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Engaged Service Learning Shapes Students' Individual Identities, Fostering Community Engagement

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Introduction

On a college campus, students have the opportunity to explore their personal and professional identity through academia. At the University of Nebraska at Omaha, the Service Learning Academy facilitates service learning projects across campus, linking academia with community engagement. This collaborative process creates a space for transformative learning to occur, employing a framework that unites practice and theory with reflection (Hullender et al, 2015). Moreover, service learning projects allow students to explore their identity in a larger context, the local, national, and global community. This research examines how service learning connects students to a deeper understanding of academia, the community, and personal identity.

Research Question 1: How does engaged service learning shape students' identities?

Research Question 2: Does engaged service learning foster community engagement?

Method

Participants

Participants for this study included 366 undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Of the respondents, 22.7% chose not to indicate any demographic information. Of the remaining participants, 75% identified as female. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 64, with the average age being 23. Respondent ethnicity included 76% White/Caucasian, 4.6% Black/African American, 8.6% Hispanic/Latino, 7.5% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 1.8% multiethnic, 1% other. Of the respondents, 35.7% indicated that they had previously taken a service learning course.

Design and Procedure

Participants were given an online survey after the completion of their service learning projects, which they were given two weeks to complete. The questionnaire included three open-ended questions analyzed for this study, including: "How, if at all, did your service learning experience influence what you will do in the community in the future?"; "How, if at all, did your service learning experience influence what you will do at school in the future?"; and "What would you like people to know about your service learning experience?". Responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed for emergent themes and coded by two trained raters. Due to the extreme relatedness of the three open-ended responses, several themes emerged consistently across all questions.



Results

Theme

Example

Expanded knowledge of and connection to the community.

"I am more informed about community issues and I was able to make great ties between class concepts and how to apply them in the real world."

Deepened sense of civic responsibility and increased prosocial behavior.

"My experience definitely made me want to keep working in my community and work with other communities I am not a part of."

Improved self-efficacy.

"It stretches your ability in ways that cannot be learned in a book."

Guided career choice.

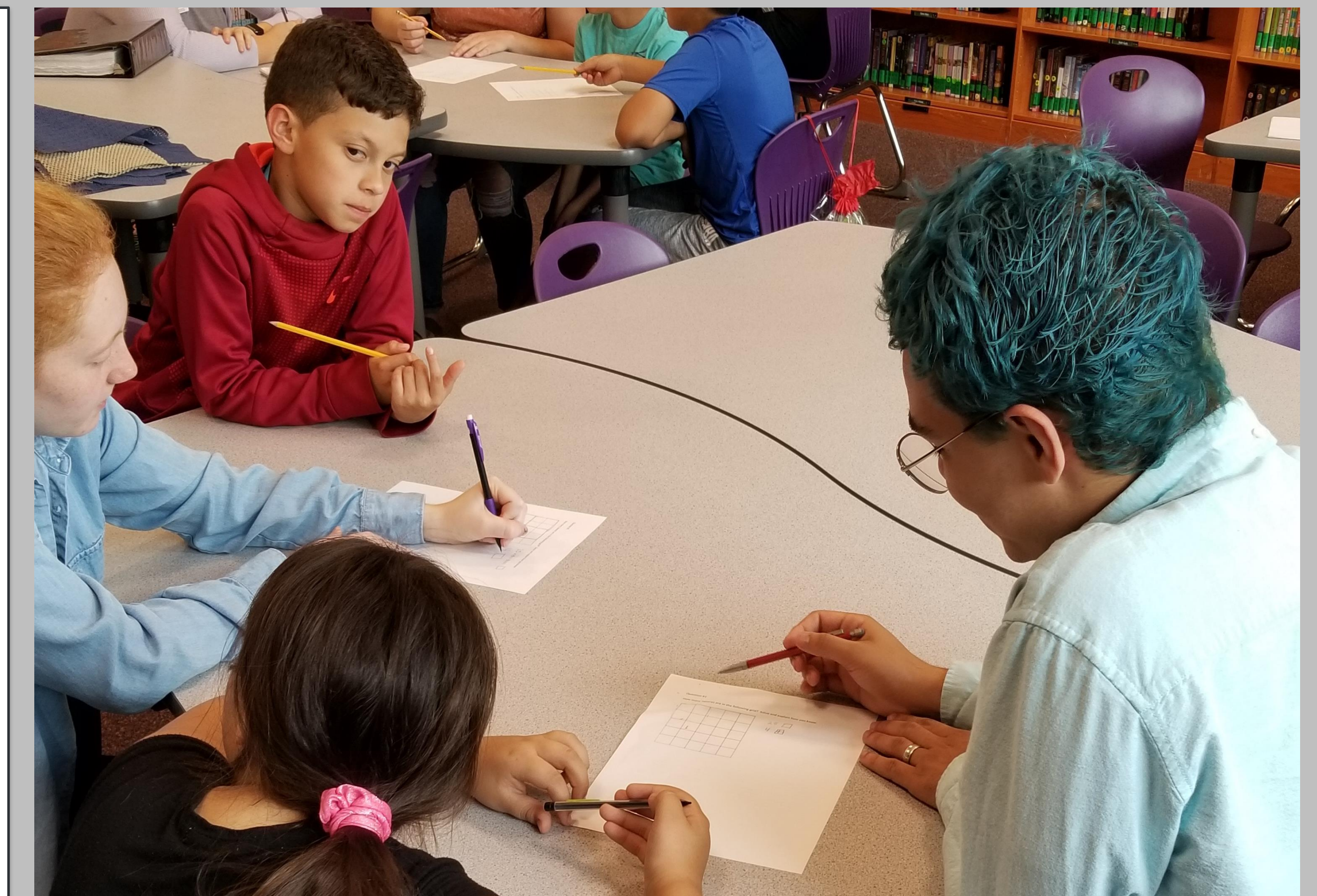
"It showed me where my passions truly lie and how my path should shift in order to fulfill my end goals."

Demonstrated adaptability and leadership.

"My service learning hours forced me to be very self-motivated because most of the work was done by myself. This allowed me to think critically and creatively to solve my own issues that came up during my volunteering."

Overall positive experience

"It was very memorable and made me think of things in a new way. I enjoyed it so much. It was an experience I will likely hold dear to my heart throughout my college experience and even the rest of my career."



Discussion

- The most frequently occurring theme was that of "deepened sense of civic responsibility and increased pro-social behavior." 62.8% of respondents indicated that their service learning experience increased their interest in engaging with their community and encouraged them to be more mindful of their contributions to the community.
- Nearly half of the participants indicated that their service learning experience expanded their knowledge of and connection to the community. These participants developed an awareness of community resources and social issues, and/or formed meaningful relationships with individuals in the community.
- Overall, responses to the open ended questions were positive; Nearly 80% of the participants described their service learning experience as an overwhelmingly positive, enjoyable, or meaningful one.

Future Directions

- Future research can expand on the impact of student reflection, including how intentional reflection of student experiences increases students' awareness of their strengths and builds their capacity to leverage them.
- Future research can also study the impact of service learning experiences on scaffolding the academic identity of students, including their interest in taking additional service learning courses.

References

Hullender, R., Hinck, S., Wood-Nartker, J., Burton, T., & Bowlby, S. (2015). Evidences of transformative learning in service-learning reflections. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 15(4), 58-82