

The “Real-World” Experience: Students’ Perspectives on Service-Learning Projects

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to identify how students gain “real-world” experience via service-learning projects. This article describes the results of a pilot study conducted with over 75 business graduate students to investigate the effects of service-learning curriculum at the collegiate level. The following qualitative data was collected: observations, field notes, interviews, video-taped group meetings, and student reflection journals. This data was collected to gain insight on the research question, “What are business students’ views of service-learning projects and how they contribute to ‘real-world’ experience?” In addition, this article briefly discusses literature on the ethnographic qualitative approach and its significance, as well as the service-learning literature that continues to evolve as the instigation of such projects continues to draw the attention of researchers and educators.

Keywords: Service-learning, Student engagement, Student motivation, Qualitative Research, Ethnography

INTRODUCTION

Considerable growth in attention has been paid to community service and service-learning in the past 10 to 15 years (e.g. Lester, et al., 2005; Sullivan-Catlin, 2002; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hironimus-Wendt & Lovell-Troy, 1999; Rhoads, 1998; Jacoby, 1996; Kraft 1996). However, the bulk of this research is being done in grades K-12 and of general university populations. The perceived value of service-learning projects in schools of business remains largely undeveloped (Lester, Tomkovic, Wells, Flunker, and Kickul, 2005); hence, the need to focus on business schools in our service-learning research. In addition, there is a need to study the benefits of the so-called “real-world” experience in order to keep students engaged and motivated to complete service work. The more we study service-learning, the more information we can pass along to achieve the greatest potential of positive outcomes from such projects.

Service-Learning in Universities

This article goes beyond stating that service-learning helps students gain experience; it identifies how students can use the “real-world” insights they have acquired through these projects, which is an important distinction laid out by Pratt (2000). As a doctoral student, my strong commitment to post-secondary education and research was the driving force behind my search for how students gain and can put to use the “real-world” experience that the service-learning curriculum is intending to provide. It is important to note that it is a commonly held philosophy that service-learning projects provide this “real-world” experience (Johnson & Notah, 1999).

The use of the service-learning pedagogy has recently been addressed, collaborated upon, and evaluated in a variety of recent books (e.g., Eyler and Giles, 1999), special issues of journals (e.g., Academy of Management Learning & Education, 2005), and numerous articles (e.g. Lester, et al., 2005; Sullivan-Catlin, 2002; Hironimus-Wendt and Lovell-Troy, 1999; Rhoads, 1998).

Theoretical Justifications for Service-Learning

This pedagogy is most commonly justified theoretically by the work of John Dewey, and his philosophy of experience was fundamental to his pedagogy (Hironimus-Wendt & Lovell-Troy, 1999; Giles & Eyler, 1994). The

following excerpt from Hironimus-Wendt and Lovell-Troy (1999: 364) reflects Dewey's approach to education; i.e., serving as a basis for connecting schools and communities, it links theory and practice.

For Dewey, learning occurs through an interaction between the learner and the environment. Learning is active, not passive; the learner creates his or her own knowledge through such interaction. Teachers are responsible for creating learning situations. They must problematize the learners' potential experiences and then select those most likely to facilitate learning through reflective-thinking activity on the part of the students. Dewey emphasized that classroom projects which produce learning must be interesting to students, worthwhile intrinsically, present problems that awaken curiosity, and cover a considerable time span. He further believed that educators must assess which attitudes are conducive to continued growth and development and recognize students as individuals at different points, intellectual, social, and moral development (Dewey, 1938).

Furthermore, experiential learning, as developed by John Dewey (1938) and David Kolb (1984), is cited numerous times by advocates of service learning (Lester, Tomkovick, Wells, Flunker & Kickul, 2005; Billig & Eyler, 2003; Johnson & Notah, 1999). Carver (1997) and Frankena (1966) state that experiential learning is based on two principles - continuity and interaction. They go on to state that educational experiences and habits influence students' current and future educational experiences according to these principles. Thus, opportunities for students to apply learning to their communities and the world beyond are essential (Johnson & Notah, 1999). Kolb's studies propose concrete experiences, reflective observations, abstract conceptualizations, and/or active experimentations, as the four distinct ways that individuals may cognitively process knowledge (Lester, et al., 2005). Specifically, Kolb (1984: 38) defines leaning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." This theoretical foundation is strengthened by the argument of Billig and Eyler (2003) that service-learning projects' major strengths lie in the notion that they contain concrete experiences and reflective opportunities providing the opportunity to address more student's learning styles (Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2000).

The Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform (1993:71) defined service learning in four ways: 1) a method by which young people learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet the actual community needs and that are coordinated in collaboration with the school and community, 2) a method that is integrated into the young person's academic curriculum or provides structured time for a young person to think, talk, or write about what he/she did and saw during the actual service activity, 3) a method that provides young people with opportunities to use newly acquired academic skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities, and 4) a method that enhances what is taught in the school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community and helps to foster the development of sense of caring for others.

Furthermore, government support for community service was enacted in the 1990s when two acts were passed. The National and Community Service Act of 1990, signed into law by President George Bush, provides financial support for primary, secondary, and post-secondary institutions that offer community service programs. The act set aside \$16M in 1992 and 1993 for which schools or community groups could apply (Andrus, 1996: 14). The National Service Trust Act of 1993, passed during the Clinton administration, also offers financial assistance to students at least 16 years of age who participate in service (Bittner, 1994). The act allocated \$27M in 1994, 1995, and 1996 for distribution to school or community-based groups performing service. Such increases in service program funding and additional educational research encouraging service have resulted in widespread execution of service-learning programs (Johnson & Notah, 1999).

METHODS

For this project, I spent six months in a participant-observation role. With over 125 hours in the setting, I acquired several hundreds of pages of data from field notes, video observations, audio recordings, and student reflection journal entries from the service-learning project teams. The research began prior to the assembly of the randomly assigned teams and was continued throughout the course of the entire project. The service-learning project of focus included business plan and website creation for a new community center that focuses on cultural and professional development. Previous projects from this course included support for homeless shelters and local therapeutic riding centers. The community center start-up was the best setting for the study because I was really

able to capture the input of all the students since the majority of the work for this project was done on campus (opposed to the alternative locations necessary to complete their previous service-learning projects). There is an emphasis put on this specific project and its location because it really allowed me the opportunity to be a participant, as opposed to just an observer, making the actual experience of the students in their service-learning project all the more transparent from my position among them.

The setting for this study was primarily a typical classroom and small-group breakout rooms. The facilities reside in the basement of an older College of Business building. The classroom is horseshoe-shaped with a chalkboard at the front of the room and no windows. The students sit throughout the horseshoe in stadium seating, tiered seating in three levels with the professor lecturing from slightly below them. The classroom seats approximately 50 students and there were 35 to 40 in each class.

The groups of five to six students did the majority of their work in breakout rooms located adjacent to the classroom. These rooms are very small and seat five to ten students around a rectangular table. Again, they are in the basement, so there are no windows or wall hangings.

DATA COLLECTION

The process of data collection for this article paralleled mainstream ethnography (Spradley, 1979, 1980; Anderson, 1987; Lindolf, 1995) and, as previously mentioned, qualitative data were collected via observations, field notes, interviews, videotaped group meetings, and student reflective journals.

Qualitative research provides us the ability to study situated action, clarify meanings that comprise an actual sequence of events, thus facilitating increased awareness of context and processes (Ashcraft, 1999; Lindlof, 1995; Anderson, 1987). Hence, I employed an ethnographic approach which allowed me to get at the context and underlying meanings of how students can and do apply their “real-world” experiences. The growing presence of service-learning enhances the timeliness and sensibility of this study.

In general, ethnography means to learn from people (Spradley, 1980). More specifically, from Berreman (1968: 337), ethnography is, “a description of the way of life, or culture, of a society that identifies the behaviors and the beliefs, understandings, attitudes, and values they imply.” Furthermore, the presentation or representation of local meanings and contexts is the main purpose of ethnographic description (Emerson, 1983).

For this study, an ethnographic research approach is necessary because it is the only method that gets at the underlying meanings of how “real-world” experiences can help students complete service-learning projects. This is possible because ethnography provides a methodology that captures context (Geertz, 1973). By studying behaviors, ethnographic research gets at the culture and cultural inferences (Hansen, 2006). It is an ethnographer’s goal to comprehend and demonstrate the native’s point-of-view (Malinowski, 1922); this entails direct participation and many interpretations of cultural experiences (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Furthermore, according to Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993), ultimately the validity of my ethnographic research lies in its internal coherence, application, and ability to challenge readers’ beliefs.

The objective of this study was to obtain and analyze student sense-making of service-learning projects; the focus was not on the university’s intentions, or specifically, what recruiters are looking for in university graduates. Furthermore, human sense-making is best interpreted by another human, which is why I immersed myself in the project ethnographically. Becoming a participant provided me a better understanding of the students’ perspectives and the ability to make better recommendations to educators interested in pursuing service-learning projects in their classrooms.

Data types

Observations, Field Notes and Interviews

I began my study as an open-ended ethnography of service-learning. Through the course of my initial observations and field notes, I found a need to address the concept of the “real-world” experience students

anticipated acquiring through their projects. This narrowing of the study led to participant-observation in the classroom and among group meetings. Guided by these initial observations, I created a list of open-ended questions which were assigned to each team for group discussion and interaction. Their answers to these questions were recorded for analysis purposes.

Videotaped Group Meetings

By videotaping small group meetings, I was able to capture the interactions and non-verbal cues (Silverman, 2005) of individuals within the groups. Since there were multiple groups in each class section, and some overlap in project responsibilities, videotaping the brainstorming and group discussions provided me comparative data. By having the tapes available to watch repeatedly, I was able to pick up many additional connotations, body-language elements, interactions, and other non-verbal cues. Videotaping these small group meetings also provided the opportunity to offer feedback to the students. All of the recordings were burned to a DVD and provided to the students so they could reflect on their groups' interaction. This is just another opportunity for the students to reflect on their project, particularly when working with others. As depicted by Porter and McKibbin (1988), business education focuses largely on the technical skills; and technically, strong business students are in need of more experience in areas like teamwork, communication, and problem-solving.

Reflective Journals

Reflection has been described as “the hyphen in service-learning; it is the link that ties student experience in the community to academic learning” (Eyler and Giles, 1999: 171). Periodic reflective writings, also called journals, are a common method used to allow students to reflect on their own reactions (intellectual and emotional), as well as their interactions with others in regard to these service-oriented experiences (Sullivan-Catlin, 2002). Multiple reflection papers were acquired throughout the course with regard to the following: 1) issues that arose from their service-learning projects (i.e. diversity, working in a team, etc.), 2) evaluation of their peers, particularly their own team members, and 3) evaluation of their team leaders. By obtaining reflection journal entries from the students regularly, I was able to capture their group successes, struggles, and personal attitude changes. Using a qualitative approach to immediately address the student perspectives, from their journals, enhanced the rationale for requiring students to complete such assignments and also provided instant feedback about their experiences. Such data is understudied in the present literature (Jacoby, 1996).

DATA ANALYSIS

To structure the service-learning story, I read through the data multiple times and identified numerous types of “real-world” experiences. I used an inductive approach and identified themes that emerged from the data, relevant literature, and emerging theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Huberman, 1984; Eisenhardt, 1989) in order to capture categories of students' perspectives and sense-making. Again, being a participant in the project really allowed me the best opportunities available to get at the students' sense-making and answer the research question.

After multiple iterations and revisions, I derived the following three categories of “real-world” experience that students feel service-learning projects help them to acquire: 1) hands-on experience, 2) career enhancement, and 3) beyond the classroom. Furthermore, to bring this service-learning research to life, I depict my interpretive claims through specific examples from my field notes and reflection papers obtained from the students.

Findings

First, hands-on experience includes the students being involved with the organizations or companies to some degree. It is the non-classroom experience of working with an organization. The opportunity to work with such organizations and learn the obstacles and successes of the undertakings regarding their projects helps students see first-hand what happens in the “real-world”, per se. As depicted in Table 1, this meant more than just reading from a textbook or listening to an instructor's lecture. Such opportunities are cited in prevalent service-learning literature as positive aspects to such projects (Eyler and Giles, 1999). The following quotes from students depict their “real-world” experiences that represent this category:

“I think this (service-learning) project will help us get what she’s lecturing about in class, or at least I hope it does.” - from the video of a small-group meeting

“I’ve never worked so hard or put in so many hours for a school project, but I thought this one was actually helping people.” - from the video of a small-group meeting

“This project gave us the opportunity to work in teams and made us accountable for our contributions, just like what will happen in the workplace.” - from a student’s reflection journal

“I started out with an attitude that his was just another project for a grade, but soon found out it was much more. I feel like I’ve really done something good for this community.” - from a student’s reflection journal

Table 1: “Real-world” Experience Examples from Each Data Type

	Definition	Observation/Fieldnotes	Video	Reflection Journals	Recommendations
Hands-on	the non-classroom experience of working with an organization	Some students worked with the companies more prevalently (speaking with them on a regular basis, etc.) while other students awaited feedback from those group members and then pursued their aspect of the project without ever really getting involved with the organization they were assisting.	“At least we get to work with local businesses that really need our help, so we might actually be able to make a difference for them.”	“I liked being involved with the local organization as opposed to just reading about it from a textbook.”	Interaction between all of the group members and the organization of focus throughout the service-learning project.
Career Enhancement	“real-world” experiences that have the potential to augment a student’s occupational track	The students appeared to be actively participating in the projects and at least one student from every group expressed their plans to incorporate the project into their resume.	“My roommate said she used the service-learning project as an example of her previous work experiences when she gave her job talk, and she really thought it made a difference.”	“I initially signed up for this class, knowing that it had a service-learning component, to build my resume so I can get a job when I graduate next December.”	Coursework consisting of career statement assignments, resume activities, recruiters speaking to the class, or mock interviews.
Beyond the Classroom	students’ involvement in service and their communities beyond the class itself	At the service-learning workshop I observed on campus, students from previous semesters came to the presentation to share their stories. All three individuals that spoke mentioned their continued interests and endeavors regarding community service work.	“I can’t believe how much we’ve accomplished in such a short amount of time. Think about what we could do if we didn’t have other classes, finals, and everything else to do right now.”	“This experience (a service-learning project) has truly changed my way of life. I will forever seek community volunteer activities because I have seen first-hand how it can change lives.”	Education on the responsibilities of being a good citizen, as well as the personal rewards that can be experienced by helping others in need of assistance.

The first quote is a perfect example showing that students anticipate the reflection process and anticipate the benefits of completing service-learning projects. Furthermore, having analyzed the students’ comments and interactions, it is apparent that hands-on experience is a major contributor to the “real-world” experience students acquire through service-learning projects.

Career enhancement encompasses the next important finding. This category includes “real-world” experiences that have the potential to augment a student’s occupational track. Career enhancement has two primary parts, with the first being an opportunity for students to build their resumes. With a drastic increase in the number of students going directly from undergraduate to graduate degrees, fewer Masters of Business Administration (MBA) graduates have the work experience employers are looking for, even in entry-level positions (Neelankavil, 1994). The other pertinent aspect of this category is the ability for students to use their experience from a service-learning project to tell a story at an interview or job talk. Open-ended experience-related questions are becoming increasingly used in interviews and job talks for the same reasons mentioned with regard to resume building. Such open-ended questions give the interviewee an opportunity to show that although they do not have years of experience in the workforce, they have encountered similar situations throughout their education. Such situations might include working with a team, handling problematic situations, and customer-service. Completing a service-learning project often provides students with examples and experiences to pull from when faced with these tough interview or job talk questions. The following are depictions of the career enhancement category as stated by the students participating in the service-learning project:

“At least I can see where this stuff would actual be useful when we’re trying to find jobs.” - from a video of a small-group meeting

“This project didn’t just give me study techniques and random classroom knowledge; it gave me skills for life!” - from a student’s reflection journal

“My service-learning experience changed my career path; it opened my eyes and mind to so many things actually happening in the world.”- from a student’s reflection journal

Hence, the career enhancement category also provides major contributions to the findings of how service-learning projects provide business students “real-world” experience.

Finally, the third finding in how students gain “real-world” experience, which they can use after the completion of a service-learning project, is categorized as “beyond the classroom.” This category encompasses students’ involvement in service and their communities beyond the class itself. The students often write comments in their reflection journals about how these projects changed their lives either positively or negatively. Reflections from this study included students who intended to pursue service the rest of their lives because they were so positively touched by the project. Students who were overwhelmed with all the bad in the world were negatively affected and seemed to steer away from further service endeavors; then there were the individuals who completed the project as a course assignment but felt no additional obligation to continue with community service work. Examples acquired from the ethnographic research of this study include the following:

“I didn’t even know organizations like this existed until this project.”- from a video of small-group meetings

“It felt good to create this final product (for the focus organization). We created the initial groundwork for them, and even after the class, I hope to further help the organization as they reach out to others.”- from a student’s reflection journal

There were varying levels of affect with regard to the students’ service-learning projects, but that was not the primary concern of this piece. Simply recognizing the many reflections and discussions regarding this service beyond the classroom made this the final significant contribution of service-learning projects providing “real-world” experience.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

As educators, we need to leverage these “naturally occurring” aspects and rewards that students feel they are obtaining. Thus, when implementing service-learning projects in the future, a specific focus should be placed on the “real-world” experiences that students perceive as beneficial from such projects. It is important to focus on the three aforementioned categories of “real-world” experience (hands-on, career enhancement, and beyond the

classroom) to enhance the overall learning experience of service-learning projects to their fullest potential. As depicted in the beyond the classroom video quote from Table 1, students see the potential of the projects and how much can be accomplished, but they also feel cramped for time and stressed with all their additional college commitments. It is our job as educators to emphasize the pertinent aspects of service-learning projects that can help these students obtain the necessary “real-world” experiences. So much more can be accomplished if we structure service-learning projects with an emphasis on hands-on experience, career enhancement, and experience beyond the classroom. With a focus on these areas, students will obtain more of the “real-world” experiences they feel are important and the outcomes of the whole project will be brought to their fullest potential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Specific recommendations for hands-on experience would entail interaction with the students and making sure they were meeting with the organization they were assisting. The nature of service-learning projects implies some hands-on work, but again, students do not always use the opportunity, or know to use the opportunity to its fullest potential. Often groups split a project into so many small pieces, which they assign to individuals, that some group members never meet or work with the organization itself. Interaction between all of the group members and the organizations will help develop the “real-world” experience to its fullest potential.

A major distinction between service-learning projects and community service is that the former entails incorporating the project with classroom materials (Waddock and Post, 2000). Thus, it is important that the curriculum being taught also includes facets of career enhancement. Such coursework could consist of career statement assignments, resume activities, a recruiter coming to speak to the class about what “experience” they are seeking for their positions, or even mock interviews where students have an opportunity to express their experience from the project in the form of an interview answer or job talk presentation.

Finally, recommendations regarding the category of “beyond the classroom” necessitate educators expressing to their students the importance of community service, because part of our duty as educators is to provide compelling ways for students to learn about the world and their responsibilities in it (Dipadova-Stocks, 2005). Community service is one of those essential responsibilities as good citizens. Further, as depicted from many of the examples in this article, providing service to people in need can be a rewarding experience in and of itself, particularly with our increasingly busy and stressful lifestyles. In addition, there is no debate that the need for service exists beyond these projects in every community. By exposing students to service and teaching them about its importance in the classroom, we are bringing the potential for their “real-world” experiences to its fullest potential.

Although some students are aware of, and can identify, some of the “real-world” experiences they are obtaining from service-learning projects, not all students can; thus, the impact of service-learning projects on business students is currently under-utilized. As educators, we need to organize the educational experience to capture all the benefits. Implementing these three recommendations when structuring service-learning projects will boost the overall learning experience to its fullest potential by enhancing the “real-world” experiences and application of those experiences for the students participating.

While there is substantial literature on service-learning, the “real-world” experiences from the students’ perspectives have been overlooked. Furthermore, while the literature has focused mainly on K-12 and general university studies, this article focused specifically on business students in a graduate program. A description of how business students actually apprehend this “real-world” experience from a live setting has been depicted. In conclusion, this article has contributed to the existing literature by studying the sense-making of students with regard to service-learning projects and has specifically focused on business students, which is currently a less developed area of the literature (Lester, et al., 2005).

While the examples posed in Table 1 are exceedingly positive, there are also many challenges in service-learning. Such drawbacks include substantially more time and work outside of the classroom for students and teachers; students’ resistance to the projects and, in turn, the ramifications professors encounter on evaluations; an imperfect fit between classroom materials and service work; stereotype reinforcement; and the general negative

outcomes that are possible from the service experience. These issues, as well as others, seem to be common in experiential pedagogies (Wright, 2000).

This paper depicts an exploratory study of service-learning projects and the “real-world” experience they provide students. Additional studies need to be conducted to address the many “how” questions relating to service-learning implementation. This paper took an exploratory analysis approach due to the limited time available for research. Because a genuine ethnography requires “thick description” from a long-term participant observation setting (Geertz, 1973), I intend to do additional ethnographic research necessary to present a “realistic” portrait (Van Maanen, 1988) of service-learning participants and the experience they acquire. The whole spirit of this article can be summed up with a quote from a student’s reflection journal; i.e., pay particular attention to the “with” as it presumes the students really do take these projects beyond the classroom.

“Through this (service-learning) project, I found that education isn’t just about learning something; it’s about getting your hands dirty and doing something with what you’ve learned.”

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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NOTES