An Investigation of Current Design, Implementation and Evaluation Methods of Service-Learning Programs in Japan

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Abstract

   This paper investigates and describes the current design, implementation and evaluation methods of service-learning programs at universities in Japan. In previous research, the author identified that service-learning in Japan has gained a strong foothold in recent years, but at the same time, it was also found that research analyzing learning outcomes from a phenomenology of practice approach was still sporadic. Considering the fact that service-learning focuses on a pedagogical approach of combining academic study and community service experiential learning, a further investigation of current design, implementation and evaluation methods at Japanese universities is necessary. After the current state of these areas is discussed, this paper concludes with suggestions for further development of tertiary level service-learning education in Japan.

Keywords: service-learning, experiential learning, curriculum design, curriculum evaluation

1. Introduction: Situating the Research

Over the last few decades, service-learning has developed as a style of education that is based on experiential learning. The blend of traditional classroom, academic-focused learning with out-of-the-classroom experiential learning through volunteer and community-engagement activities leads to the enablement of enhanced civic responsibility and citizenship learning for the participating students (O'Connell 2022, Patrick et.al 2019). Service-learning has long been seen as a representative example of experiential education due to the common pedagogical approach of combining academic study and community service through volunteer activities. As Benson and Harkavy (2003) explain, the benefits of this approach in service-learning programs center on the opportunity for students to enhance their critical thinking and problem-solving skills as well as heighten their civic responsibility and citizenship awareness as a member of the society in which they live. Previous research conducted by the author revealed that more than 50 universities throughout Japan offer service-learning focused opportunities for their students (O'Connell, 2022).

   In Japan, reforms implemented by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (hereafter referred to as MEXT) in 2001 included a strengthened

focus on increasing and improving community engagement of Japanese students so that they could become more open and empathetic through community service participation (Monbukagakusho, 2002). Research related to service-learning in Japan reveals that there are a variety of initiatives that are driving the development of service-learning implementation.

As Mashino (2022) points out, there has been a heavy research focus on advanced initiatives such as on the number of service-learning programs selected for good practice grants available from MEXT (Sakurai & Yamada, 2009), and new policy trends and implementation efforts (Fukudome, 2019). However, recently, research that highlights and describes the benefits of service-learning from an educational viewpoint has started to increase (Yamada 2016, Kodama 2017, O'Connell 2020, 2021, 2022).

Conversely, when comparing such research to overseas service-learning programs, it is apparent that Japanese service-learning education still may lack a robust reflection process that allows students to become more conscious of creating social networks and social innovation through community engagement (Yamada 2016, Zeng 2021, O'Connell 2022). Considering the fact that service-learning focuses on a pedagogical approach of combining academic study and community service experiential learning, an investigation of current design, implementation and evaluation methods at Japanese universities is necessary.

Accordingly, the remainder of this paper provides an overview of the current state of design, implementation and evaluation methods of representative tertiary examples as it would be impossible to examine all institutions here. This paper then concludes with suggestions for further development of tertiary level service-learning education in Japan.

2.　Service-Learning at Japanese Universities: The Big Picture

In a previous study, the author found there were an abundant number of service-learning opportunities available to Japanese university students throughout Japan (O'Connell, 2022). The study examined three representative examples of Japanese tertiary level service-learning curricula development and implementation that showed robust and well-designed programs. Research conducted by Mashino (2022) comparing the characteristics of Japanese and U.S. university service-learning education programs also highlights a number of worthwhile points of that further contribute to understanding the big picture regarding this type of education in Japan.

His study found that there were over eighty institutions, including national, public and private universities, in Japan with service-learning oriented syllabi in place. Through an in-depth examination of the syllabi content using keyword and thematic analysis, Mashino (2022) points out that Japanese service-learning programs feature a strong emphasis on the citizenship awareness through volunteer activities as well as skill development within the various programs. Conversely, his research also shows that there is a lack of focus on constructing values and philosophy in a way that gives students the opportunities to express their opinions freely and describe themselves openly. This analysis suggests that there is still an expectation of conformity in regard to communication skills. In conclusion, he stresses that as service-

learning programs in Japan develop, there is an opportunity for program design to use the community engagement conducted by students to stimulate not only their thoughts on how they can contribute to social change, but also their ability to voice the opinions in a democratic and neo-liberalistic way instead of remaining passive.

3. Current Insights: Service-Learning Programs in Japan

Each Japanese university offering service-learning programs does so with the intent of providing experiential education opportunities to its students. Among the array of programs available throughout the country, there are a number of representative examples of good practice based on sound pedagogical approaches in terms of design, implementation and evaluation.

In a previous study, the author introduced the undertakings and approaches of service-learning programs conducted at the University of Fukushima, International Christian University and Ehime University. The design and implementation of all three programs indicated a strong emphasis on connecting the learning achieved in and out of the classroom and the inclusion of individual and group reflections. However, at the time of that study, information pertaining to the way in which those activities and reflections were evaluated as well as the perceived effectiveness of the programs was not available (O'Connell, 2022). Accordingly, this study attempts to elucidate more details on evaluation methods and program effectiveness through the description of following four representative programs.

Sophia University Junior College Division
In terms of effectiveness, one study that does shed light in the context of Japanese university service-learning programs is one provided by Associate Professor Maria Lupas at Sophia University Junior College Division (hereafter referred to as SUJCD). The service-learning program at SUJCD took hold in 2008, including the establishment of a dedicated Service-Learning Center on campus. Service-Learning at SUJCD was developed by building on volunteer-driven program models used at the institution for the past four decades (Lupas, 2021).

As Lupas (2021) explains, the center conducted an exhaustive method of marking the relationship of classes to service-learning from 2009 to 2017 by allowing instructors of all classes across the university syllabi to indicate a streamed marker of relationship—(A level) strong relationship, (B level) moderate relationship or (C level) slight relationship to service-learning. If a particular class was given one of these markers of relationship to service-learning, the content of that class that directly linked to service-learning would be specified. This type of self-indication by instructors was guided through the implementation of guidelines such as the spirit of service based on Christian humanism, skills and knowledge that simulated the ethos of cooperating and engaging with and for others, the ability to mature into an adult member of society, and independent action that stimulated self-growth as a member of and contributor to the global community.

Until 2019, the service-learning system was a non-credit guidance, but was then established as a credited seven-week course which blended academic instruction and experiential education led by SUJCD instructors and community partners, including the Hadano City Municipal Office and Hadano City Board of Education. Whilst this study does not shed light on how the course is evaluated, it acts as a good example of how a service-learning initiative can be nurtured in a way that it filters into syllabi university-wide.

Kwansei Gakuin University

An excellent example related to course evaluation is represented in the undertakings of service-learning at Kwansei Gakuin University. In an investigation of a "service-learning in a global issues" course, Ballou (2019, p. 23) sought answers to the following questions:

1. *Was the service-learning project sufficiently linked to the learning goals and course curriculum?*
2. *Were the students involved in the planning, implementing, and evaluating of their project?*
3. *Did the project address community needs in a way that was collaborative and mutually beneficial?*
4. *Did the students engage in meaningful reflection that made use of a variety of modes before, during, and after the service activity?*

Over a fifteen-week period, students participated in a course focusing on global issues including topics related to poverty, human rights, welfare, global conflict and climate change. Part of the course required them to choose one topic as a local service-learning project for five weeks. They were required to keep a journal of their findings and experiences as well as deliver a presentation focusing on their reflections and learnings from the course. Examples of the action projects conducted by the students included the promotion of HIV/STD awareness and prevention on campus, the design of an ecotour for international students, a survey of issues facing elderly care facilities and volunteering at a child welfare facility (Ballou, 2019).

Evaluations were student-centered and included many positive and self-reflective responses. One common theme that appeared related to the connection felt between their in-class study and experiential learning outside of the classroom. The academic preparation done in the class to understand the issue to be handled in each project meant the students were more aware and capable to analyze the situations they experienced. Another common evaluation was that students felt that had created projects that met a diverse range of community needs. Furthermore, many responses suggested they felt supported through guidance from their instructor at all stages of the project—design, preparation, implementation and reflection— which in turn obviously leads to increased motivation to participate. As Ballou (2019) suggests, however, the projects did have areas that could be improved, such as an objective evaluation by the community participants in these projects, which was not solicited. Saying that, it is obvious that the service-learning project was a success due to the high level of investment of time and thought by both the students and the instructor.

International Christian University

As introduced in a previous study (O'Connell, 2022), International Christian University (hereafter referred to as ICU) offers courses in which students learn through service-learning study and activities. The curriculum has been designed in a logical multiple-layered way by which the students can gradually increase the knowledge as well as participate in experiential education—1) general education service-learning, 2) preparation for service-learning study, 3) community service-learning, 4) international service-learning, 5) reflection on service-learning studies and 6) special studies in service-learning (International Christian University, 2023).

Pedagogically speaking, the design and implementation of this curriculum indicates a strong emphasis on connecting what is experientially learnt in terms of community engagement activities via solid reflection. Moreover, with a dedicated service-learning center on campus, academic staff act as advisors in order to help students best plan their service-learning experience. A review of the ICU service-learning center webpage shows that evaluation of students' progress is also robust as the advisors provide evaluation on reports, oral presentations suggesting that careful consideration and reflection is available for students (International Christian University, 2023).

SUIJI Consortium

As has been illustrated thus far, Japanese universities are working tirelessly to incorporate more of this type of experiential learning. Here, one more example will be discussed to consider the overall balance of course design, implementation and evaluation approaches.

SUIJI is a consortium of three Japanese universities (Ehime University, Kagawa University and Kochi University) and three Indonesian Universities (Bogor Agricultural University, Gadjah Mada University, and Hasanuddin University). It is an agricultural service-learning program that aims to cultivate leaders who can support primary industry at the regional level and contribute to a sustainable future society. At the undergraduate level, students are able to participate in a service-learning project in their home country as first-year students and then in a similar project in the partner country as second-year students. The project runs from anywhere from one-week to three months in duration and is also available for graduate students wishing to continue to gain experience through service-learning in areas such as tropical agriculture, food security and community service, and comprehensive agricultural science (Ehime University, 2022).

There are two components to the program—learning and service. For the learning component, the main goal is for students to enhance their communication and research skills. As for the service component, the predominant goal is to provide students with opportunities to expand their critical thinking skills through interaction with students from overseas as well as with the community partners involved in the projects (Kobayashi, 2015). As a result, this project has made it possible students from Japan and Indonesia to attempt to achieve these goals. Between 2012 and 2015, a total of 183 Japanese students and 112 Indonesian students participated in service-learning projects at eight sites in Japan. During that same period, 103

Japanese students and 126 Indonesian students participated in projects at five sites in Indonesia. A student evaluation of Japanese students was conducted in 2014 shows that those who participated in Indonesia were satisfied with their learning outcomes as indicated by the following percentages—44% "very satisfied", 52% "satisfied" and 4% "neutral". Whilst the results may seem encouraging, there was no explanation of what specific areas of personal growth, either related to academic skills or civic responsibility awareness (Kobayashi, 2015). In this regard, the evaluation would seem to have missed the opportunity to gain a qualitative and phenomenological insight into the reflections of the participating students.

4. Discussion: Making sense of it all

Sound curriculum design, implementation and evaluation practices are common among Japanese tertiary institutions. At the height of the COVID pandemic, many institutions had to revert to online versions of their service-learning programs. Whilst the face-to-face element of experiential learning was taken out of the equation, this type of learning is of value.

As Daily-Herbert et.al (2008) state, there are four pedagogical values of service-learning online, namely non-liner paths to learning, peer-learning, global connectedness and application. The global expansion and access of course content normally provided domestically is one noteworthy advantage. Simply put, content can become more accessible to a wider audience and with onsite service activities reduced, the program naturally becomes more cost-effective. Saying that, without the experiential learning component provided through community engagement activities, it is obvious that there are limitations to the expected learning outcomes of any service-learning program.

The COVID pandemic has undoubtedly triggered questions and also provided opportunities for a review of new developments in service-learning pedagogy. The modalities of domestic programs throughout Japan could be revisited in a way to create more blended modes of instruction (online and offline) in classroom couple with community programs. It should be noted that online learning does answer the geographical barriers in international activities to some extent, however it is difficult to say whether online interaction produces the same heightened sense of teamwork and community as face-to-face interaction does (ICU Service-Learning Center, 2021).

Another area for discussion is the transparency of learning outcomes for students participating in service-learning programs. A review of the programs run at Japanese universities shows that all universities seek to foster a number of skills including communication skills, critical thinking and problem-solving that can be linked to future career planning and consciousness. One representative example of the regular analysis of student reflections frequently conducted by ICU.

ICU has used its reflective and phenomenological approach to service-learning pedagogy as a way to analyze the participating students' reactions in terms of how useful experiential learning can be for future career planning (ICU Service-Learning Center 2016). The analysis revealed five themes from student reactions: 1) adaptability, communication and teamwork, 2)

intercultural and diversity flexibility, 3) plan execution and problem solving drive and ability, 4) learning attitude and continuation, 5) critical thinking toward self-awareness of ability and potentiality. The frequent extraction of such themes suggests that students are able to recognize the skills they are able to gain from service-learning experience. In terms of future career planning, interpersonal communication skills and adaptability are obviously important things to be aware of not only in work itself, but also when students are giving a subjective and objective explanation of themselves in job interviews.

In summary, it can be said that the pandemic has highlighted the flexible nature of the current service-learning program environment by blending face-to-face and online interaction. Furthermore, service-learning has predominantly been seen as a way to foster active members in society, but as can be seen from the ICU analysis, service-learning participants are aware that service-learning experiences can have a positive impact on future career planning.

5. Conclusion: Future Implications

This paper has examined examples of current design, implementation and evaluation of service-learning programs at Japanese universities. Building on findings from previous studies by the author (O'Connell, 2020, 2021, 2022), it is clear to see that there are a number of positive initiatives currently in place throughout the country with sound design and implementation methods incorporated as shown by the likes of the SUJCD structure (Lupas, 2021).

Saying that, this study has also shown that research on actual evaluation techniques used is still sporadic at best. As Kaye (2004) stresses, any service-learning project should include four primary phases—Preparation, Action, Reflection and Demonstration. All service-learning programs surveyed have displayed there is an awareness of these four phases in part through an explanation of the preparation, activities, reflections on learning outcomes and course satisfaction from the student perspective. However, it is clear that some of the evaluation methods are rather simplistic or, at times, subjective by only highlighting the student evaluations. It is surprising to see that there is no real mention of the evaluation methods and results conducted from faculty or community partner standpoints. To better understand the needs of all involved—students, instructors, faculty, and community partners—it is important for the evaluation methods to become more holistic in the future.

The successful design, implementation and evaluation of service-learning programs not only acts as an effective way to constantly improve the experiential education of participating students in both an academic and personal growth sense, but it also helps universities connect with the community in a way that contributes to collaborative relationship building in the future. To do that, service-learning educators should create and implement established structures of evaluation that make way for continued development of such programs.

Acknowledgments

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