

Curricular and Pedagogical Features Influencing International Service-Learning Outcomes

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1. ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS

International service-learning (ISL) is a form of experiential learning combining service-learning, study abroad and international education. It has been hailed as an effective pedagogy to facilitate students' intercultural competence and global citizenship development, enabling them to excel in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world. However, critics argue that the pedagogy, if poorly implemented, could potentially reinforce prejudice and discrimination. While some research has looked into factors that affect ISL outcomes, empirical studies on how course and pedagogical features affect students' learning from ISL are scanty. This study aims to bridge the gap in literature on factors influencing ISL outcomes. The specific research question is: What were the salient curricular and pedagogical features of ISL that facilitate students' learning outcomes from the students' perspective?

This study was conducted in a large public university in Hong Kong, using individual semi-structured interviews with a total of 44 students. The study identified nine key curricular and pedagogical features in ISL programmes that promote students' learning outcomes and offered insights on how to develop and deliver an ISL programme that maximizes learning outcomes from the students' perspectives. Limitations of the study, and implications for practice and future research were discussed.

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2. INTRODUCTION

International service-learning (ISL) is a form of experiential learning combining service-learning, study abroad and international education (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011). It has increasingly been integrated in university education across a broad spectrum of disciplines (Nichols, Rothenberg, Moshi, & Tetloff, 2013), and hailed as an effective pedagogy to facilitate students' intercultural competence and global citizenship development, enabling them to excel in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world (Plater, Jones, Bringle, & Clayton, 2009). Converging studies suggest that ISL promotes a wide range of cognitive, civic and intercultural benefits to students, including global awareness, personal competencies and intercultural development (Dixon, 2015; Nichols, Rothenberg, Moshi, & Tetloff, 2013). However, critics argue that the pedagogy, if poorly implemented, could potentially reinforce prejudice and discrimination (King, 2004).

Student learning is not automatic. Similarly, ISL, without any intentional intervention, does not automatically lead to adaptive learning outcomes (Crabtree, 2008). It is therefore imperative to examine the curricular and pedagogical factors associated with the merits of ISL (Grusky, 2000). Previous research has identified opportunities for intercultural exchange, authentic dialogue with culturally diverse host communities and reflection as the key factors affecting ISL outcomes (Kiely, 2005; King, 2004). However, empirical studies on how course and pedagogical features affect students' learning from ISL are scanty (Crabtree, 2013), and most current studies utilize small samples and/or focus on a few selected programme components, or a particular project (Nichols, Rothenberg, Moshi, & Tetloff, 2013).

This study aims to bridge the gap in literature on factors influencing ISL outcomes. The specific research question is: What were the salient curricular and pedagogical features of ISL that facilitate students' learning outcomes from the students' perspective?

3. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in a large public university in Hong Kong, using individual semi-structured interviews. Target participants were students enrolled in eight credit-bearing ISL subjects with thirteen offshore projects from a wide range of disciplines, service locations and service natures in the 2016/17 academic year. Each subject consisted of semester-long lectures and workshops, and at least forty hours of services in the target community. Students were expected to achieve a broad range of academic, social, personal, intercultural and civic learning outcomes from the ISL experience. Two to four students from each project were selected for the interviews, making up a total of forty-four participants.

The interviews were conducted in Cantonese, Mandarin or English according to the language preferred by the interviewees. The interview protocol comprised four main sets of questions, including (a) students' personal background; (b) project background; (c) impact of the ISL experience on their learning and development; and (d) good aspects of the project/subject and suggestions for improvement. This study mainly addressed the results from the last questions relating to good practices in ISL. The interviews, each lasting for about 1.5 hours, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Using grounded theory approach, two researchers analyzed the data separately on NVivo. The interpretations of coding and themes were then discussed and compared for consistency.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the interviews revealed multiple key features facilitating students' learning outcomes from ISL, as follows.

4.1. Cultural immersion

Dialogic intercultural service experiences

Students expressed the importance of having direct interactions and dialogues with the local communities. This interaction, with the less-advantaged groups, from unfamiliar cultures, helped students to better understand personal stories in context. This facilitated students to feel more connected, and from there to compare, contrast and reexamine their own value sets.

Cultural training and visits

The pre-service cultural training and local visits to historical and cultural sites were important for students. They mentioned that this cultural exposure provided them with knowledge on the served countries' history and development, culturally preparing them to meet the service recipients.

Homestay

Students appreciated the homestay arrangement, as it enabled them to know more about the locals' habits and provided opportunities for interaction with the local families, outside of the services. They were able to not only exchange ideas and thoughts, but also form more intimate relationships and bonding with locals. Students reported improvements in intercultural awareness and understanding through this immersion experience into local life.

4.2. Subject design

Structured reflection

Students reported that reflection was crucial to connect their service experiences with learning. They shared about how reflection consolidated their learning, and stimulated them to explore issues and questions that they might not think about otherwise. Reflection provided a valuable platform for them to evaluate performances, share ideas and feelings and brainstorm social issues on a broader scale. Students generally preferred a smaller group which allowed them to reflect in more depth and with more ease.

Collaborative learning

Teaming with multicultural and multidisciplinary students in collaborative tasks took students out of their comfort zones. Students admitted that they would choose to work with their friends or peers with similar cultures and majors if not for this project. The collaborative working opportunities broadened their perspectives, reduced stereotypes and prejudices, and enhanced their teamwork abilities.

Students' autonomy within a broad framework

Students mentioned it was good to have autonomy to plan and implement their service project, within some general guidelines. They could make use of their creativity and ideas to explore different methods to deliver the services. The trial-and-error process provided them more space to learn, which helped them to develop greater understanding of different problems.

Challenging but manageable tasks

Students shared their satisfaction with being able to successfully manage some unforeseeable problems which challenged them beyond their experiences. They stated that their learning would be limited if the service delivery only involved simple tasks.

Preparation for services

Students pointed out the while lectures and seminars provided them with the necessary knowledge, hands-on workshops and mock services were essential to help them link the classroom theories with actual experiences, enhance their understanding of and practice skills needed for delivering the service. Besides, they expressed that the pre-trip orientation on the social and cultural background of the served countries mentally prepared them for the unfamiliar cultural settings, and reduced their anxiety and tensions about the service.

4.3. Teacher

Teachers as role models

Students highlighted the positive influence of heartfelt teachers who were passionate about community services and genuinely cared for both the service recipients and the students' learning experience and outcomes. Students remarked that they regarded the teachers as role models and were inspired and motivated by them. Constructive and timely support from teachers was also identified as factors enhancing their personal competencies.

The study shows that features that influence students' learning from ISL are mainstays of a student-centered progressive pedagogy, which enables students to become active participants in their own learning. The study also reiterates that students' learning from ISL is not automatic, but influenced by certain curricular and pedagogical factors. Three of the factors (dialogic international service experiences, cultural training and visits, and homestays) are closely related to cultural immersion, an element applicable mainly to ISL and other study abroad programmes. It is crucial to provide opportunities for students to have intensive authentic dialogues and interaction with the culturally diverse locals to facilitate their intercultural understanding and learning.

Features related to subject design and teacher apply to both local and international service-learning. While the importance of reflection has been largely recognized, the study provided some ideas on the contents and format preferred by students. Practices which move students out of their comfort zones, including collaborative learning with diverse others, students' autonomy within a broad framework and challenging but manageable tasks, played critical roles in maximizing students' learning. Adequate preparation for services helped manage students' cultural shock and prepared them to face uncertainties without being overwhelmed. Few studies to date have highlighted the important role of teachers in SL, which have been found to be a key factor in affecting students' ISL outcomes in this study. Students consistently reported that they were inspired and motivated to do their best work by the dedication and behaviours of their teachers, and saw them as role-models. It appears that effective ISL practices involve teachers' heart for service and learning, in addition to their curricular and pedagogical knowledge and skills in ISL.

5. CONCLUSION

Using semi-structured interviews, the study identified multiple key curricular and pedagogical features in ISL programmes that promote students' learning outcomes. Apart from supporting the notion that learning from ISL is not automatic, it emphasizes the importance of thoughtful preparation and implementation of the pedagogy. It also offers insights on how to develop and deliver an ISL programme that maximizes learning outcomes from the students' perspectives. Nevertheless, the qualitative study only examined a particular form of ISL in one single university in Hong Kong. Moreover, the findings were derived from interviews with a small sample of students, and reflected mainly students' perspectives. Further research should explore in greater depth the major determinants of different types of ISL outcomes, using more quantitative data with bigger samples from multiple institutions and drawing on other stakeholders' perspectives.

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