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Advancing Intercultural Understanding and Personal Development Outcomes Through Service-Learning: Insights from an International Student

Neivin M. Shalabi

Knowledge, experience, and reflection are mutually dependent and interconnected. The things people do comprise their experiences which then become the source of their knowledge. Unless people reflect on their experiences, they are less likely to learn from them (McCarthy, 2003). With this in mind, this essay is a critical reflection account of my experience in a service-learning course I took as a graduate student in a U.S research-based university. The essay is organized into four main sections. The first provides an operational definition of service learning and briefly discusses past research pertaining to the effects of this pedagogy on student service-learners. The second describes my experience, introducing the goal, nature, and structure of the service-learning course. The third highlights my engagement in the service-learning experience, providing examples of the course activities. The final section of the essay discusses the significance of this service-learning experience, elaborating on some academic, social, and personal gains.

Service-Learning: Definition and Impact

There exist many definitions for service-learning (e.g., Eyler & Giles, 1999; Furco, 2003; Jacoby, 1996); each definition emphasizes a specific orientation or aspect of this pedagogy (Bringle, 2013). In this essay, service-learning is defined as

course-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112).

Research documents a wide range of academic, social, and personal gains of service-

learning for the student service-learner. On the academic side, there is evidence that service-learning has positive impacts on students' learning outcomes (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Strage, 2000; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000) and it is positively associated with increased ability to apply course concepts to new situations (Eyler & Giles). At the social level, Astin and Sax (1998) reported that participation in service-learning positively affects students' civic responsibility: increased commitment to serve the community, interest in influencing the political structure, and helping others in difficulty. With respect to students' personal development, studies suggest positive impacts of service-learning on students' sense of personal efficacy, personal identity, spiritual growth, and moral development (Astin & Sax; Eyler & Giles; Vogelgesang & Astin). The following sections describe the service-learning course and my engagement in this experience.

Service-Learning Course

The service-learning experience under examination in this essay was part of my graduate studies. In particular, I took this course to fulfill a part of the requirements of my cognate that focused on not-for-profit organizations management. The overarching goal of the course was to enable students to acquire practical knowledge and experience on successful management of not-for-profit organizations. To that end, the course addressed several management issues as they relate to not-for-profit organizations, including organizational vision and mission, strategic planning, goal setting, program evaluation, leadership, and the co-ordination of staff and volunteers.

In the beginning of the course, the instructor presented the class with study proposals from not-for-profits addressing several causes, asking that students form groups based on their selected organizations. Given my interest in youth issues and prior volunteer experience with disadvantaged members of this age group in Egypt, I chose a

youth-based organization. Two other classmates chose the same organization, and thus we formed a group. Structured reflection was integrated in the course; the instructor encouraged student teams to reflect on their service-learning experiences at the end of class sessions. Additionally, each student developed an individual reflection paper to fulfill part of the course assignments. The service component of the course was designed to allow students to apply the knowledge gained in the course in addressing the issues facing and/or enhancing the opportunities presented to a not-for-profit organization in the local community. Specifically, groups of students were charged with providing consultancy services in the form of written and oral reports to the management of their respective organizations. Each report included a summary of the study process, an explanation of the major findings, and a list of the recommendations and their rationale. The following section briefly describes the selected organization.

Overview of the Organization

The youth-based not-for-profit was a small organization whose mission was to provide experiential and outdoor learning opportunities that encourage personal empowerment, leadership, and community participation so that clients reach their potential at home, in school, and within their community. The organization's activities were targeted to middle- and high-school students from low-income and racial minority backgrounds. To break the economic barrier to students' participation, the organization offered its services with no fees. Examples of the organization's activities, included swimming, rock climbing, and hiking training sessions in addition to assistance with homework. Besides these activities, the organization arranged a weekend wilderness adventure once a month.

Engagement with the Service-Learning Course

After a series of discussions with the organization's director, my team decided to conduct an evaluation that could be used for developing a letter of analysis and recommendations. Examples of our work included conducting field trips; interviewing the executive director; developing a survey questionnaire to assess clients' perception of the organization; examining and analyzing documents pertaining to the not-for profit, such

as its mission, bylaws, board members' rights and responsibilities; and reviewing the organization's website.

Using the collected data, we conducted a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis. The outcomes of our research and analysis indicated that the major challenge was how to strike a balance between expanding the organization financially and programmatically while enhancing its visibility in the neighboring community. Accordingly, my team focused its work on three major areas: marketing, volunteer recruitment, and board of directors. By the end of the course, we submitted a report including recommendations pertaining to these areas and rationales for each suggestion to the not-for-profit management. Additionally, we presented our work in class.

Critical Reflections on the Value of the Service-Learning Experience

This service-learning course was distinct. Before discussing my gains from this experience, I would like to stress that this course was more engaging and enjoyable to me than courses that focus solely on theory within the walls of the classroom. The practical nature of this educational experience was instrumental in making it exciting. I especially enjoyed the field trips my team made to the not-for-profit. Additionally, this experience was significant to me in other ways. First, while the course materials increased my knowledge base of the third sector (not-for-profit organizations), the study process and the development of the team report enabled me to gain practical experience in addressing issues pertaining to the management of not-for-profit organizations. Equally important, the structured reflection activities throughout the course afforded me valuable opportunities to reflect on the whole experience and draw lessons that have informed my attitudes and practices since then.

Second, I very much appreciated the opportunity to apply already learned materials in completing the assignments of this course and enriching my teamwork experience. For example, I utilized my research skills in designing the survey used to gauge clients' perception of the not-for-profit. Also, I used my specialized academic knowledge on diversity to offer recommendations for diversifying the organization's Board of Directors, thus attracting

members who reflect the demographics of its clients. These gains support research indicating that service-learning enhances students' ability to apply what they have learned in the real world (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Moreover, this experience consolidated my previously gained knowledge about the value of experiential learning and reflection, thus strengthening my commitment to incorporating active learning and reflection activities into my teaching practices to enhance student learning and build their characters.

Third, this experience led me to change some of my preconceived notions about life conditions in the United States. Given the U.S. common image in Egyptian media as a prosperous country, I, as an outsider based on my status as international student in the U.S., was under the impression that everyone in the U.S. leads an easy life and enjoys prosperity. But, this experience opened my eyes that despite the overall prosperous nature of the U.S., poverty still exists in the nation. Specifically, I was surprised upon seeing the not-for-profit facility, which was housed in a basement of a small building. The facility was disorganized, dusty, gloomy, underequipped, and understaffed. Although I saw several grassroots organizations in Egypt, it was difficult for me to believe that such a modest space existed in the United States. The physical appearance of the facility was so striking to me that I kept recalling the sharp contrast between the reality of what I saw at the organization and the typical pictures portrayed in Egyptian media about the prevailing conditions in the U.S.

Experience Changed Perceptions

Beyond the perplexity I felt upon seeing the physical appearance facility, I came to realize that not everyone in the United States, as I used to think, enjoys "the good life" life. Rather, there exist disadvantaged populations who struggle in their daily life in a country commonly known as the land of opportunity. Specifically, I came to see how minority youth suffer from lack of quality educational services, among other issues, similar to their Egyptian counterparts. Furthermore, my direct contacts with the organization's multiple constituents allowed me an invaluable opportunity to realize how people, irrespective of their demographic characteristics and geographic locations, have many things in common. For example, during reading youth completed survey forms, I was struck by the similarity between

these young people's thoughts and those of the disadvantaged youths with whom I interacted in Egypt before starting my graduate studies in the U.S. My newfound understanding of the realities of life in the U.S. consolidates previous findings that service-learning has a positive effect on reducing stereotypes and facilitating cross-cultural understanding (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007; Berry, 1990; Boyle-Baise, 1998).

I felt privileged to have gone through this and other genuine experiences that enriched my intercultural experiences. Unfortunately, however, such opportunities are not afforded to all international scholars. As such, I offer this experience to higher education professionals, urging them to maximize service-learning opportunities for students, both domestic and international. These activities, though, should be well-designed such that they incorporate sufficient preparation; reflection; and intervention plans during the experience and adequate debriefing after the experience (Bringle, 2011; Lou & Bosley, 2008; Vande Berg, 2007). Through such thoughtful opportunities, students are more likely to challenge their preconceptions, form more complete and realistic picture about others from different backgrounds, and develop feelings of empathy for people with different values and lifestyles. Significantly, such service-learning projects could enable students to help make a positive difference in the global community while honing their multicultural competencies through interacting directly and adequately with diverse community members.

International Students' Importance in Promoting Intercultural Understanding

While offering these opportunities to college students in general is a good practice, attracting international students to such activities is especially crucial. Given the privilege and uniqueness of this body of students in several aspects, including possessing multilingual skills and the likelihood for them to hold positions in international arenas, international students are better situated than their domestic peers to promote intercultural understanding between their native and host cultures. They could serve in formal and/or informal capacities as ambassadors who spread the values of mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence and stress how people, regardless of their cultural background, relate to each other as members in the global community.

Therefore, concerted attention should be paid to engage international students in well-designed service-learning projects. These efforts are especially important given Deardorff and Edwards' (2013) claim that "the human race must confront in the twenty-first century" (p. 178).

Contribution to Personal Development

In addition to promoting my intercultural understanding, this service-learning course contributed to my personal development in several ways. Specifically, it provided me with practical opportunities to exercise my leadership and professional communication skills while playing the role of a consultant, strengthening previous research findings that demonstrate positive effects for service-learning on leadership and communication skills development (Astin & Sax, 1998; Dugan, 2006; Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001). Also, this experience was instrumental in shaping my identity as a team player and enhancing my collaboration skills. In particular, it afforded me a valuable opportunity to practice the process of coordinating the schedules of and handling conflicts among team members. Furthermore, my work with two classmates enabled me to learn strategies for successful collaborations among diverse team members. For example, I recognized the value of discussing the goals of the group and the responsibilities of each member for achieving these goals at the initial phase of collaboration. Also, I realized the importance of agreeing on the channels of communication among group members, and between the group and external stakeholders in ensuring timely and effective communication among all involved parties. Additionally, I appreciated the value of distributing responsibilities among group members based on the unique skills and talents each member possesses in order to benefit from their diverse resources for achieving the team's goals and maximizing its success. Moreover, I better understood the importance of providing constructive and timely feedback for team members and showing appreciation for them in establishing good working relationships, generating a positive atmosphere, and energizing team members to exert more effort while enjoying the work. This experience really helped me grow as a collaborator and enabled me to better understand the opportunities and challenges presented by collaborative work. Given my

academic, social, and personal gains from this course, I strongly advise college students to engage in service-learning opportunities as an effort to get the optimal benefit from their collegiate experience.

Conclusion

The intent of this essay was to reflect on my service-learning experience as a graduate student. The first section revealed that service-learning is a type of experiential education that aims to connect classroom instruction with its application in the real world. It also showed that reflection is a key component of this pedagogy. The second section described the service-learning course under examination. This part showed that the service-learning course aimed to familiarize students with management issues facing not-for-profits and prepare them to successfully lead such organizations. It also explained that the course was designed for students to work in teams to provide consultancy services to management and reflect on their overall experience through structured opportunities for reflection throughout the course. The third section outlined the service activities associated with this experience, providing examples of the research and analysis activities my team conducted. This part indicated that my team focused primarily on exploring strategies for enhancing the organization's visibility in the community, attract more volunteers, and increase the effectiveness of its Board of Directors. The final section discussed the personal impact of the course on me. This section presented examples of my academic, social, and personal gains from this experience. For example, it deepened my understanding of the not-for-profit world and affected my sense of efficacy in that I had an increased sense that I could address issues facing not-for-profits and make a concrete effort toward their improvement. This effect is especially important given Bandura's (1995) remark that beliefs about one's efficacy are crucial to social change. Also, it showed how this experience informed my teaching philosophy such that it reinforced my plans to integrate experiential learning into my teaching practice and offer opportunities for students to reflect on their learning experiences, and practice outdoor activities. Additionally, this experience afforded me valuable opportunities to exercise and advance my leadership, communication, and collaboration skills.

Significantly, how this service-learning

influenced me is consistent with past research exploring the impacts of service-learning on student participants. For example, similar to my experience, prior research suggested positive impacts of service-learning on self efficacy (Stewart, 2009), developing students' interpersonal development, communication, and leadership skills (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Keen & Keen, 1998). Since my reflections reinforce outcomes of past research on the positive effects of service-learning on students, it is my hope that these reflections add evidence for the value of service-learning to college students, thereby encouraging faculty members to integrate it into their mainstream teaching practice and urging institutions of higher education to reconsider faculty reward structures such that they recognize the faculty who engage students in addressing authentic community issues while advancing their learning in the classroom.

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