reciprocity and intentionality in balancing student and community benefits (Hatcher et al., 2004; Jacoby, 2015). A quantitative study by Dahan (2016) replicated and confirmed earlier research by Mabry (1998), who identified three factors that predict academic and civic outcomes of service-learning, that is, frequency of contact with the served community, in-class and out-of-classroom reflection, and the duration of service.

Lambright and Lu (2009) surveyed empirical research about program and student characteristics that influence the educational impact of service-learning. In addition to verifying critical factors already mentioned, Lambright and Lu (2009) observed that "level of instructor guidance" and "working in groups" also had significant educational impact. Whereas the level of instructor guidance positively correlated with learning, the authors noted, intriguingly, that working on a service-learning project as a group seemed to "lower educational effectiveness rating ... depending on how well students believed their group acted as a team" (p. 439). Lambright and Lu's findings are corroborated by Ngai et al.'s (2018) study of the relationship between course and pedagogical elements and students' learning outcomes. Two elements—"Perceived benefits to people served" and "Challenging and meaningful tasks"—were found to be strongly associated with intellectual, social, and civic outcomes; elements related to course instructors (e.g., "Instructor enthusiasm and passion," "Interaction with teachers, tutors, and teammates") were strongly associated with intellectual and civic outcomes; while elements specifically related to teammates (e.g., "Motivated and supportive teammates," "Good personal relationship with teammates") were strongly associated with social outcomes.

Zeroing in on ISL, Hawes et al. (2021) did a systematic review of ISL project characteristics and success factors. They proposed four areas under which effective practices and guiding principles could be grouped, namely, partnership principles, course design principles, project implementation principles, and core principles. As mentioned, many studies on ISL draw from knowledge or

experiences from specific disciplines or single programs. For instance, Watson and Reierson (2017) offer a detailed discussion of six features of “effective and safe” international programs. These were: (a) maximizing student learning by reflection; (b) managing culture shock; (c) minimizing risks; (d) promoting cultural sensitivity; (e) committing to impact evaluation (i.e., qualitative assessments to understand “a trip’s actual impact on students,” and faculty self-reflection “to critically analyze their own behavior and procedures, and adapt practice as appropriate” (p. 34); and (f) promoting reciprocity and partnership for more authentic and balanced cross-cultural relationships. From the field of health and medical sciences, Reisch (2011) offered practical guidelines to observe before, during, and after a service project trip with a view to minimizing ethical issues and optimizing ISL programs’ benefits for all stakeholders, that is, academic institutions, faculty, students, and the host community, which includes local partners and service clients. Expressing the same concern about making ISL projects beneficial for all parties, Hartman and Rola (2000) provided a checklist of matters to consider when developing an ISL program. The list included crafting teaching aids, preparing students psychologically and culturally, and practical details such as site and accommodation selection, health insurance, and close communication with host community members.

In sum, there are many factors to consider at different levels and phases of ISL programs, and these factors concern different stakeholders. Among the factors identified in the literature, which ones come to the fore in students’ perspectives? The study will shed more light on ISL outcomes and factors influencing outcomes through research stemming from an Asian context and involving multiple disciplines.

The Research

Research Context

The research was developed in a large, publicly funded university in Hong Kong SAR, China, where academic service-learning was institutionalized in 2012. As a mandatory undergraduate requirement, service-learning in the university consists of academic credit-bearing subjects that span at least one semester. Service-learning subjects typically involve lectures, seminars, or workshops and a minimum of 40 hrs of community service. In ISL programs, the service duration usually spans 7 to 14 days in the host community. By 2017–2018, the academic year when the present study was initiated, nearly 70 service-learning subjects were offered. Close to a third of the 3,700 students who enrolled in service-learning subjects that year (i.e., 1,070 students, or 28.91%) took part in ISL projects in Asia or Africa.¹

Participants and Data Collection

The research was undertaken by the Service-Learning and Leadership Office, the central coordinating unit of academic service-learning in PolyU. The study is based on in-depth, semistructured interviews with students who joined ISL projects offered by six academic departments, namely, computer engineering, hospitality and tourism, language, nursing, optometry, and social sciences. Since the ISL programs of said departments were open to nonmajors, participants in these programs majored in different disciplines, not limited to the six academic departments offering the ISL programs.

The researchers aimed to interview 18 ISL students, a sample size considered sufficient to reach saturation in qualitative research based on individual interviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). ISL teachers from the six departments were approached and asked to nominate for interview undergraduate

Table 1. Participant Profile (N = 18).

	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Academic Major (Broad Discipline)</i>	<i>Origin (Hong Kong SAR or Nonlocal)</i>
Student 1	Male	Health and social care professions	Nonlocal student
Student 2	Female	Health and social care professions	Local student
Student 3	Female	Health and social care professions	Local student
Student 4	Male	Applied sciences and engineering	Local student
Student 5	Female	Business and humanities	Local student
Student 6	Male	Business and humanities	Local student
Student 7	Female	Business and humanities	Local student
Student 8	Female	Applied sciences and engineering	Nonlocal student
Student 9	Female	Applied sciences and engineering	Nonlocal student
Student 10	Female	Business and humanities	Local student
Student 11	Female	Business and humanities	Nonlocal student
Student 12	Female	Applied sciences and engineering	Local student
Student 13	Female	Health and social care professions	Local student
Student 14	Male	Applied sciences and engineering	Local student
Student 15	Female	Health and social care professions	Local student
Student 16	Male	Health and social care professions	Local student
Student 17	Male	Applied sciences and engineering	Local student
Student 18	Female	Applied sciences and engineering	Local student

Note. For the sake of confidentiality, only general classifications of participants' disciplines and origins are provided.

students who (a) completed ISL courses in the previous academic year, (b) were willing to share their views about their ISL experience, and (c) represented different project sites (i.e., where ISL subjects they taught had more than one location).

From the pool of interviewees nominated by teachers, researchers used purposive sampling to ensure that students from different academic majors, ISL programs, and project sites were represented. Students were contacted by email and offered HK \$200 (approximately US\$25). Written consent was obtained from students for the interviews to be audio-recorded and transcribed for research. All 18 student participants were full-time undergraduates who enrolled in ISL subjects in the academic year 2016–2017. A profile of participants can be found in Table 1.

The ISL community projects completed by participants lasted for 1–2 weeks between May and July 2017. Details about the ISL programs involved in the study (i.e., offering department, service type, project sites) and the distribution of interview participants in these programs are shown in Table 2.

The interviews were conducted between October 2017 and February 2018 (see Appendix for the interview protocol). Each lasted for 1–1.5 hrs, and the medium was English, Mandarin, or Cantonese, according to student preference.

Research Method

The research aimed to uncover meanings attributed by students to their ISL experiences with a view to understanding factors that contributed to ISL's impact on them. A qualitative research with a phenomenological approach was needed to understand ISL students' perspectives with the rich details of lived experience (cf. Cohen & Manion, 1994; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

For the research process, interview materials for the study were first collected, organized, and anonymized. Two members of the research team went through all the materials separately to familiarize themselves with the content, discern patterns, and get a sense of the whole.

Table 2. The ISL Programs and Distribution of Interview Participants (N = 18).

Distribution of participants by ISL Program (Discipline and service project)	<i>Computer Engineering</i> (two project sites) Designed and installed solar-powered systems or stations in villages in Myanmar and Rwanda	4*	
	<i>Hospitality and Tourism</i> Restaurant skills and training for local hospitality students in Vietnam	2	
	<i>Language</i> Developed teaching kits and conducted language learning/training activities for students and English teachers in Cambodia	2	
	<i>Nursing</i> (two project sites) Health status assessment and health promotion for low-income families in Cambodia and Rwanda	4*	
	<i>Optometry</i> Vision screening tests and eye care for school children in Qinghai, China	2	
	<i>Social Sciences</i> (two project sites) • Taught primary school children in Hangzhou, China • Organized a camp on disaster risk and resilience for children affected by big earthquakes in Sichuan, China	4* (=18)	
	Distribution of participants by project location	<i>Africa</i> Rwanda	3
		<i>China</i> Hangzhou, 2; Sichuan, 2; Qinghai, 2	6
		<i>Southeast Asia</i> Myanmar, 2; Cambodia, 4; Vietnam, 3	9 (=18)

Note. (*) ISL programs with two different project sites had four interviewees, two from each project site.

Next, solo coding was done by a research team member who was versed in the three languages used in the audio recordings and transcripts. As Saldaña (2016, p. 36) explains, qualitative data analysis is an inherently interpretive process and “coding in most qualitative studies is a solitary act—the (researcher) intimately at work with her data.” To strengthen the validity of the findings, solo coding was enhanced with collaborative methods, which we explain in continuation.

The coder collected significant statements from the interviews whilst taking care to “trace the themes,” that is, to collect as much relevant data as possible about the RQs, regardless of where these occurred in the interview materials (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 210). Then, through a process of constant comparison of interview segments, statements with similar content were grouped together and assigned labels that captured their content. These labels were treated as provisional categories and were refined and finalized in succeeding team discussions (cf. Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Coding was inductive and guided by literature, which enabled researchers to recognize categories and supply terms for themes that emerged from the data. We did not start data coding by applying existing categories, but only adopted categories known from the literature when these seemed to express participant views. This was particularly the case when exploring ISL’s learning outcomes, where, after analyzing and sorting the data, the researchers adopted general categories of academic, civic, interpersonal (or social), and personal outcomes, as well as intercultural competence and global citizenship, which are constructs widely mentioned and accepted in literature. For the most part,

however, it was necessary to modify existing categories or create new ones in order to represent students' views in the data. In this regard, the subcategories of ISL outcomes (e.g., "Teamwork effectiveness," "Self-awareness and management skills," "Motivation to volunteer or contribute to society," etc.) and the categories for ISL factors (e.g., "Interaction and immersion in host community," "Team rapport and dynamics," "Intersubjective reflection," etc.) were descriptive labels which researchers articulated after analyzing groups of statements with similar content.

Regular research meetings functioned as "data sessions" for informed colleagues who were familiar with the data set or had been directly involved in the ISL programs to engage in "dialogical intersubjectivity" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 37). During meetings, research findings and progress were presented to the research team, whose various members acted as critical auditors and examiners of the coder's analyses. Issues and differences in points of view about the data analyses or interpretations were discussed until consensus was reached. The research was documented in notes, files, and spreadsheets, which were uploaded to a protected shared drive to keep track of the research progress and for research team members to access. Approval for the research was granted by PolyU's Institutional Review Board (Ref. HSEARS20201110007), and guidelines for research involving human subjects were duly observed throughout the research process.

Findings

Before presenting the main findings, some background information about the interviewed participants and their ISL experiences is in order. Preliminary questions in the interview protocol inquired about participants' relevant prior experiences and reasons for registering in the ISL subjects for which they were being interviewed. Most participants had study-related overseas experiences (13 out of 18), and an equal number had taken part in volunteering or community service activities. In terms of reasons for choosing ISL subjects, students' main considerations were the project location (16 out of 18) and interest in the subject content (10 out of 18). Other reasons were the nature of the service (five out of 18), the timing of the project (four out of 18), and safety, affordability, and peer influence (one to two each out of 18). Participants viewed their ISL experiences favorably: All considered their ISL experiences "impactful" and gave ratings of 3 or above on a scale of 1 to 5. Besides, the emotions they used to describe their ISL experiences were overwhelmingly positive. Feeling "happy/joyful," "content/satisfied," and finding the ISL experience "meaningful/worthwhile" were the most popular adjectives they used. Asking students to rate their ISL experience and to describe their overall feelings helped to arouse students' memories and call to mind details of their ISL experiences. Students' replies to these questions were useful for cross-referencing statements and also gave the interviewer a chance to make follow-up questions for students to elaborate on the reasons behind their ratings and emotions.

ISL's Impact on Students

The first RQ was about ISL's learning outcomes. These outcomes may be regarded as the short- to medium-term impact of ISL on students. Students described various outcomes which can be categorized under four types: interpersonal, personal, civic, and academic outcomes. The four categories of outcomes with itemized examples are shown in Table 3. Since intercultural competencies (a type of interpersonal outcome) and global citizenship (a type of civic outcome) are key ISL outcomes, examples of both are highlighted within their respective categories in Table 3.

Among the four categories, interpersonal outcomes had the highest number of examples. The category encompasses skills which enable a person to associate constructively with others, such

Table 3. ISL's Impact on Students (N = 18).

Interpersonal Outcomes	Total: 62
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teamwork effectiveness (15) • Openness to express self and interact with others (7) 	
<i>Intercultural competencies</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating and working in multicultural contexts (17) • Cultural learning (12) • Building relationships with diverse others (6) • Second/foreign language skills (5) 	
Personal outcomes	Total: 42
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-awareness and self-management skills (14) • Reinforced or changed values (12) • Being inspired or impressed by others (9) • Sense of achievement and confidence (7) 	
Civic outcomes	Total: 24
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivation to volunteer or contribute to society (8) • Considering a socially oriented career (3) 	
<i>Global citizenship/outlook/awareness</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest in world news and affairs (5) • Realizing one's capacity/responsibility to contribute beyond the home country (4) • Understand developing countries' problems/needs (4) 	
Academic outcomes	Total: 15
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learned new concepts or skills (8) • Appreciation/fresh perspective of academic learning (7) 	

as through “Teamwork effectiveness” or being able to collaborate with peers (often despite differences), and “Openness to express self and interact with others,” or sociability. The interview excerpts below are vivid examples of interpersonal outcomes.

This is the subject where I learned most about project management and getting along with others. I was used to group projects where we simply distributed tasks and each one worked independently. But in the ISL project, we really needed to work together. Even though each one's pace is different, we had to find a way to work together to finish a task. Working in teams really improved collaboration skills. (S6)²

I now proactively approach nonlocal classmates for group projects and manage differences better. I realize that there are different ways of doing things, and not to stick to one way. I should think before insisting and be more flexible with plans. (S12)

This was the first time that I really worked “in a team.” Having a good team is important when doing a project overseas ... Although the workload was heavy, I was relaxed because each teammate was responsible. There was no free rider. (S16)

These statements contain concrete examples of improvement in the manner of working or relating with others. It is important to note, though, that *many* but *not all* students had positive

experiences of group work. For those with positive experiences, being part of a team with good dynamics meant moral support, added motivation, increased interpersonal learning gains, and more effective project delivery. On the other hand, being part of a weak team—for example, “not feeling close to” or “not getting along with” groupmates (S2, S8), or perceiving that some worked more than others (S1)—generated negativity, casting a shadow on ISL experience. What seems clear from both positive and negative experiences is that students are not indifferent to but are *strongly affected* by team relations.

The majority of interpersonal outcomes were related to intercultural competencies, especially “Communicating and working in a multicultural context,” such as learning to understand and adjust to the interlocutors’ language level.

I realized that you have to use different methods when communicating with different people. You have to try to understand them first in order to communicate well. (S4)

We had to speak in broken English, but it felt like talking with friends. I just said what I wanted to. When you use complete sentences, they may not understand, but if you use simple words to reply or ask questions, it’s easier for them to follow. (S7)

“Cultural learning” was an important example of developing intercultural competence. Exposure and interaction in new places enriched students’ perspectives. They, in turn, shared their culture with host communities.

It was good to meet people from different places. With fellow Hong Kongers, you only talk about topics related to Hong Kong. But when you’re with people from other places, you end up talking about more global things and get new insights. (S12)

The greatest impact for me was cultural learning. My understanding of culture and of the host community increased immensely. The site visits and the explanations by locals who accompanied us helped us to understand the country’s culture and challenges. (S10)

“Developing relationships with diverse others” was also an important part of the intercultural competencies students gained. Students greatly valued connecting or bonding with people from different cultural backgrounds and continued to keep in touch with new friends through social media. Initial language barriers proved to be surmountable obstacles.

We spent a lot of time with the local students. We talked and laughed together. We chatted about school, how we spend our free time, and what we want to be. I gained deeper knowledge of the place and its culture by going there. The friendship with locals makes you learn even more. We still keep in touch. If I had gone there for tourism, I would not have had the chance to go to the village and converse with locals. (S16)

Another example of intercultural competence was improving “Second/foreign language skills.” Given the short duration of the ISL programs, students realistically stated that they did not think they had significantly improved in speaking a second language. However, they felt more at ease and less self-conscious about speaking in a foreign tongue.

I forced myself to speak English. I can't say my English improved, but I'm more daring to express my thoughts and converse in English. I no longer hesitate to speak with foreigners and even approach tourists in the street who seem lost. (S6)

Personal outcomes emerged as the category with the most examples after interpersonal outcomes. Main examples of personal outcomes were "Self-awareness and self-management skills" and "Reinforced or changed values." The former included being more flexible, problem-solving, and resilience or emotional control, which resulted in different ways that students stepped out of their comfort zone or accustomed ways to adapt to new environments or situations. Meanwhile, examples of "Reinforced or changed values" were tempering materialistic views and appreciating things previously taken for granted, such as basic necessities, relationships, or even life itself.

I saw many changes in myself. I had to eat things I didn't like, and these turned out to be not so bad. There were many situations like this. I've learned to value things more, simple things like having running water and a comfortable bed. I overcame my fear of insects. I am also more aware of events and processes through reflection. I pay more attention to things I could learn. There was a lot of space and a good environment for reflecting. (S5)

We had to deal with a lot of issues and last-minute changes. Not that we weren't prepared, but sometimes unexpected things just came up. And since we were a diverse team with different approaches, I had to manage this problem and control my emotions to avoid conflicts. (S9)

Other examples of personal outcomes were "Being inspired or impressed" by persons or experiences in the host community, which motivated students in different ways and had the effect of life lessons, and "Sense of achievement and confidence" for their role in projects which they perceived were beneficial for the communities.

Visiting the museum and learning about the history of genocide and reconciliation made me do some soul-searching about being more forgiving and generous with others. (S6)

Seeing the poverty there made me understand how much we have, and made me wish I could help more. My values changed a little. I'm more frugal now and also more inspired to study, seeing how much the local children dream of going to university. (S17)

There were fewer examples of civic and academic outcomes compared to the first two categories. Examples of civic outcomes were increased interest in community service or in a socially oriented career.

My biggest takeaway was becoming surer about my future profession. I was already thinking about doing humanitarian work in a developing country. This ISL experience made me want to pursue that even more. (S1)

I want to participate in more community services after this trip. I will look for more opportunities. It's really good to help others, and it also builds your confidence because you feel useful. (S8)

More than half of civic outcomes were examples of global citizenship, in particular, “Increased interest in world news and affairs,” “Realizing one’s capacity/responsibility to contribute beyond home country,” and “Understanding developing countries’ problems/needs.”

I became more interested in world news. I would read world news before because I had to, not because I wanted to. But now I read the news out of personal interest. (S10)

My outlook has broadened. I understand more about the needs of places besides Hong Kong. Before the trip, I was preoccupied with home affairs and simply thought of Africa as some “faraway place.” Now I have a “picture” of Africa in my mind, learned about its economic conditions, policies, etc. I am more interested now in the plight of ethnic minorities and refugees (in Hong Kong) from these places. (S15)

Note that these examples of civic outcomes show a broadening of perspectives and of spheres of concern through increased interest in places beyond home.

Academic outcomes were also reported by most participants, and these included “Learning new concepts or skills” and “Appreciation/fresh perspective of academic learning.” Taking part in ISL programs offered by other departments exposed some students to disciplines different from their own majors. Applying knowledge from their discipline or other disciplines also gave students fresh perspectives about academic learning. What they learned in class seemed to come alive once applied to service, and this helped them to appreciate the usefulness of what they were learning for society.

The “book stuff” that we learned became useful once we applied this to the project. What we learned in class was really linked to the service we did. (S2)

The theories sounded boring during class. But once the theories were applied to service, they became meaningful. (S5)

Joining the ISL project gave me the chance to learn about vision screening, something new and different from my field. I find this knowledge useful and even share what I learned with my friends. (S18)

The examples above illustrate valuable benefits of service-learning as an academic enterprise, namely, its capacity to reinforce, broaden, and draw out the social relevance of university education. At the same time, the examples show the pedagogical significance of establishing a close link between the academic content and the service component of service-learning subjects.

Factors Contributing to ISL’s Impact

Equally important as knowing the outcomes is understanding the factors and processes that lead to desirable outcomes. During the interviews, students were also asked what factors they believed contributed to the outcomes they reported. Although the topic was phrased as an open question, there was a notable convergence in the factors described by students. Students concurred about five factors, namely: “Interaction and immersion in the host community,” “Team rapport and dynamics,” “Intersubjective reflection,” “Teachers’ support and example,” and “Meaningful service” in the sense of being involved in projects which they perceived were useful, needed, or appreciated by host communities. The factors are listed in Table 4.

All students, without exception, valued personal interaction with the host community. Apart from interacting with service recipients through direct service, students also appreciated “frequent”

Table 4. Main Factors Contributing to ISL's Impact (N= 18).

Factors	Cited by the Number of Students
• Interaction and immersion in host community	18 out of 18
• Team rapport and dynamics	16 out of 18
• Intersubjective reflection	13 out of 18
• Teachers' support and example	12 out of 18
• Meaningful service linked to academic learning	10 out of 18

and “in-depth” interactions with locals who joined them in the projects as service collaborators or partners. Students also appreciated spending downtime with locals, as this enabled them to engage in friendly conversations and share culture.

We worked with local university students and spent a lot of time installing solar panels together in the villages. We had a lot of exchange, and talked about random things. Going out to the rural areas with local students and doing the project together the whole day for 10 days was a rare experience that I may never have again. We became friends and still keep in touch. (S7)

We interacted a lot with the locals. We stayed with host families in the community and had orientations and project preparation with local university students who also accompanied us for sightseeing. Communicating with our service clients and using gestures was memorable. I felt a real connection even before the interpreter said anything ... I had seen a movie about the country before the trip, but it was just that—a film. Being there and visiting different sites left a deep impression. (S13)

Alongside human interaction, physical immersion in new environments was also instrumental for learning. Students described the pedagogical significance of physical immersion by contrasting “being there” or “seeing with one’s own eyes” with other ways of knowing about distant places, such as through books, films, or tourism. Students described the value of physical immersion in vivid ways.

I think going there made all the difference in learning and was impactful. I was able to immerse myself in their daily life and had a lot of chances to be with the locals ... I’m the type of person who needs to experience in order to learn. (S3)

Being there lets you see the place up close. *Knowing about things* and *seeing things for yourself* are very different experiences. Even though we studied these places in school, learning about them in history class and actually going there created different impressions. When you go there, it’s like you understand things about history without even having to memorize. Watching these things on TV doesn’t create the same impression as being there, either. (S10)

It’s an experience and attitude that is altogether different from going as a tourist. When you interact with the locals and do things together, you get to see life from their side. (S11)

Most students cited “Team rapport and dynamics” as a key factor of ISL’s impact. As mentioned, support from teammates had both emotional and practical import. Moreover, students

reported additional benefits from having teammates from different cultures or disciplines: It trained them to navigate differences and opened up alternative ways of seeing or doing things.

I was disappointed when my friend and I were assigned to different groups. But in the end, I think it was good that we formed mixed groups with local and nonlocal students. The team distribution allowed me to make new friends. We were very different from each other and came from different departments, but we helped each other a lot and did many things as a team. There was real collaboration. (S7)

My teammates and I were from different majors. Doing things together meant learning different ways of doing things. It was a good experience cooperating with different people. (S10)

Reflective activities, especially when these involved dialogue, also played an important part in student learning. Engaging in group reflection not only helped students process their own experiences and emotions but also enriched their thinking by listening to their peers' perspectives. Reflective group gatherings or debriefings were especially instrumental for self-realizations, as the following examples show.

We had a group debriefing where we did a kind of peer evaluation. I didn't expect such a simple exercise to have such a big impact on me and my teammates. It made me reflect on my personality. My groupmates wrote nice things about me that I did not realize about myself. How we think about ourselves can be very different from how others see us. Hearing what others had to say about me helped me to understand myself more. (S7)

I realized that I tend to be controlling and feel bad when others don't agree with me. I discovered this from the small group debriefings. Listening to others makes you see that you're not absolutely right and they're not absolutely wrong. They have their own reasons and stories. The debriefing also let me know what others were going through. (S15)

"Teachers" emerged as key figures in most students' ISL experiences. Students counted on their instruction and guidance, appreciated their trust and concern, and valued their personal example and engagement in the service projects as much as in reflective activities.

I learned a lot from the teachers, from what they shared during the debriefing. They were very willing to help and were a model in service, going out of their way to bring fruits to the service clients, even though it was not necessary for them to do such things. (S13)

The "teacher factor" was extremely important. The teacher was very passionate. Her points of view and comments were so helpful. It really helps to hear the perspective of someone who is older and has experience. I know my classmates feel the same. Her impact on the students during the two weeks abroad was important. (S15)

As seen in the literature, students' perspectives confirmed that "Meaningful service linked to academic learning" has important consequences on learning outcomes. Perceiving their work as something that would genuinely benefit the community motivated students and helped them to realize their potential to contribute to society.

I used to volunteer as a tutor. I helped kids do their homework and played with them. But we didn't bond much, and I don't think the experience was meaningful for either of us. But with service-learning, we were able to bring electricity to the people and help solve a concrete problem. The benefit to the community was quite big. It makes me want to do more community services like this, and less of the kind of volunteering that I did before. (S8)

The ISL experience was worthwhile and meaningful. Our service clients really looked forward to our service because the nearest hospital was too small and did not offer the kind of service we did. (S17)

Other factors mentioned by students were related to program design and arrangement (mentioned by five out of 13) and having a leadership role in the project (mentioned by two out of 13).

Discussion

To recap findings about ISL's learning outcomes, *interpersonal outcomes* outnumbered by far the other types of outcomes. Intercultural competencies made up a large portion of interpersonal outcomes. Qualitative data presented in the study support the claim and provide details of how ISL enhances intercultural competence (see Nickols et al., 2013; Niehaus & Crain, 2013; Tillman et al., 2016). We saw that students achieve interpersonal and intercultural outcomes primarily through interaction with the host community, but also importantly through working in multidisciplinary or multicultural teams.

Personal outcomes also ranked high in terms of frequency. Quantity aside, concretizations of personal outcomes merit attention. Personal outcomes such as increased self-awareness and reinforcement or modification of values are fundamental types of takeaways which are relatable to what authors describe as personal transformations which ISL programs can bring about through critically processed experiences of challenges and dissonances (see Kiely, 2004; Tonkin, 2004).

Compared to interpersonal and personal outcomes, *civic* and *academic outcomes* reported by study participants were fewer in number. Nonetheless, concretizations of civic and academic outcomes, such as increased motivation for social involvement and appreciating the social relevance of university learning, are powerful takeaways, suggesting that ISL experiences help student participants to consider their role and position themselves as engaged members of society. Examples of global citizenship took up a good portion of civic outcomes, lending support and detail to ISL's advantage over domestic or local service-learning in terms of civic outcomes (see Bringle et al., 2011; Niehaus & Crane, 2013).

Our exploration of students' perspectives about ISL's outcomes and critical factors led to findings that support and reinforce each other. A review of the findings and some practical implications are in order. These are presented alongside student suggestions for more effective ISL programs.

First, "Interaction and immersion in the host community" topped the list of factors that contributed to ISL's impact (cf. Table 4). In fact, it was cited as a factor by *all* interview participants without exception. This piece of information sends an unequivocal message that *interaction in the host community* occupies a singular place in students' ISL experiences. It is thus important to pay attention to the *quality* and *frequency* of student and host community interaction in ISL programs. Apart from securing adequate hours of interaction through direct service, enabling host community members to be service partners or collaborators instead of mere service recipients can help bring student-community interaction to a higher level. Spending time together during downtime—such as having shared meals, visiting historical sites, or even reflecting together—can be valuable opportunities for mutually enriching exchanges.

Second, the topic of “Team” consistently came up in the two areas of findings: “Teamwork effectiveness” was the most cited particular outcome (cf. Table 3), and “Team rapport and dynamics” was identified by the majority of interview participants as a factor that influenced their learning (cf. Table 4). Again, bringing these pieces of information together sends a clear message that *teams* occupy an important place in students’ ISL experiences. When teams are composed of students from different disciplines or cultural backgrounds, working and reflecting in a group further opens up possibilities for interdisciplinary or intercultural learning. Students perceived teammates as sources not only of much-needed support but also of learning, and realized that the outcome of their service to communities partly depended on how well they managed to work together. Evidently, the teams they belong to matter a lot to ISL students and, as Lambright and Lu (2009) observed, can positively or negatively influence service-learning’s educational effectiveness depending on whether students formed strong or weak teams. In this regard, ISL practitioners would do well to consider how to nurture strong teams, for instance, through timely teambuilding activities and by providing team assistance through group mentoring or project consultation. One concrete suggestion raised by student participants is to form groups earlier in the semester or program in order to give groupmates sufficient time to warm up to each other and learn to work together before carrying out service projects as a team. ISL program designers could also magnify student outcomes by forming multidisciplinary or multicultural teams where possible.

Third, reflection and meaningful service were both identified by the majority of interview participants as factors that significantly contributed to ISL’s outcomes. Service-learning literature lays special emphasis on individual, written reflection. However, students’ perspectives shared in this study highlight the benefits of *intersubjective* reflection. Reflective activities, such as group discussions or onsite debriefings, help students process their emotions and experiences while these are fresh and open up broader or nuanced viewpoints as students hear their peers’ thoughts about shared experiences. We concur with Lin’s (2022) idea of not limiting reflection to “a solitary activity” but to also promote reflection as “a social activity” through which students are exposed to multiple perspectives and can enjoy a sense of belonging (pp. 126–127). It is also worth noting student suggestions for more effective reflective activities. In concrete, class or team reflections could break into “smaller groups to ensure that each one has the chance to speak” (S4, S12), and reflection topics or prompts should “tackle personal development and not only project matters” (S15). As for written reflection, students appreciate clearer guidelines and adequate time for composing reflective essays (S6, S8, S9).

Concerning “Meaningful service,” this factor had direct bearing on personal outcomes (such as “Sense of achievement and confidence”) and on civic and academic outcomes, which are essential to service-learning. Applying class learning to service not only deepened students’ knowledge but also led them to discover its usefulness for society. Herein lies a powerful aspect of service-learning as a pedagogy: its potential to make students see how their disciplines apply to helping the disadvantaged.

Finally, “Teachers’ support and example” emerged as a key factor in ISL’s impact on students. The teacher figure tends to be downplayed in service-learning literature, which is dominated by attention to program design and student and/or community stakeholders. However, as we heard from interviewees, teachers involved in ISL programs can impact students in varied, powerful ways. Students count on teacher support and example, instruction, and guidance. Students appreciate teacher feedback and engagement. Students look to teachers as models in service and reflective activities. Likewise, students recognize the teacher’s hand in well-designed programs and meaningful projects. In sum, teachers, who can include course collaborators such as tutors and class assistants, *are* an important factor in student learning. The matter gestures toward reappraising the

teachers' role in service-learning. In the context of service-learning, teachers are not only facilitators of academic knowledge and program designers. They are also called upon to be active collaborators and personally involved with students and communities in service projects. In this regard, teachers could support students better by offering "group guidance or consultation" (S3, S4), by "proactively finding out how students are doing" (S1), and by trying to "understand them without bias" (S5) when they share their views or experiences.

Students' perspectives explored in the study corroborate elements of effective programs consistently brought up in ISL literature, in particular, facilitating in-depth student–community interaction, having a tight connection between academic learning and service, promoting reflective learning, and ensuring that planned services are meaningful in that they adequately challenge students and are genuinely needed by communities. The study provided qualitative data to substantiate and, in some instances, shed light on gray areas in quantitative findings. Ngai et al.'s (2018) quantitative study based on a large sample of nearly 3,000 service-learning students confirmed, among other things, the need for services that genuinely meet community needs, thorough student preparation for service, and direct interaction with service recipients. Interview excerpts in this article showed how these elements come into play in students' experiences and impact their learning. On the other hand, Ngai et al. (2018) noted that their study was unable to reflect the significance of pedagogical features related to teachers or instructors of service-learning. Qualitative data in this article were able to capture the "teacher effect" on ISL students. This stands as an important finding of the study, the role of teachers being seldom addressed in ISL literature.

The study gives a close-up view of how interactions with the people students encounter through ISL projects (i.e., community members, peers, and teachers) are fundamental to their ISL experiences and influence their takeaways from ISL. In this light, the notion of connectedness—that is, a "sense of belonging, integration and satisfaction" in interpersonal relationships and social groups which favor students' academic success, well-being, and community involvement (Jorgenson et al., 2018)—runs through our findings. Lin et al.'s quantitative study (2023) concluded that connectedness "plays an important role in students' learning outcomes in service-learning ... Specifically, connectedness to service recipients." Our findings agree with this, but add that connection with *peers* and *teachers* can also strongly impact student learning. Finally, recalling student testimonies about the impact of discovering the social relevance of academic learning through application in meaningful service, we may say that connectedness in service-learning is not only about interpersonal connectedness but also about *connectedness between learning and service*.

Concluding Remarks

The study is valuable in that it not only reported student outcomes but also attended to factors that led to outcomes. Moreover, suggestions from ISL students to improve the impact of ISL programs were presented alongside reported factors and outcomes. As mentioned, there are abundant studies about ISL experiences and outcomes, but fewer about factors that affect student outcomes. In this regard, we urge more studies on factors of ISL experience that matter to student learning, to elucidate what and why students learn (or do not learn), and probe deeper into the pedagogy and design of effective or well-implemented ISL programs.

The study has several limitations. Although it is based on ISL programs from different disciplines with different service project locations, all programs are from a single institution: They are imbued with the particular model and practice of ISL in the institution. The study thus has limited generalizability. Further, it is based on self-reports, and the investigated impacts of ISL were limited to short- to medium-term impacts on students.

As a qualitative piece with phenomenological approach, the study focused on contemplating patterns and details of ISL learning outcomes and factors based on the shared experiences of a limited group. Given the small sample size, it was not possible to flesh out nuances in the findings based on differences among participants. In future research, studies with larger sample sizes and subgroups could shed light on nuances and find meaningful correlations between participant or program variables, such as duration of service, academic discipline background, project location, etc.

One contention about ISL that can be found in related literature is whether ISL programs have any added value compared to domestic service-learning, given that opportunities for internationalization can often be found or created in home countries. The study could be brought to bear on the ongoing discussion. All participants without exception identified “Interaction and immersion in host community” as a contributing factor to ISL’s impact. Rich and vivid qualitative data highlight the utmost importance which students ascribed to physical presence and direct interaction in the host community. Our findings thus support Niehaus and Crain’s (2013) claim that ISL offers students experiences significantly different from domestic service-learning. Intercultural competence was numerically the most significant type of learning outcome, showing precisely where ISL has an advantage over domestic service-learning. This is especially the case in the context of a small territory like Hong Kong SAR, China. An interviewed student explained it well in stating that,


Hong Kong is a very small place, and it’s hard to have a global outlook living here. I really appreciate programs like this which bring Hong Kong’s youth to experience other places ... The more you know about the world, the more you also want to build your own city. (S10)


In large countries with more cultural diversity, it is more possible to design domestic service-learning programs which strongly foster intercultural competence. In terms of nurturing global awareness or citizenship, however, we believe that ISL offers a special type of experience and impact that is harder to achieve without leaving home and fully immersing in a developing country.


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Ethical Considerations

The research obtained approval for Human Subjects Ethics from The Hong Kong Polytechnic University’s Institutional Review Board (Approval reference: HSEARS20201110007).

Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the research’s conception, design, development, and data analysis, likewise to writing or commenting on earlier versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the submitted manuscript.

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Notes

1. ISL project sites include Chinese mainland, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam in Asia, and Rwanda in Africa. Although Hong Kong SAR is part of the People's Republic of China and its racial demographic is very similar to Chinese mainland, historical and linguistic factors make service-learning projects in Chinese mainland culturally distinct experiences for students from Hong Kong SAR.
2. Quotes from the interview transcripts were translated into English, language edited, and abridged.

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Appendix. Interview Protocol.

(1) Project background

- Reasons for choosing the ISL subject
- Description of ISL experience: type of service, estimated hours of service, target community, schedule, accommodation, frequency of interaction with locals, reflection and other learning activities

(2) Project impact

- Rate the personal impact of your ISL experience on a scale of 0 to 5 (0 for *nil*, 1 for *very mild*, 5 for *very strong*)
- Elaborate rating of ISL's impact: Did they perceive changes in themselves before and after the ISL experience? What were their learning gains, if any? (Prompts: academic learning, personal development, social development, intercultural effectiveness, [global] civic/citizenship)
- Factors which they believe contributed to their reported impact and learning gains (Prompts: curricular, pedagogical, contextual or personal factors)
- Give two to three adjectives to describe their emotions during the ISL trip and the incidents that caused these emotions

(3) Suggestions for improvement

- What they appreciated most about their ISL experience which facilitated their gains
 - Any suggestions to improve the ISL subject or program
-