

More Lessons without Borders: A Qualitative Study of International Service–Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Outside of the classroom, community engagement and involvement is the most important thing that a student can do while enrolled in college (Plante, Currie, & Olson, 2014). Community engaged learning (CEL) is a curriculum-based opportunity whereby students become engaged in the community as a critical part of their learning experience with the goal of CEL to promote critical thinking skills, enhance knowledge-based skills, and provide reflection activities on the well-being of the community (Tacelosky, 2013). This type of community engaged involvement that has had a longstanding history in American higher education (Burkhardt & Pasque, 2005).

The National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 describes service-learning as an effective method of teaching that enables students to learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service. The act describes four characteristics of service-learning: learning and development through active participation; integration into academic curriculum with structured reflection time; opportunity to apply information learned in the classroom in real-life situations; and extending student learning beyond the classroom (Cashel, Goodman & Swanson, 2003). The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (2005) illustrates service-learning as, "...a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities" (para. 1).

As a pedagogical practice, service-learning combines academic coursework with hands-on volunteer activities within the community. It demands that service activities be tied to academic coursework and incorporate critical reflection to ensure that students make connections between their work and abstract academic concepts (Deeley, 2010). Service-learning research has been found to benefit student in many ways including increased social integration and feelings of belonging on campus, increased satisfaction with their collegiate experience and increased class attendance and improved academic performance. Students also demonstrate gains in academic self-efficacy, leadership development, choice of a service career, and plans to participate in service after college (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda & Yee, 2000; Astin & Sax, 1998; Kuh, 2008; Yeh, 2010). Astin and colleagues (2000) determined that participation in service learning is linked to an increased awareness of societal and personal ignorance, injustices, inequities, and prejudices and allows students to expand upon their own goals of cultural adaptation, values, knowledge acquisition, and career plans (Aydlett, Randolph & Wells, 2010). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) report

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that participation in community service and service-learning activities have significant and positive within-college effects on sociopolitical attitudes and beliefs on community and civic engagement.

Students participating in service-learning show increased commitments to civic engagement and social justice activities as well as deeper understandings of diversity. Previous qualitative and quantitative research has also provided evidence that outcomes of service-learning include self-confidence, social responsibility, civic-mindedness, greater diversity learning, increased self-esteem, and personal efficacy (Crabtree, 2008; Kezar & Rhoads, 2001).

In addition to these academic benefits, service-learning participants also demonstrate a greater capacity to consider social issues and diversity. Students also demonstrated a greater commitment to civic engagement and awareness of needs within the global community (Sternberger, 2005). Rockquemore and Schaffer (2000) found that “students [can make] positive changes in their attitudes toward social justice [and] equality of opportunity” (p. 15) as a result of their service-learning experiences. Everett (1998) found that 87% of students in a sociology class with a service-learning component agreed that their experiences “enhanced [their] understanding of social inequality” (p. 304) by enabling students to apply coursework to real-world problems.

Cultural-based service-learning is a pedagogical approach integrating diversity-related content with community service. Also known as multicultural or diversity service-learning, students are granted an opportunity to learn about different social disparities within diverse communities (Simons et al., 2009). Embracing multiculturalism can change peoples’ attitudes and beliefs by challenging racism and at the same time strengthen democracy by identifying citizens’ rights and responsibilities. By supporting diversity between societies, young leaders can embrace local, national, and even global values. This provides for community cohesion – embracing other backgrounds, bringing others together through service, and democracy through citizenship (Faas, 2011).

International service-learning provides students with another lens from which to evaluate social issues. It combines traditional study abroad experiences with service-learning work and integrates a cultural component to the students’ experience (Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004). These programs have been found to enhance cultural understanding, build cultural competencies, and increase intercultural communication. Researchers hypothesize that international service-learning maximizes the effectiveness of service-learning experiences (Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004). These trips are often transformative in nature, and enhance participants’ abilities to view their world from multiple perspectives while enhancing participants’ commitment to civic participation, community service, and social responsibility (Crabtree, 2008; Knuston & Gonzalez, 2009). Monard-Weissman (2003)’s international service-learning research found that participants reported a deepened understanding of the world and felt more commitment toward service work and active global citizenship as a result of their experiences. Short-term international programs, however, have been found to yield negative impacts on student participants. They can sometimes reinforce stereotypes of the poor and simplify social problems. These trips can lead students to question consumerism, cultural norms, foreign policy, and even American cultural hegemony. Students sometimes experience reverse culture-shock upon returning home from their host country and service-experience, where students undergo a transformation of intellectual and moral character through reflection, and develop a renewed and critical perspective on American behaviors, beliefs, values, and norms (Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004).

As citizens of a global world, it is important for students to work and live for students to interact with people from diverse backgrounds. In order to prepare students for work and life, colleges and universities have growing interests with exposing students to diverse cultures with diverse economic, political, and social systems through global service and education. In 2006, approximately 40% of colleges and

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