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Learning by Doing: A Case Study of Hospitality Students' Learning Experience via Service Learning/Hands-on Experience

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ABSTRACT

This is a case study based on the Hospitality and Restaurant Management program at a comprehensive Midwest university in the United States of America (N = 164). The sample selection for this study was a convenience sample of the students enrolled in a meetings and events management course. The purpose of the study was to investigate how the incorporation of service learning/hands-on experience in a meetings and events management class influences student learning and interest in community service. The results indicated that participants' involvement in service learning/hands-on experience in a meetings and events management class significantly influences student learning and interest in community service.

Keywords: *service learning, hands-on.*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of service learning is taking off on university campuses around the world (Maran, Soro, Biancetti, & Zanotto, 2009). In fact, several institutions of higher learning have allocated resources of entire departments dedicated to the oversight of service learning programs (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009). The goal is multi-faceted: to encourage higher thinking skills and academic performance, develop career goals and workplace skills, and partner with community resources to satisfy social needs unmet through current funding. Service learning is different from voluntary service in that academic credit is given when service-oriented learning objectives are identified and evaluated (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Another fundamental difference from

volunteerism is the reflection component where students engage in activities such as writings, small group discussions and class presentations to tie the service activities to the course content.

Furco (1996) and Zlotkowski (1996) differentiated service learning from cocurricular community service programs such as volunteer programs, community outreach, and student service organizations by its academic component in which the “the community service activities are used as a “text” that is interpreted, analyzed, and related to the content of a course in ways that permit a formal evaluation of the academic learning outcomes”. Faculty using a service learning-based approach report more active classrooms, stronger performance in measureable learning, increased student interest, new skills in problem solving, and a more enjoyable teaching experience. This study intends to investigate how the incorporation of service learning/hands-on experience in a meetings and event management class influences student learning and interest in community service.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Gray, Ondaatje, Fricker, and Geschwind (2000), service learning addresses several academic and social issues: (a) From early education through higher education, service learning promotes active learning that increases motivation to learn, engagement in the learning process, retention and graduation rates, and achievement. (b) Understanding of the course content and critical-thinking skills are improved through the integration of theory and practice. (c) The activity of service in the community helps to prepare students for participation in a democratic society by increasing their understanding of civic affairs and experiencing the expectation that all individuals should participate in community service. (d) Curriculum directed service bridges the gap in public funding for social and environmental services by providing assistance at no cost. (e) In addition, studies have suggested that through service learning students are more able to clarify career goals and develop the necessary skills for the workplace ranging from specific skills needed for the job to general interpersonal, communication, and team-building skills.

As the traditional college student is gradually becoming more complex, fresh strategies are needed to challenge previous methods of learning. More nontraditional learners are opting for college study, and are demanding more varied modes and models of learning (Cantor, 1997). Many advantages are linked to hands-on or cooperative learning. Hands-on, or cooperative learning approaches recognize the role of the learner in helping to construct knowledge, see both the teacher and the learner as collaborators in the educational process, give students stake in the outcome, and find an active role for each individual (Walker, 1996). Hands-on learning creates platforms for data analysis skills as well as collecting learning skills (Walker, 1996). Students are able to practice theories that are previously learned and/or discussed in the classroom and further implement the skills attained for future progress (Cantor, 1997).

Bringle and Hatcher (2009) explained the benefits of this style of learning go far beyond what internships, fieldwork, or even clinicals can teach students. Service learning allows its participants the unique opportunity to learn through serving, while also learning *how* to serve. This goes beyond just getting a grade, but teaches students who they are as people and how to engage in the community. This form of learning is a wonderful way to get the student involved in academia and civil issues, while encouraging the community to get to know the student as well (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009).

According to Maran et al (2009), service learning has many more benefits. Students tend to be better problem-solvers and have more interest in their education when involved in service

learning opportunities. This allows for students to gain personal skills and qualities that will help them in prospective jobs in the future, and also help them in personal quests. The experience gained through service learning is truly unique and incomparable

Armstrong (2006) studied psychosocial development outcomes of different types of service learning. These included ongoing continuous service throughout a semester in co-curricular service learning; one time, intensive week-long spring break service learning trips; and ongoing service through a semester of academically-based service learning. The effects were tested by doing a pretest and a posttest and used the Student Development Task and Lifestyle Assessment (SDTLA) as a testing measure. The findings of this study showed that there were few differences in the SDTLA scores of traditional college students compared to the three types of service learning with the exception of the spring break learning trip. The intensive week-long spring break service learning trip had a significant improvement in psychosocial development.

Astin and Sax (1998) studied the academic effects of service learning by comparing final grades of a class of 477 students. Part of the class participated in service learning and the other part did not. Overall, the students engaged in service learning earned grades that were 4.8% higher than those that did not participate in service learning. Even with results indicating that service learning has a positive impact on students; some faculties are still reluctant to include service learning in their curriculum (Strage, 2004). One of the major reasons is due to the uncertainty about the depth and breadth of academic advantages service-learning provides within and beyond the isolated course within which it is embedded (Hill, 2003). Hence, the purpose of this study was to investigate how the incorporation of service learning/hands-on experience in a meetings and events management course could influence student learning and interest in community service. The objectives of this study included the following:

1. To explore students' perception of how service learning/hands-on experience affects their classroom learning experience.
2. To determine the difference between the effects of lecture and service learning on learning experiences of students who have been involved in planning community events via service learning/hands on experience .
3. To explore students' perception of how service learning/hands-on experience affects their likelihood to participate in community service, social justice, charity, and increase personal responsibility.

METHODOLOGY

The target population for this study was students in the Hospitality and Restaurant Management program at a comprehensive Midwest university in the United States of America ($N = 164$). The sample selection for this study was a convenience sample of the students enrolled in a meetings and events management course where the questionnaire was directly administered.

The students were involved in planning a community event that was formerly hosted by the city parks and recreation department. They were divided into different committees with various responsibilities ranging from soliciting sponsors, vendors, and attendees to the overall planning, logistics and implementation of the event. The students organized themselves into groups to coordinate various aspects of the event such as administration, publicity, and site operation. They interacted with community service organizations such as the visitors' bureau, mayor's office, parks and recreation, police department, and local news media to generate support for the event. The students were also involved in the promotion of the event on camera

for television viewers and on radios for music lovers. The local news media often required the students to get up in the early morning hours and dress for their audience of thousands for the promotion of the event. Pre- and post-event data were collected from the students regarding their perception of the influence of service learning/hands-on experience on their learning experience and value for community service.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study is a seven-point Likert-type scale with the following response choices: 1 = strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= slightly disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5= slightly agree, 6= agree, 7 = strongly agree. The questionnaire is made up of thirty (30) questions adapted from a review of literature. A pilot study was used to establish the reliability of the instrument. Cronbach's alpha is the common measure of reliability and the usual criterion is a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.70 (Harris & Ogbonna, 2001). A Cronbach's alpha of 0.80 was found for the instrument indicating that the instrument is reliable with a high degree of internal consistency. The instrument is made up of four parts. Part I was used to measure the importance of service learning to students' learning experiences (this measurement is reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.93). Part II was used to measure the importance of lecture to students' learning experiences (this measurement is reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.95). Part III was used to measure the students' likelihood to participate in community service, social justice, charity, and increased personal responsibility, and part IV was used to collect demographic data.

Data analysis

Data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17.0 for Windows, a product of SPSS, Inc. Frequency was used to screen the data for any irregularities. Descriptive statistics (e.g., percentage, mean) were used to analyze the students' likelihood to participate in community service, social justice, charity, and increase personal responsibility. A paired sample t-test was used to analyze the difference between the effects of lecture and service learning on learning experiences of students who have been involved in planning community events via service learning/hands on experience. Descriptive statistics and a paired sample t-test were used to explore students' perception of how service learning/hands-on experience affects their classroom learning experience.

Results

The first objective of this study was to explore students' perception of how service learning /hands-on experience affects their learning experience. Table 1 shows the mean scores associated with the effect of service learning/hands-on experience on the participants learning experiences. All the items in this measure have a mean (*M*) score between 5.83 – 6.23. Hence, all the scores are approximately 6.0^a indicating that the participants in this study agreed that service learning/hands-on activity enhanced their learning experience in event planning and management.

Table 1
Mean Scores of Learning Experiences from Service Learning /Hands-On Experience

Rank	Learning Experiences	M	SD
1	Incorporating service learning/hands-on experience into an event planning course will enable me to understand the concepts covered in the course.	6.23	1.07
2	Incorporating service learning/hands-on experience into an event planning course will improve my learning experience in the course.	6.13	0.82
3	Incorporating service learning/hands-on experience into an event planning course will enhance my ability to plan a real life event.	6.03	1.13
4	Incorporating service learning/hands-on experience into an event planning course will enhance my ability to plan successful events in the future.	6.00	1.14
5	Incorporating service learning/hands-on experience into an event planning course will enhance my learning from the course.	5.93	0.98
6	Incorporating service learning/hands-on experience into an event planning course will enable me to optimize my performance in the course.	5.87	1.14
7	Incorporating service learning/hands-on experience into an event planning course will enhance my ability to apply concepts from this course to new situation.	5.87	1.28
8	Incorporating service learning/hands-on experience into an event planning course will enhance my interest in the subject matter.	5.83	1.37

a: 1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Slightly disagree 4 = Neither agree or disagree
5 = Slightly agree 6 = Agree 7 = Strongly agree

The second objective was to determine the difference between the effects of lecture and service learning on learning experiences of students who have been involved in planning community events via service learning/hands on experience. The result of the paired sample t-test indicated a significant difference between the influences of lecture (M=3.46, SD=1.61) and service learning (M=5.94, SD=1.14) on the participants' learning experience (P< 0.001). The result indicated that the participants believed that service learning will enhance their learning experiences more than lecture (see Table 2).

Table 2
The Difference between the Effects of Lecture and Service Learning

Paired Sample Statistics								
Pair	Mean							
	Mean	N	Standard Deviation	Std. Error Mean				
Lecture	3.46	100	1.61	0.16				
Service Learning/ Hands-on	5.94	100	1.14	0.11				
Paired Sample Correlations								
Pair	N							
	N	Correlation	Sig.					
Lecture & Service Learning/Hands-on	100	-0.046	0.653					
Paired Sample Test								
Paired Differences								
Pair				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper			
	Lecture-Service Learning/Hands-on	2.48	2.01	0.20	2.08			

The third objective was to explore students' perception of how service learning/hands-on experience affects their likelihood to participate in community service, social justice, charity, and increase personal responsibility. All the items in this measure have a mean (*M*) score between 4.95 – 5.32 (Table 3). Hence, all the scores are approximately 5.0^a indicating that the participants slightly agreed that planning the city event via service learning/hands-on experience affects their likelihood to participate in community service, social justice, charity, and increase personal responsibility (see Table 3).

Table 3
Mean Scores of the Likelihood to Participate in Community Service, Social Justice, Charity, and Increase Personal Responsibility

Rank	Learning Experiences	M ^a	SD
1	Engaging in service learning enhanced my intention to serve my community.	5.26	1.48
2	Engaging in service learning enhanced my intention to give to charity to help those in need.	4.99	1.58
3	Engaging in service learning enhanced my orientation toward others and away from myself.	5.22	1.47
4	Engaging in service learning enhanced my intention to work on behalf of social justice.	4.95	1.52
5	Engaging in service learning enhanced my appreciation and support for community service.	5.28	1.40
6	Engaging in service learning enhanced my sense of personal responsibility.	5.32	1.43

a: 1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Slightly disagree 4 = Neither agree or disagree
5 = Slightly agree 6 = Agree 7 = Strongly agree

DISCUSSION

The result of this study indicated that the participants felt a strong optimism toward service learning/hands-on in mastering the content of the event planning course. The students organized themselves into committees to coordinate various aspects of the event such as administration, publicity, and site operation. Lecture alone would not have permitted the interaction with community service organizations such as the visitors' bureau, mayor's office, parks and recreation, police department, or local news media. Coordination with all of these concerns was necessary for the success of the event. The face-to-face communication gave students insight into typical challenges and hurdles of event implementation that textbooks and lecture do not cover. Promoting the event on camera for television viewers got students up in the early morning hours and dressed for their audience of thousands.

All students participated in soliciting sponsorships, vendors, and parade entries which encouraged interaction and diplomacy with local businesses and citizens. The skills developed through that process cannot be passed on through lecture alone. Blocking off streets and lining up parade entries required leadership, quick thinking, and resourcefulness dealing with existing traffic, float drivers unsure how to get into position, and impatient people waiting for the parade to start. Students worked with local news celebrities to emcee the parade and announce the floats passing the reviewing stand. Several students assisted Santa with the many children waiting to talk to him. When the parade was done, the entire class assisted with street cleanup.

End-of-semester student reflections detailed successful aspects of the event and opportunities to be addressed by future classes planning this event. The overall theme of the reflections was the value added by the hands-on experience to the course content. By actually participating in the planning and implementation of the event, students were able to see how much work goes into making a community event happen. By doing this, they were also able to feel the satisfaction and excitement of ownership when the night was over. Along with the importance of all the details that students learn while working hands-on with such a project, they also understand the joy of the end result.

After finishing the parade, student interest in event planning was enhanced, due to not just learning about it through lecture, but by experiencing it and being an important part in making a community event successful. Interacting with the other organizations involved with the event also helped students gain confidence working with others to make events happen. Knowing that finding sponsors and parade entries was a huge part of making the parade successful was intimidating, but after the students were encouraged to participate in this process, the fear was turned into confidence. Due to service learning and hands-on classroom education, students were able to see the importance of hands-on learning experience in event planning, which sparked their interest in becoming involved with future events.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study indicated that service learning/hands-on activity will increase the participants' understanding of the concepts covered in the course. The study also showed that students found the time and effort required to plan a successful event was better understood by actually getting out there and doing it. Likewise, their feeling of accomplishment was compounded by the joy on the faces of the attendees.

Service learning/hands-on will enhance their interest in the subject matter and enhance their academic performance and learning from the course. The students believe service learning/hands-on will enhance their ability to apply course content concepts to new situations and to plan successful, real-life events in the future. They also believe their learning experience is enhanced by a service learning/hands-on component.

Implications for students include improved academic achievement resulting from an increased level of interest in the course and higher level of learning. This leads to a more positive academic experience, overall, which affects a student's sense of self-worth and value. It also increases their value of higher education. The opportunity to interact with community partners gives students confidence dealing with business leaders and other members of the community. By developing specialized skills in event planning through hands-on experience, they will have a marketable resume when entering the professional work force. Positive hands-on experience may direct their career choice to a field where they feel they have some field-based knowledge.

LIMITATIONS

This is a case study that was limited to a Midwestern school in the United States of America. A random sample of students and/or event planners in various regions beyond this boundary could provide a more representative and generalizable result.

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