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SERVICE LEARNING FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH KOREA

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ABSTRACT: This research was conducted at a top ten university in Seoul, South Korea, within the confines of a course titled *University English*. The instructor was from North America. Korean students were introduced to the concept of service-learning as well as organizational communication, after which the faculty and students worked together on placement of service-learning sites outside the university. The concept of service learning seemed to be new to most Korean university students, and most students tended to describe the service-learning project as volunteerism or community service. Some students expressed resistance, either verbally or as part of surveys after the fact. Students who gained measurably from the experience also communicated an altered view of themselves and fellow citizens less fortunate than themselves. Students were required to return from their service-learning project to present in English the results of their efforts. The results of this study were gleaned from surveys of students and site supervisors. The authors chose the 6th Asian Diaspora Pre-conference as a venue to disseminate initial results in order to determine response from fellow academics that have knowledge and experience of Asian perspectives. Bringing this research before an expert audience was intended as a first avenue to share findings.

Introduction

Rational of the Study

This study was intended to initiate a comparative, cross-cultural inquiry into service learning. Specifically, three researchers from North America sought to determine the efficacy in South Korea of a learning practice common in the United States and Canada. The researchers also wished to investigate the response of South Korean students as they maneuvered themselves within a service-learning environment. Further, the researchers aimed to understand their own responses to service learning situated inside a traditionally Confucian educational system. This study evolved out of a general education course required by students at a top ten comprehensive university in Seoul, South Korea.

Statement of the Problem

Engaging learners for meaningful and transformative purposes remains an ongoing educational goal in North America (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Transitioning away from lecture and evolving into interactive modes of learning is a key component, particularly in higher education. The same movement is occurring in Asia, but the headway toward engaging students experientially may be emerging at a slower pace.

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Students throughout Asia complain of boredom because most educators rarely step away from the lectern (Zhenhui, 2001). Despite research that supports the idea that the *sage on the stage* hierarchy of teaching may be outdated, a Confucian-centered ideology seems to persist, one in which the professor is all knowing and nearly unapproachable. For the learning styles of Generation Y and Generation Z—two generations of learners who grew up enmeshed with technology—the traditional classroom that emphasizes rote plus regurgitation seems to be missing the mark (Baron, 2002; Doherty & Singh, 2005; Kuo, 2011)

Government, business, and industry in both North America and Asia are clamoring for students cum employees who are engaged and persistent problem solvers (Holtzman & Kraft, 2011). Therefore, learning that mirrors real-life immersion is tantamount. This research overviews a learner-centered project that ushered learners into a theater of experience.

Research Questions

The research questions for the study included the following:

R1: Is service learning a viable educational tool when the pedagogical framework for the practice is relatively unknown within a culture?

R2: Are the skills associated with service learning applicable across nationalities and cultures?

R3: What measurable benefits can be demonstrated when a foreign instructor incorporates service learning into a Korean classroom?

Significance of the Study

Service learning may provide an experiential link between the theoretical nature of a university and the practical environs of a workplace (Godfrey, Illes, & Berry, p. 310, 2005). Service learning, as defined in North America, is not readily practiced as a function of the higher education classroom in South Korea. Traditionally labeled as a “social service course” (Berry & Chisholm, 1999, p. 8), many service courses are offered as an extracurricular activity—that is, not tied to a particular course but tied to an agency or organization affiliated with the university. Even universities such as Sungkonghoe with a service graduation requirement tie this obligation to volunteerism outside of curricular classes (Berry & Chisholm, 1999). Some service courses even occur in foreign countries during semester breaks. These examples show a consistent push toward service, but these examples are not service learning projects. They can more rightly be called community service or service to society. Service learning has a different mandate.

Within the context of a regular semester and within the confines of a given course, South Korean students tended to view service learning as volunteerism. The pedagogical approach is often conceptualized and interpreted as volunteerism, perhaps due to its outward appearance. However, service learning departs from volunteerism when the learning that occurs is intentionally integrated into the classroom for assessment and reflection. Providing the results of this study

may add to service learning literature as an adult learning tool that can be applied across cultural boundaries.

Literature Review

History of Service Learning

Service learning as a teaching and learning strategy is uniquely North American. Despite influences reaching back in history, the concept that evolved into its current mechanics did so out of the cooperative education movement at the University of Cincinnati at the turn of the 20th century (Auld, 1972). American theorists such as William James and John Dewey began providing a theoretical thew with ideals such as continuity of experience, reflective activity, and Dewey's Great Community—the notion that educational participation leads to citizenship (Giles & Eyler, 1994, pp. 82-83). The phrase “service learning” was first used in 1966 when the Oak Ridge Associated Universities conducted a student-led project with the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), linking students and faculty with tributary area development organizations (Sheil, 2007). Today, the largest cooperative education program in the world is housed at University of Waterloo in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada with more than 17,000 students enrolled in co-op programs and more than 4,500 active co-op employers (uwaterloo.ca, n.d.).

Service Learning Defined

The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse defines service learning through three key characteristics:

1. Service-learning constitutes activity that is focused on meeting a human need in the community where that need has to do with the well being of individuals and of the environment in which they live.
2. Key academic and civic objectives to be achieved through combining service with learning have been identified prior to the activity.
3. Opportunities for students to reflect on their experience and its connection to specific academic and civic objectives are incorporated into the activity. (servicelearning.org, n.d.)

Learning Benefits of a Service Learning Approach

While service learning is relatively common in North America, less emphasis has been seen outside a Western context. Notwithstanding, Vickers, Harris, and McCarthy (2004) reported that service learning may provide a conduit for the development and continuance of symbiotic connections between the university and the community at large. As a result, service learning is gaining in popularity outside of the United States including Australia and Asia (Vickers, Harris, & McCarthy, 2004). Coffey and Wang (2006) observed several benefits in China similar to what is reported in the West. The students reported the service-learning project as worthwhile, assisting them to retain the material being taught. The outcomes suggested that service learning is an effective extension of individualized instruction (Coffey & Wang, 2006). Service learning affords the opportunity for students to link academic learning with real-work experience.

Service learning situates education within a social context and facilitates socially responsible understanding. The experiential practice increases civic engagement (Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009). Service learning assists students to address the rigors of responsible citizenship (Elwell & Bean, 2001). In service learning, the community becomes the teacher. Elwell and Bean (2001) suggested that service learning fosters the characteristics of compassion, accountability, critical thinking, and other- and self-respect. A Japanese student in the class reported, "I grew up a little" (Elwell & Bean, p. 61). Service learning increased student motivation and skill development (Levesque & Stanek, 2009). Connecting with professionals and assisting communities bolsters intrinsic motivation. Students who participate in service learning projects self-reported a higher value of the class (Levesque, et al, 2006).

Learners whose focus was directed toward service enhanced understanding of course material and altered perceptions in a constructivist frame (Cho, 2002). The program connected concepts to students' lives and experiences in a social context. While the actual experience occurred in Iowa, Cho (2002) surmised that experiential teaching and learning practices could be applied in South Korea as an instructional tool.

Methods

The service learning project was not prescribed by the English department of the Korean university. Instead, the project evolved to become a feature for four individual classes as envisioned by one instructor with prior experience with service learning. The course, titled University English, had students of varying levels of English language proficiency.

The members of service learning groups were devised to represent a range of English language speaking and writing ability. For example, students with less ability were grouped with students with higher ability.

The instructor relied on an English-speaking Korean assistant to help coordinate the service-learning placements and manage challenges that arose. Site supervisors seemed eager to have student participation and placements included orphanages, senior centers, assisted living facilities, and the like.

Group members were encouraged to work together, rather than splitting up their effort. Each student was required to spend eight hours over the course of several weeks of the service-learning project.

The methodology for this study began with a rationale for a qualitative case study and by defining the case study approach. The context of the case study is elaborated, and the analytic process to interpretation and representation is explained. Survey results were translated from Korean to English, and then coded for themes. Interview results of site supervisors are examined and categorized.

Results

The data collected provide an intercultural perspective on service learning in venues unaccustomed to this experiential practice. Service learning is common in higher education in North America and is spreading across the globe, but more slowly in Asia. The initial findings in

this comparative study seem to reveal three critical interfaces between the students, the university, and the community. The students reported a range of responses to service learning from disdain to delight. The greater Seoul community was receptive to the idea of the projects, welcoming university students into environments such as orphanages, nursing homes, and assisted-living centers. The range of findings are elucidated in a full report of the research.

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