

What Did Residential College Students' Perceive They Have Learned through a Cross-border Generic Service-Learning Program?

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ABSTRACT

Service-learning and residential-learning are two educational practices for integrated education which stimulates students to synthesize what they learn in different courses and to connect in- and out-of-classroom experiences. These two approaches have been adopted by an increasing number of higher education institutions in Asia in order for students to cultivate knowledge, skills and values that are essential to civic engagement and global citizenship. This paper aims to critically assess the learning perceived by students who participated in a recent cross-border service-learning program organized by a residential college (RC) of a Macau university in a township in Sichuan Province of China which was badly hit by the Great Earthquake in 2008. Several key facets of students' perceive learning through active engagement in the student-led service activities are identified and examined, and the results are cross-checked with the five intended learning outcomes of the program. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how to improve educational programming in the intertwined yet under-researched context of service-learning and residential college in the East Asia region.

Key Words: Service-learning, residential college, civic education, China, Macau

1. INTRODUCTION

Service-learning and residential-learning are two educational practices for integrated education which helps students to synthesize what they learn in different courses and to connect in- and out-of-classroom experiences. These two approaches have been adopted by an increasing number of higher education institutions in Asia, for example, those in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau and Singapore, beyond the Western countries as their origin, in order for students to cultivate knowledge, skills and values that are essential to civic engagement and global citizenship. This paper aims to critically assess the learning perceived by students who participated in a recent cross-border service-learning program organized by a residential college (RC) of a Macau university in a township in Sichuan Province of China which was badly hit by the Great Earthquake in 2008.

2. CONCEPTS AND THE CONTEXT

2.1 Live", "Serve", "Learn"

A residential college (RC) system serves 'as a means to integrate students' in-class and out-of-class experiences by providing a community that fosters greater faculty and peer interaction, increased opportunities for coordinated learning activities, and an academically and socially supportive living environment' (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003, p. 335).

Service-learning is a pedagogical approach to creating carefully monitored educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity

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that meets identified community needs, and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain skills and knowledge, develop increased self-awareness and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility, and discover meaning in their lives (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Reeves & Hare, 2009). With equal emphasis on service and learning, any service-learning programs must provide benefits to both the recipients and providers of the service (Furco, 1996). More than just doing service, an academic capture of knowledge is required through written reflection, small group discussions, class presentations, multimedia projects or other forms that express what the student has learned (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Jay, 2008).

2.2 Background Context of the Institution

The higher education institution under the present study (hereafter labelled “MU” for anonymity) is a public university in the Macau Special Administrative Region of China (simply “Macau” hereafter). MU has attempted to weave liberal education and civic engagement into the core educational experiences of students, while its RC system also acts an important part in this transformation. The transformation of the educational model of MU may be a critical challenge but it indeed provides a timely opportunity to put forward innovative learning opportunities for not only students but also faculty and even the community.

In 2010, two pilot residential colleges (RCs) were established, one of which is the subject of the present research, here labelled as “RC1” for anonymity.¹ Over the past few years, a few more RCs have been founded, and gradually taken shape in terms of management approaches and student development programs. In 2014/15, as MU has completed its relocation to the new campus in Hengqin, a total of eight RCs are in full operation accommodating around 450 students each from different academic backgrounds and years of study. In particular, it is now mandatory for all freshmen to stay in one of them. Envisioning the importance of global citizenship to university education, the RCs have incorporated different in-house and off-campus service-learning programs in a decentralized manner based on the individual college’s goals. Since late 2012, as the first residential college of UM, RC1 has implemented various service-learning programs of different scales, including summer trips to Laos (2013), Taiwan (2014) and Sichuan, China (2014).

Having the control over the whole process of design, execution and evaluation, the RC would be able to take care of its students’ personal and social development which is indeed the major objective of this living-learning community. As some service-learning programs are to be incorporated into and implemented via the RC system, which is a less-researched area of educational research, we are not yet certain what the best way is to do so to fully accomplish the goals of both service-learning and residential-learning. As part of a larger action research based study of RC service-learning programs, this particular study aims to critically assess the learning perceived by students who participated in a recent cross-border generic service-learning program organized by RC1 in order to provide preliminary evidence of whether the service-learning goals of the RC match with students’ perceptions of learning in such type of programs. The approach of action research is adopted since we ultimately strive for developing deeper knowledge

¹ The RC system is under the management of the Vice Rector (Student Affairs). The official statement of MU about the RC system defines that “Residential Colleges (RC) is a small on-campus staff-student learning community that integrates students’ learning and life and that aims to promote their whole-person development. Each student not only belongs to his/her major but is also assigned to one of a number of RCs. In a university, faculties and RCs are supplementary to each other, or mutually complementary to the other.” In a regular setting, each RC has four academic staff members, including College Master, Associate Master (both of whom can be full-time or part-time) and two full-time Resident Fellows.

about how to improve educational programming in the newly established RC system of MU.

3. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Reflective discussions with various stakeholders, including students, RC academic staff and local partners were conducted. Multiple sources of data are collected and interpreted, for example, interviews, activity records, group discussions (pre-, in- and post-service), videotapes, photos and students' journal entries and retrospective essays. Based on the method of content analysis, the data are analyzed and compared with open and axial coding, and themes are to be developed and interpreted.

4. ABOUT THE PROGRAM

In late 2013, the idea of organizing a service-learning trip to Sichuan, China was first initiated by the second author of this paper, as one of the academic staff of RC1, taking advantage of connections previously made through a regional service-learning conference with a Chinese social work service organization. After a field visit by the second author in February 2014 and a few months of planning, including a series of coordination, student recruitment, logistical arrangements and pre-departure preparation, a total of eight students participated in the program and went to the trip in June 2014 for 10 days in the earthquake-hit Shuimo Town in Sichuan. The student outputs encompass in-service daily reflection in the forms of group discussion (video-taped) and journal entry, post-service individual retrospective essays, a video, and a presentation at a sharing session held in RC1.

The service site was Shuimo Town situated in Wenchuan County, one of the hardest hit locations of the earthquake measured at 7.9 Mw and stricken on Monday 12 May in the mountainous Sichuan Province, China (CCTV News, 2012; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2014). The disaster caused tremendous human and economic losses. However, after several years, Shuimo Town has transformed from a heavily-polluted industrial center to a tourism spot. The program participants visited and stayed in Gaofeng Village, one of the isolated villages scattered across different attitudes of the mountainous area in Shuimo.² The students designed and performed a series of service activities for school children and local villagers throughout the trip.

With regard to the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) of this program, in the end of the trip, students should be able to:

- 1) Analyze the strengths and problems of the service activities they designed and implemented for the local villagers and school children (ILO1);
- 2) Demonstrate high levels of teamwork, communication, and leadership skills (ILO2);
- 3) Distinguish the local culture in Sichuan and relate their own culture to that observed at the service site (ILO3);
- 4) Summarize and compare their service-learning experiences (ILO4); and
- 5) Suggest ways to act more responsibly in society in face of social problems (ILO5).

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In consideration of the five ILOs listed above, we attempted to evaluate what the students perceived they had learned, through analyzing their reflections during and after the service period, and compared these to their expectations collected from the

² Gaofeng Village, with an elevation of over 1,000 meters, is one of the most isolated mountain villages above Shuimo Town in Wenchuan County, Sichuan Province. The end of the village is unreachable within two hours' walking. The village has only around 280 residents, and many of them are working outside in the town center of Shuimo or beyond.

recruitment interviews and pre-service discussions. Emerging themes from such analysis were then triangulated with other sources of relevant information, including the onsite observation by the second author (as the teacher leader of the trip), his discussions with the leading social workers (as moderators), and informal conversations between the students and the authors. The emerging themes were subsequently cross-checked with the five ILOs to seek key themes for fruitful discussion.

The key themes identified are discussed as follows:

5.1 Learned to Have No Presumption

As the students got to know that they would have the opportunity to meet Tibetan people during their trip, they were all very curious about what this ethnic minority group of people look like and what kind of custom they practice. They initially imagined Tibetan people were probably “rude” and had “closed mindsets” but were surprised that the Tibetan adolescents were actually “polite, creative and fashionable” (Student L). Students agreed that they should not judge people’s lives and presume people’s behavior purely from the public media or other indirect sources, but should observe things in person before concluding any personal opinions. This specific learning has met ILO3 about cross-cultural encounters.

5.2 Improved Cross-cultural Sensitivity

Apart from avoiding prejudgment, students also realized differences among people, not just within the same country but even within the same region. Within the same province of Sichuan, the commonest ethnic groups of people the students met were Han and Tibetan, in addition to a few other ethnic minority groups. They discovered that people of these different ethnic origins could look very different. Another instance Student H observed was that the local villagers had never seen the sea as they lived in the mountainous region for their whole lives, and were very surprised when they heard that the RC1 students came from Macau which is a coastal city surrounded by the sea. This exemplifies that students were able to recognize diversity among people as a result of, for instance, varied grow-up backgrounds in this case. Such perceived learning matches with ILO3.

5.3 Learned to Deal with Language Problem

The local people at the service site spoke Sichuan and Tibetan dialects. Many could speak Mandarin but with strong accents. Although most of the students grew up in mainland China, some of them were from Guangdong and Macau, southern part of the country, were not very proficient at understanding the local people. However, they paired with their teammates who are more competent with the local language, and asked for the local social workers’ advice. After one or two days, the students expressed that they learned some tactics to better communicate with the local villagers. This learning has met ILO2.

5.4 Learned the Importance of Teamwork and Unity

Some students commented that, in the first two days of stay in Gaofeng Village, their division of labor was not clear enough, thus making a waste of time and effort in some tasks. For example, Student L pointed out that on one morning they had to go up the mountain to promote their afternoon activity to the villagers house by house along the slopes. They did not manage the time well and just went up and up, leaving very little time to tidy up the foothill venue where the afternoon activity would be held. Fortunately, a few male teammates were able to rush to the venue for the preparation work. Another instance is that Student H was falling sick during the first few days. She

recalled that she had thought of giving up but at last believed in perseverance especially because of peer support and mutual trust between her and her teammates. Such perceived learning has met ILO2 about teamwork, as the students not only knew to be responsible for their own tasks, but also learned to share each other's burden and provide practical and mental support to their teammates.

5.5 Learned the Need to Take Care of Differentiated Needs and Interests of Service Targets

The first service activity designed and executed by the students in Gaofeng Village was a sharing session for them to tell villagers about some places the students came from and had visited before in the hope to let villagers know more about the outside world. On the evening of the retrospective group discussion after the activity, several students gave critical comments on their failure to make the sharing session interesting enough to attract the participating villagers' attention, as they all noticed the loss of interest over the course of the activity. Although succeeded in attracting a large group of more than 70 villagers, they also faced a wide range of age groups. Student T analyzed that, given such wide age difference of the audience, the team failed to formulate comprehensive "target", "differentiation" and "decision-making" strategies beforehand. In other words, they should have identified one or two specific groups of audience as their target to deliver the sharing session. Student P supplemented to express that they needed different approaches to different groups of people, i.e. children, teenagers and the elderly. For example, to attract children, they should have used simpler words and games to instill fun into learning.

This incidence, as the students reported, was partly resolved by a few students, who were to deliver their presentations in the middle of the session, deciding cutting down the sharing session and taking the audience, particularly the children, to the playground for some fun games. Student L believed that this immediate shift seemed to have improved the uneasy situation, and their adaptability had enhanced after this lesson. These self-assessments showed that the students were able to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the service activities they designed and conducted for the service recipients, matching with ILO1.

5.6 Learned to Make Positive Criticisms of Oneself and Others

Having various opportunities to plan, execute and reflect on the service activities, the students learned to evaluate and criticize whether what they had done met their own expectations and objectives. In regard to the incidence illustrated in the previous subsection, Student T frankly commented, during one of the retrospective group meetings, that he did not agree with the tactic of Students C and S of giving candies to kids as an incentive to attract their attention to their presentations. He elaborated that this tactic might not be effective since kids would ask for more and more, which might just encourage their materialistic wants. On another occasion, Student C openly suggested other teammates, once having completed their work earlier than others, should have self-motivation to offer assistance to teammates who have not finished, instead of just standing aside waiting.

Besides being able to provide positive criticisms to teammates, students also became self-critical and self-aware in order for the whole team to reach the shared goals of their service. For instance, Student C also admitted that he in the beginning was reluctant to accepting other people's comments on his work; however, he subsequently learned that others' criticisms would indeed benefit himself. Other students also made different criticisms about their own attitudes and practices, and suggestions on future improvement.

The above perceived learning provides good evidence of ILO1, ILO2 and ILO4 being met.

5.7 Learned to Be Appreciative

Upon the completion of the trip, most students expressed that they would cherish what they had got, as they saw that local villagers and school children were very happy even though their lives seemed to be harsh based on the students' 'standard'. Student H stated that she would think of 'have's' rather than focusing on 'have not's', and be more aware of problems and needs of her local community. This seems to suggest students were able to grasp ILO5.

The word 'appreciation', or other words that have this similar meaning, appeared in the students' reflection many times. The students had appreciated local people's friendlies, kindness and hard work; the beautiful natural landscape of the service site; the strong team spirit among their team; as well as the local children being very creative and energetic. Such learning of attitudinal and philosophical dimensions matches with ILO4.

5.8 Acknowledged the Reciprocal Value of and Self-Worthiness in Service-Learning

The students admitted that the program probably helped them in terms of learning much more than the local people in terms of serving. They understood that their experiential activity in the farm might actually disturb the normal livelihood of local farmers. The students were also able to remind themselves about the objectives of the service-learning trip, i.e. 'they were there to serve, rather than on vacation' (Student L). Nonetheless, they did not undermine the value of their service, and thought that they could indeed bring happiness to the people in this earthquake-hit region. Yet, they were well aware that whether they had done a good job would be up to the evaluation of other people, such as the local villagers and the social workers. They understood that people who were in need usually needed empathy more than sympathy. All this suggests students' perceived learning has met ILO1 and ILO4.

The above analysis of students' perceived learning has provided good evidence of most of the ILOs of this service-learning program being met upon its completion. However, although most of the above perceived learning tends to show students were able to suggest ways of taking actions for a better society, which would be responding to ILO5, ILO5 seems to be difficult to gauge at this stage. The authors believe that it takes time for students to nurture their sense of civic responsibility and advocacy, and it is not realistic to claim that, no matter how good a service-learning program is designed and executed, any action for social betterment or advocacy taken by students is a direct or immediate result of such program.

6. IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This study serves to seek improvement on service-learning programs of the RC system through a critical reflection on a recent international service-learning trip. It has identified and elaborated the students' perceived learning through their active engagement in a cross-border generic service-learning program, and whether all this key learning matches with the intended learning outcomes outlined in the program.

All service-learning experiences are not created equal" (Bell, Horn, & Roxas, 2007, p. 130), so it is vital for teacher-researchers to reflect on the specific contexts in which their programs are designed, implemented and evaluated. Understanding different aspects of generic learning of the participants can help program developers to intentionally create effective programs based on empirical evidence and not only on remote references.

More broadly, the present study sheds lights onto the under-researched area of service-learning and residential-learning in higher education in East Asia. It provides preliminary evidence that service-learning programs that do not have specific academic focus but aim at cultivating students' generic skills and knowledge, as well as providing help to the community and people in need, do offer certain values to students, service recipients, local partners, and even faculty.

However, most of the data analysis relied on students' self-reported learning, although teachers' observation and discussion with students and local partners was also compared to assess the validity of the findings. This is a common pitfall of any perception research, so it must be supplemented by other methods or embedded within triangulation approaches. In addition, since service-learning is a very personal experience. Even if two persons engaged in the same program, their experiences as they perceive can be completely different. While the present study does not aim to generalize the impact of service-learning programs on the learning and development of RC students, the results presented here will still need to be compared with future analysis of in-depth interviews with students, teachers and community partners, and even service recipients if time and resources allow. Observation and discourse can be applied to study how students' learning occurs in the whole learning environment of any service-learning programs which is interactive in nature.

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