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# Exploring Global Awareness: International Service-Learning and its Impact on Student Intercultural Competency

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## Abstract

International service learning (ISL) programs are becoming increasingly popular around the world. For students, they offer a number of opportunities to broaden their knowledge and polish their intercultural understanding and communication skills. This paper investigates how participation in an ISL program affects the intercultural competency of students from a Japanese university. Specifically, it elucidates the students' level of consciousness regarding their sense of global awareness and intercultural competence through a thematic analysis of their reflections after participating in an ISL program in New Zealand during the summer of 2017. To conclude, this paper will discuss the potential for expansion of such a program to reach a wider audience and to encourage further collaboration.

## 1. Introduction: Situating the Research

The popularity of international service learning (ISL) programs is steadily growing throughout the world. Students participate in such programs with the aim of broadening their knowledge, intercultural understanding and worldview as global citizens. In the current literature, these learning outcomes and benefits have been well documented, particularly in the case of university students from North America (Larsen, 2015). However, data related to the benefits in terms of global awareness and intercultural competency gained by students at Japanese universities is still scarce. Drawing upon past results, this study is a follow-up to the author's first look at the representations of learning outcomes gained by students at a Japanese university that have participated in an ISL program conducted in cooperation with the University of Canterbury Community Hub program in New

Zealand (O'Connell, 2017; University of Canterbury, 2017).

This paper begins by providing succinct definitions of ISL, global awareness and intercultural competency as well as giving a brief overview of the program conducted in 2016. It then moves onto describing the program conducted in 2017 in which five students and the author participated in the ISL program in New Zealand. Following that, it will explore how participation in the program affected the students' intercultural competency and ultimately whether it was able to enhance their global awareness in any way.

### **Definitions: ISL, Global Awareness and Intercultural Competency**

Bringle, Hatcher, and Jones (2011) define ISL as a mixture of learning experiences that combines service learning through volunteer activities coupled with international education with the goal of positively influencing the growth of global awareness and intercultural competence. Moreover, it allows students the chance to learn more about specific domains such as public policy through community engagement activities.

The term 'global awareness' not only expresses the notion pertaining to being aware of the global environment. In fact, as BrckaLorenz and Gieser (2011) skillfully explain, it includes a multitude of concepts such as intercultural sensitivity, global citizenship and world-mindedness that are interrelated. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, it is defined as recognizing and appreciating of the diversity of the world. Therefore, the more globally aware a person is, the more it allows them to sense the diversity of people and cultures worldwide.

As for intercultural competency, Deardorff (2006) suggests that it is the competence to acquire and cultivate specific knowledge, skills and mindsets that help a person to navigate their own behavior and communication in way that is effective and suitable for intercultural interactions. In this study, this definition as well as the abovementioned definitions of ISL and global awareness will be used as a combined framework to analyze the data collected from the students that participated in the ISL program.

### **Program Overview: Structure and Goals**

As explained in detail in the previous paper on this particular ISL program (see O'Connell, 2017), the program was developed and conducted for the first time

in 2016. In the first year, six students travelled to New Zealand to take part in a ISL program customized to their schedule which allowed them to experience real-life learning opportunities both on and off campus through the UC Community Engagement Hub at the University of Canterbury. Based on the success and reflections of the first tour in 2016 that saw six students and the author take part in the program, the 2017 program was further improved with the goal of stimulating more intercultural competency and global awareness among the participating students through more activities while maintaining the same overall structure.

### 2017 Program Format

As shown in the tables below, the format for the 2017 ISL tour was the same as 2016: 1) pre-departure preparation classes, 2) ISL tour and 3) post-tour report and focus group as shown in the tables below:

Evaluations and reflections gathered from the 2016 program cohort pointed to a strong desire to participate in more service-learning projects in the Christchurch community and to be able to interview more key players in these projects (O’Connell, 2017). Based on these results, the author revised the overall structure and content to reflect the 2016 students’ evaluations.

Firstly, in regards to the pre-departure preparation class conducted in Japan, the author used the same content, but set new goals within each section. For example, in the first lesson, the students were introduced to the meaning of ISL through examples gained from the 2016 program. This allowed the 2017 cohort to connect the definition of ISL to authentic examples of what they would experience in

Table 1. PRE-DEPARTURE PREPARATION CLASSES

PREPARATION CLASS	ACTIVITIES
CLASS 1	THEME: What is International Service Learning?
CLASS 2	THEME: Research & Fieldwork Planning
CLASS 3	THEME: Fieldwork Interviews & Data Collection Methods
CLASS 4	THEME: Fieldwork English
CLASS 5	THEME: Presentation Skills

Table 2. INTERNATIONAL SERVICE LEARNING TOUR

TOUR SCHEDULE			
DAY 1	Depart Japan	DAY 8	On Campus: Student Volunteer Army: Interviews & Discussion Data Analysis
DAY 2	Arrive Christchurch Program Orientation (UC)	DAY 9	Service Learning Project 3: "Riccarton Police & City Council-Community Engagement"
DAY 3	On Campus: Community Engagement Off Campus: Quake City Tour	DAY 10	Service Learning Project 4: "Redcliffs Reserve Clean Up"
DAY 4	Service Learning Project 1: "Greening the Rubble Project"	DAY 11	On Campus: Final Data Analysis Presentation Preparation
DAY 5	Service Learning Project 2: "Cultivate Urban Farm Project"	DAY 12	On-Campus: Presentation
DAY 6	Weekend: Homestay Surveys	DAY 13-14	Weekend: Homestay
DAY 7	Weekend: Homestay Surveys	DAY 15	Return to Japan

Table 3. POST-TOUR REPORT AND FOCUS GROUP ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY	CONTENT
Final Report	Four-page report in English or Japanese reflecting on experiences and learning outcomes. Submitted within one month upon return to Japan.
Focus Group Interview	Interview to follow-up on themes extracted from student reports.

New Zealand. Once the students had a clear and shared definition of ISL, they were able to discuss and decide on their learning goals both as individuals and as a group. In between each preparation class, students were encouraged to research the current post-earthquake recovery situation in Christchurch and visualize what type of learning they thought would be possible.

This approach was useful in terms of research planning and preparation. With all of the students gaining basic knowledge on the recovery process in

Christchurch, they were able to group together to produce a list of possible research questions. These questions were then categorized in themes in order to decide where and when the students could source data and answers to the questions. Categorizing the questions proved useful in terms of fine-tuning the actual program schedule as it allowed the group to identify their research targets—i.e. host families, Christchurch City Council, Christchurch Police, Student Volunteer Army, etc. In order to make sure proper research etiquette and ethical consideration was adhered to, the students were instructed on how to collect and secure their data as well as the type of language to use in interviews and questionnaires.

Due to the relatively small size of the student group, small changes to the program schedule were easy to implement, as it did not involve major logistic changes. As mentioned above, the students were able to select a number of significant categories that in turn led to creation of the schedule shown above in Table 2. Compared to the 2016 program, the off-campus service learning activities were more diverse. Not only did the students get to participate in volunteer activities such as maintaining community gardens or assisting in creating new plots at urban-based vegetable gardens that catered to small retail cafes and restaurants, but they also were able to talk with the stakeholders in all projects being conducted—i.e., community members, local police and city council representatives. Additionally, a roundtable-style discussion with the executive members of the University of Canterbury Student Volunteer Army was held during the on-campus component of the program. Naturally, during all of the activities due care and attention was given to reminding the students of their objectives and purpose of participation so as to ensure they got the most out of each experience. At the end of the ISL program, the students gave a presentation that described their experiences and discussed their analysis of the data collected through their interviews with the people that interacted with on-campus through the lectures and roundtable discussion, during each of the service projects and at their homestays. Finally, as was the case with the 2016 program, after returning to Japan, the students were required to submit a four-page report that reflected on their experiences and following that, to participate in a follow-up focus group interview that focused on confirming the meaning of their reflections in their reports.

## **2. The Study: 2017 ISL Program Outcomes**

This study focuses on the affect service learning project participation has on students' intercultural competency as a way of exploring the issue of global awareness. In the previous study conducted last year (see O'Connell, 2017), the interactive nature of the program proved to positively affect the learning outcomes, particularly in relation to enhancing their cultural intelligence, or in other words how knowledge of cultural differences can help students to navigate their own behavior to a stage which is appropriate in a host culture. It also elucidated that participation-based pedagogy is an effective way of stimulating learner motivation. In the current study, the focus is now steered toward exploring the effect on the students' intercultural competency by exploring the ways in which their global awareness is consciously evaluated subjectively as well as an objective analysis by the author.

This study used a qualitative approach similar to the previous study using two key frameworks—constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2009) and thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). The data for this study was collected from three main sources—the author's observation notes, final reports and a focus group interview in order to gain insights, and to form themes that highlight examples of the affect on students' intercultural competency. As the author was of the group, the constructivist grounded theoretical framework was ideal as it allowed interactions with the students to be viewed using an inductive and comparative approach. Once the data was collected from all three sources, it was then coded into themes that emerged. The students were instructed that all data submission was voluntary and they were guaranteed anonymity. As a result, all students voluntarily signed a consent form for the use of data in this paper.

## **3. Findings: Analyzing the Effects of ISL Participation**

A thorough analysis of the five student final reports, the author's ISL program observation notes and the focus group interview transcripts produced three main themes connected to the effect of the program on student intercultural competency in relation to global awareness. The three themes were: 1) role as a global citizen, 2) view as a member of a large-village, and 3) necessity of

intercultural communication skills. Accordingly, this section of the paper will discuss the findings of each of the three themes.

### **Theme 1: Role as a Global Citizen**

The first predominant theme to appear from the data was an enhanced consciousness of global citizenship among all five students. A number of factors can be attributed to this shared sense of citizenship, all of which can be traced throughout the three stages of the program from the pre-departure stage to their return to Japan. In all of these stages, one clear purpose was established in terms of making the students aware of their place as a member in a larger global society. They were encouraged to self-reflect on their experience from that standpoint. Accordingly, the following extracts give us a clear description of how they viewed their role as global citizens.

*“The preparation before going to New Zealand really helped me to realize that we can all do something to help others everywhere in world. We just need to grasp the opportunity and have a purpose.” (Student #1)*

*“Before preparing and doing this program, I didn’t really think very much beyond what was in front of me. But I now know that I’m part of the world and can actually do something for communities no matter where I go. The volunteer activities I took part in and the discussions I had with the people in Christchurch really opened my eyes to the world and made me aware that I need to be motivated and have a purpose to do something.” (Student #2)*

*“Until I took part in this program, I didn’t really think of my role as a global citizen. Through this experience, I’m now able to see a bigger picture and realize that I need to be more aware of global issues as they affect me.” (Student #5)*

As these three examples show, the students transformed their worldview as a result of the whole experience. They were clearly able to grasp the concept of having a role to play globally. Overall, the underlying tone of being aware and motivated to play an active role was the most significant finding within this theme.

## **Theme 2: View as a Member of a Large-Village**

Another significant theme to surface from the data analysis was the students' view of being a member of a large village. This concept was introduced by Dr. Billy Osteen—the instigator and professor in charge of the UC Community Hub course (University of Canterbury, 2017) at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. Simply put, the large-village concept relates to how New Zealand culture is described. With a population of approximately 4.6 million spread over an area equivalent to two-thirds the size of Japan, the chances of people knowing someone in common is relatively high. Moreover, as New Zealand culture prides itself on its community-first approach in many walks of life, people nationwide are well known for coming together in times of disaster to help each other and provide unconditional support.

This concept struck a strong cord within all five students as made evident by the following comments:

*“One thing that really stuck with me through participation in this program was the idea that we are all part of a large village. Rather than look at things on a small regional scale, I was able to learn that when it comes to helping one another, we should see ourselves as people in a large village. That way, we are able to get rid of unnecessary boundaries and barriers.” (Student #1)*

*“The large-village concept made me think about how to relate to others living in the same country. Rather than categorizing people by region, if we think of ourselves as members of a large village, there is more positive feeling toward cooperation and understanding.” (Student #2)*

*“The large village way of thinking helped me to realize that we are one big community. This can be defined on many different scales—regional, national and international. If more people thought this way about the people around them, I am sure that it would lead to stronger community building.” (Student #3)*

*“In times of disaster, like the Christchurch earthquakes, the large village approach really*



*encourages people to come together to achieve recovery. I heard many stories of how fast the entire country came together to help Christchurch on individual levels as well as local and national government levels. I think not only Japan, but many other countries should embrace this way of thinking to get things done.” (Student #4)*

*“To me, the large village concept was an eye-opener. It is something that seems like commonsense, but in today’s world I think that many people tend to look at how they are different more than looking at how they are similar and can help each other. Access to a larger community, whether it is a city as whole or even a nation, means that things progress more smoothly and with more energy at times when people need help.” (Student #5)*

These comments all describe the astonishing effect that this concept had on the students. It connects strongly with the views on roles as global citizens. What is noteworthy is that the students grasped the concept in terms of how it relates to community building and helping one another.

### **Theme 3: Necessity of Intercultural Communication Skills**

As previously stated, the underlying objective of this study was to investigate the effect that participation in an ISL program has on intercultural competency. A thorough examination and analysis of the data pointed to a clear consciousness of the importance of having intercultural competency as shown by the following extracts:

*“During this program, I was concerned that my English wouldn’t be good enough to communicate with the citizens of Christchurch. However, what I became aware of was that it’s not how good your grammar is, but in fact, how positive your approach to communicating is. Also, I discovered that knowing the culture behind the language helps tremendously. New Zealand people are open in their communication, but at the same time, modest in the way they talk about themselves. Using that knowledge helped me to communicate smoothly with them.” (Student #1)*

*“We had many opportunities to communicate with a wide variety of people in Christchurch—university teachers, student volunteers, community residents and local*

*government officials. What amazed me is that no matter what position people were in, they were all very friendly, positive and open in their communication. This was the biggest difference for me comparing my usual style of communication in Japan, and while it took some time to get used to, it made me aware that it is important to know how culture and language are connected so that you can make the proper adjustments when in a host culture.” (Student #3)*

*“The experiences I gained from this program are numerous. I became aware of myself in a global sense. I learned that knowing yourself and others in terms of similarities differences helps to choose a way to cooperate and meet in the middle. It has given me the motivation to learn how to use knowledge to guide my behavior more. I feel as if I now understand what it means to communicate interculturally.” (Student #4)*

These comments are representative of a sense of accomplishment among the students. In their reports and focus group interview, they were able to articulate what the experience meant to them in terms of enhancing their intercultural competency. Not only were they able to express the deep link that cultural knowledge and linguistic competency possesses in intercultural interaction, but they also described specific points. For example, one common reflection related to the need to adjust communication styles or behaviors in intercultural interactions. This clearly indicated that the students were beginning to enhance their intercultural competency through a heightened awareness of self and others.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the effect an ISL program had on the intercultural competency of students from a Japanese university. It began by defining three central frameworks related to this issue—international service learning, global awareness, and intercultural competency. Accordingly, this section will discuss what can be drawn from the data as examples of effects on intercultural competency. This paper will then conclude with a discussion of the findings in regards to future considerations and goals.

Firstly, regarding the international service learning framework, using the reflections of the 2016 cohort, the program was improved to provide more

opportunities for students to connect with the community through volunteer activities as well as the chance to interview and discuss the role of volunteers in community recovery efforts. As a result, students were able to communicate with active members of the student volunteer army, teachers involved in the program, and the community and city council officials. As such, they were required to use their English language competency as a tool to navigate this intercultural interaction. This meant that they had to remain cognizant of culture and communication style differences in order to communicate effectively. As the extracts in the findings sections highlight, it resulted in students becoming more aware of the differences between themselves and the local people.

Secondly, the findings suggest that their global awareness was heightened. All five students were able to give a descriptive account and reflection of how they are now more aware of their role as a global citizen. The concept of being part of a large village rather than a country stimulated their thought-process on how people can come together to contribute to social and community recovery efforts.

Finally, the predominant finding from this study is that ISL program participation can trigger intercultural sensitivity and awareness. The students in this particular program noticeably became more aware of the need of intercultural competence in a host culture. The interactive structure of the program allowed them to navigate cultural differences and instilled a sense of accomplishment as is made clear from the positive comments and reflections they gave.

After two successful programs in 2016 and 2017, the author is now at a stage of constructing plans for this ISL format to reach a larger audience. One of the major future considerations relates to more collaboration. To that end, contact with universities in the Fukushima and Kumamoto areas has been made to explore the potential of creating joint-study tours to the University of Canterbury in the future. Based on the ethos established through student volunteering, the University of Canterbury has created real-life learning opportunities that stimulate bicultural competence, community engagement, global awareness, and innovation. For the two above-mentioned regions that are already establishing local service learning type projects, this could provide an opportunity for their students to enhance their global awareness through the sharing of similar experiences. If discussions and ideas on how to implement a joint-study program continue to proceed successfully, the ultimate goal of the author is to create a full-fledged

*Grants-in-Aid* (kaken) application that makes it possible to develop a reciprocal learning program that sees university students and teachers in Japan as well as their counterparts at the University of Canterbury learn and work together both in New Zealand and Japan.

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