

The Impacts of Service-Learning Experience: An Exploratory Case Study of Alumni Perspective

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As an emergent pedagogy embraced by the Asian higher education institutions since the beginning of the 21st century, service-learning has reframed the learning goals and approaches to connect students with the society (Ma, Chiu, Wei, 2019). While different institutions in different regions adjust service-learning to its own social and cultural context, this study focuses essentially on a service-learning project with which students apply their academic knowledge and skills to serve the community. Along with service, the experiential learning cycle, experience-reflect-think-act, proposed by Kolb (1984), was incorporated as an indispensable part of the project. Through the combination of active involvement in serving and the experiential approach to reflect on the learning process, empirical studies had indicated positive outcomes in learners' educational experiences, personal growth, community engagement, and civic responsibility (Hullender, Hinck, Wood-Nartker, Burton, Bowlby, 2015; Molee, Henry, Sessa, & McKinney-Prupis, 2010; Olsen & Burk, 2014; Xing & Ma, 2010).

Globally, there have been increasing findings on the potential gains of students when participating in service-learning, including better academic performance (Tross, Harper, Osher, & Kneidinger, 2000), enhanced communication skills, organizational

ABSTRACT

This article reports on the self-perceived impacts of service-learning experiences from the perspective of alumni who graduated from a technical university in Taiwan. Drawing on the alumni responses in a focus group interview, the study investigated how the respondents perceived the impacts of participation in a service-learning project. Findings suggest that these experiences fostered a lasting change in the alumni personal development, communication skills, ability to adapt and persevere, learning attitude and commitment to service. In addition, the alumni reported not just these practical and personal benefits derived from the service-learning experiences, but also critical transformation that

skills, problem-solving skills, social competence (Vogelgesang, & Astin, 2000), leadership skills (Santulli, 2018), civic engagement (Solomon & Tan, 2021; Steinberg, Hatcher, & Bringle, 2011), and perspective transformation (Bowman, Brandenberger, Mick, Smedley, 2010; Hudson, Serra, Shappell, Gray-Girton, Brandenberger, 2017). In addition, there were studies documented that the duration and intensity of service-learning experiences had positive correlation with these academic, psychological, and social development (Astin & Sax, 1998; Mabry, 1998).

Currently, majority of the research discussion of service-learning remains at the immediate impacts on the learners. Comparatively fewer studies have investigated the long-term effects, particularly after students graduate. There is a need for scholars and practitioners to examine if service-learning have lasting effects on the alumni. In US, both smaller scale and larger scale of research could be found. For instance, Fullerton, Reitenauer, and Kerrigan (2015) explored the long-term effects of a senior service learning course through interviews with 20 alumni and revealed the transformational effects of service-learning experience on multiple levels of the alumni's life. In a larger scale research, Johnson & Martin (2017) examined the short-term and long-term effects of alternative break through online survey of the 147 alumni from various colleges and concluded that the positive gains from alternative break sustain after graduation. In contrast to the available US research on long-term impacts of service-learning, studies in an Asian context are limited. In addition, while most service-learning courses last for one semester, very few studies focused on the longer service-learning engagement. To fill in such gap, this article presents a case study examining the long-term impacts of a service-learning project on alumni who participated in it for at least 2 years.

The Study

This study aimed to diversify the continuously growing research in terms of the long-term impacts of service-learning through a naturalistic inquiry paradigm. Based on the focus group interview (as suggested by Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996) of the alumni, this case study addressed the following questions:

1. What were the perceived impacts of the service-learning experiences on the alumni's university life?
2. What were the perceived impacts of the service-learning experiences on the alumni's life after graduation?

Context

This service-learning project was funded by Taiwan's Ministry of Education from 2009 to 2019 aiming to shorten the digital divide between the urban and rural areas. The technical university, located in the metropolitan area of northern Taiwan, is over 300 km away from the service location, Taitung County, in the southeastern Taiwan. A total of 230 students voluntarily participated in this service-learning project, providing total on-site service time of approximately 15,000 hours. Partnered with several local community entities across Taitung County, services were provided through 2 major approaches: (1) provide summer and winter camps that teaches children, teenagers, and adults the fundamental information technology skills; (2) develop online marketing platforms and provide online marketing services to promote local produces.

Setting and Participants

When students participated in this service-learning project, their ages were between 18 and 22, in their freshmen to senior years. While they were engaged in this project, the impacts of the service-learning were evaluated through their self-reflections during and immediately after services. In a past study (Lei & Huang, 2013), the researchers had found positive gains of students' development, particularly in communication skills and active learning motivation. However, after these students graduated, when they look back on the service-learning experiences, what do they perceive as the impacts on their university life? What do they perceive as the impacts of the service-learning experiences on their life after graduation?

As a start to explore these two research questions, this study utilized purposive sampling technique focusing only on the core team members (e.g., camp director, camp section leader, online marketing coordinator) of this service-learning project. Because the project is volunteer-based, students' involvement varied. Some students only participated once, which would only be several weekends during a semester or one to two weeks during summer or winter break. To be a core team member, on the other hand, students were committed for 2 consecutive years or more. Participants for this study were therefore recruited from the online network of alumni who formerly served as the core team members in the service-learning project. A total of 9 alumni, 3 males and 6 females, responded and a focus group interview was conducted.

Data Collection and Analysis

Using the sampling strategy described, participants of this study were contacted and invited for a 120-minute focus group interview about the impacts of their college service-learning experience. The researchers, one as the primary moderator and the other as the assistant moderator, used the key questions (figure 1) as outlines to conduct an open-ended investigation.

1 st Hour Theme: Service Learning Experiences in University
♦ Primary question: <i>What were the impacts of service learning experiences on your university life?</i>
♦ Follow-up question: <i>What were the most memorable incident(s) associated with the perceived impacts?</i>
♦ Ending questions: <i>Is there anything else you would like to talk about?</i> <i>Would you like to add to what is already shared?</i>
2 nd Hour Theme: Impacts of Service Learning Experiences after Graduation
♦ Primary question: <i>What were the impacts of service learning experiences on your life after graduation?</i>
♦ Follow-up question: <i>What were the most memorable incident(s) associated with the perceived impacts?</i>
♦ Ending questions: <i>Is there anything else you would like to talk about?</i> <i>Would you like to add to what is already shared?</i>

Figure 1. Focus Group Interview Outlines

The interview was audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. The predominant themes in the transcription were identified and data was coded according to these themes. The two researchers thoroughly discussed these preliminary themes and coding units until the consensus was reached. Afterward, the researchers examined the meaning and connections of the themes to prepare for the final stage of analysis, the interpretation of the data.

Findings

Three male and six female alumni participated in the focus group interview. At the time of the interview, four participants (45%) had graduated 5-8 years prior to the study, three (33%) had graduated 2-5 years, and the remaining two (22%) had graduated within 2 years. The committing period in the service learning project during college ranged from 2 years (56%), 3 years (22%), to 4 years (22%).

Table 1. Participant Information

Participant	Gender	Graduation Time	Service Time	Core Responsibility
R	Female	5-8 years	3 years	Camp: Director Online Marketing: Coordinator
S	Male	5-8 years	3 years	Camp: Director Online Marketing: Coordinator
N	Female	5-8 years	2 years	Camp: Art Section Leader
Z	Female	5-8 years	2 years	Camp: Member Online Marketing: Platform Operator
W	Male	2-5 years	4 years	Camp: Director Online Marketing: Coordinator
H	Male	2-5 years	2 years	Camp: Assistant Camp Director, Curriculum Planning Leader Online Marketing: Social Media Operator
T	Female	2-5 years	2 years	Camp: Financial Section Leader Online Marketing: Platform Operator
Y	Female	2- years	4 years	Camp: Director Online Marketing: Coordinator
J	Female	2- years	2 years	Camp: Member Online Marketing: Platform Operator

When the participants recalled and described their service-learning experiences in college, all of them reported that joining the service-learning project was their first initiative to step out of their comfort zone – a school- and part-time-job-centered life. The project allowed them to step into a totally different environment in terms of culture, value and lifestyle from their urban environment. They were exposed to a

variety of people in terms of age, vocation, and ethnicity. They had a sense of accomplishment that couldn't have been granted from the school work nor the part-time job. Findings from the thematic analysis are organized into the following main impacts on the alumni's life during college and after graduation: enhanced communication skills, growth in adaptability and perseverance, active learning attitude, and commitment to service. Each of the categories is illustrated with excerpts from the interview responses.

Enhanced Communication Skills

All 9 alumni reported that the service-learning experience enhanced their communication skills. When they engaged in the service-learning project, they must first communicate with the community entity to understand the locals' need and to set a goal for each mission. After a clear goal was set, they must communicate with the teammates while preparing for the mission, whether the computer camp or the produce promotion. When executing their plan, they must learn to communicate with the service recipients.

One alumni describe how he learned to be a better communicator through the service-learning experience:

“the service-learning project required a massive amount of communication, whether with the teammates, the local community, or the service recipients. At first, I couldn't communicate well with so many different perspectives and opinions. The miscommunication often lead to the delay of the progress and even the misunderstanding among the teammates. After so many attempts, I gradually get the hang of how to listen to diverse opinions, clearly expressed my opinions, and collaboratively came up with an optimal way.” (H)

The enhanced communication skills not only impacted them during college, but also prepared them for the workplace after graduation. As one alumni noted:

“In the service-learning project, I learned how to communicate with different people who look at things from different angles from me. I carried those communication experiences to my workplace, which has been a great help to my job.” (R)

The ability to communicate with diverse people to accomplish a common goal was one major competence cultivated in the service-learning project and was carried over to the alumni's life, such as in the workplace, after graduation.

Growth in Adaptability and Perseverance

Seventy-eight percent (7 out of 9) of the alumni recalled their growth in adaptability and persistence through the service-learning experiences. From the planning stage, execution, to the completion of each mission, it required collaborative effort of the service-learning team and the local entities. However, things didn't always go as planned. There could be all sorts of unexpected problems and obstacles. They learned to come up with alternatives to adapt to the situations, sometimes at a moment's notice. For them, it was a valuable experience to face the obstacles and challenges together without giving up.

One alumni remarked that, with the real-world context, the service experience prepared her to be more adaptive and persistent:

"I need to keep trying and learning to adapt when the unexpected things happened. There were a lot of negotiation and coordination going on. I learned to have backup plans, to make rearrangement, and most importantly, to accomplish our mission no matter how stressful I felt. ... This was so close to the real world we later stepped into." (N)

The ability to adapt and persevere, when acquired, could also be carried over to the alumni's life after they graduated. Another alumni stated that her gains in the service-learning project had boosted her confidence in herself to adapt and persevere in new situation:

"What we achieved under such intense circumstances helped me when I face enormous amount of stress now. The experiences pushed me to try something that I wouldn't have necessarily tried or thought I would have been able to do. So now when I face an unexpected circumstance, I would tell myself that I was capable then, and I am capable now." (T)

The potential to adapt and persevere to real-world challenges was another competence fostered in the service learning project and has a lasting impact on the alumni's life.

Active Learning Attitude

Sixty-seven percent (6 out of 9) of the alumni reported that the service-learning experiences impelled them to be a more active learner. Because of the collaborative nature of this project, each team member was assigned a role with corresponding

responsibilities. In order to achieve the common goal, each individual had to responsibly accomplish their parts. A lot of times it required them to explore new realms, such as writing a proposal, making a marketing plan, selling unfamiliar produces, holding workshops for locals, etc., and they managed to apply what they learned in class or learn new skills on their own.

An alumni described his experience from a passive learner to an active learner:

“I didn’t pay much attention in class, and I didn’t know much when I first joined the service-learning team. ... But I learned it from working with others that when I’m assigned a task, I must learn to do it and accomplish it. Year after year, I learned to do so many different tasks and eventually was able to organize a camp by myself.” (W)

When this alumni talked about the impact of service-learning experience on his life after graduation, he mentioned:

“I had quite a dramatic change because of the service-learning experiences. I found myself able to set up a goal and motivate myself to learn it. This is a great asset to process. I still remembered when I started my first full-time job, it was challenging but I learn diligently. I had four to five learning goals accomplished in one year.” (W)

In addition to the impact on their workplace, the active learning attitude could be seen in how they were more willing to further step out of their comfort zone and attempt to new experiences. As one alumni stated:

“I had never thought about going to so many places and trying so many new things. After Taitung, I had participated in a national competition of marketing, done my internship abroad, and even attended a conference in USA. I have become open to try and learn new things. This is the major influence of the service-learning experience.” (Y)

The active learning attitude acquired during the service-learning experiences has positively changed the alumni’s self-perception in college and afterward.

Commitment to Service

Forty-four percent (4 out of 9) of the alumni had taken further action to engage in community service after participating in this service-learning project. Some have served in their neighboring communities, some continued to go back to Taitung to serve, and one even joined an oversea service project. These alumni mentioned that

the service-learning experience has made them not only connected to Taitung but also aware of what they could contribute to others.

“I love Taitung. It’s like my second hometown. People there are very sincere and passionate. I learned so much every time I was there. I wasn’t just giving but also gaining. I became more outgoing and open-minded. I still keep a great relationship with the locals and continue to serve in Taitung even after I graduated.” (S)

One alumni mentioned that the service-learning experience had motivated him to look for a job in a NGO, Teach for Taiwan, and some other social enterprises. Although it didn’t work out, he still planned to have a job that could contribute to the society.

“Right now, I still contact the [Taitung] locals from time to time. ... Recently, I go to the stray animal shelter on the weekends. ... I have been working in a bank. Once I saved enough money and have economical foundation, I will try to look for a job in a NGO or a social enterprise. That’s my ultimate goal.” (H)

For these four alumni, the sense of connection to Taitung and the willingness to volunteer their time to serve others were the lasting impacts of their service-learning experiences.

Discussion

The findings support the associations between the service-learning experience and the students’ personal growth while in college and after graduation. Specifically, these alumni who committed a minimum of 2 consecutive years in service reported transformative changes in terms of communication skills, adaptability and perseverance, active learning attitude, and commitment to service. These long-term impacts on personal development were also documented in earlier studies in other contexts such as participation in alternative break (Johnson & Martin, 2017) and service-learning courses (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Ma, Chan & Chan, 2016; Newman & Hernandez, 2011).

As Perry & Perry (2015) pointed out, when students intensely involved in the service-learning, the challenging nature of working with diverse populations in the real-world scenarios fostered the active and collaborative learning. When the students collaborated with each other and successfully solved the unscripted

problems, the sense of fulfilment and meaningful relationship began to transform their perception. With increased self-perceived efficacy, they were empowered with positive attitudes and enhanced abilities to handle real circumstances they would encounter during and after college. The findings from this case study were clearly resonant with Perry & Perry's view, evidenced by alumni's personal development in communication skills, adaptability, perseverance, and active learning attitude while in college and after graduation.

It is worth noting that the technical university in this study is not the top-notch university within the higher education realm in Taiwan. It is common that students tend to possess a self-identity closely attached to the ranking of the university they are in (Huang, Chen, & Chien, 2014). Thus it was not surprising that the students in this case study generally held a lower self-efficacy expectations prior to their positive service-learning experiences. Gonsalves and her colleagues (2019) stated, "efficacy expectations affect an individual's confidence in his/her abilities to approach a task and persevere through similar challenges (p.19-20)." When these students successfully persevered through the challenges and produced favorable outcomes in their service-learning experiences, it further raised their self-confidence and efficacy expectations. Reeb (2006) pointed out that with higher self-efficacy expectations for service-learning, students were more likely to commit to service-learning and to make greater impact. In this case study, the transformed self-efficacy expectations could be the reason the students were willing to commit to service for longer period of their time in college. In return, it raised their self-perception and self-confidence of what they could achieve later in their life outside of the school boundary.

Conclusion

Eyler and Giles (1999) stated that the service-learning experiences cultivate the genuine perspective transformation of students' intellectual, personal, and civic development. One part the current study adds to the existing studies on the long-term impacts of service-learning is to focus on the longer service commitment and its sequential influences. The focus group interview brought the alumni back to fully reflect on their service-learning experiences and revealed the transformative effect on their self-efficacy and the subsequent actions because of the transformed perspectives. More specifically, it seems clear from the study that the service-learning experiences of these core team members were effective in raising their self-efficacy expectation, which in return help them take an active role to face the challenges in life, to explore the unimagined possibilities of their future, and to

continuously contribute to the society. This important change in mindset in terms of their increased self-confidence and positive self-identity development is a crucial empowerment to students, particularly those who consider themselves academically less competent.

Although the present exploratory case study involved only a small sample of alumni, it reveals the lasting impacts of service-learning on service participants after college. Given the promising outcomes of long-term commitment in service-learning, practitioners could consider encouraging students to devote to longer service term and deepen the community engagement. Future research could investigate how to further incorporate critical components of service-learning pedagogy to bring life-long impacts on service participants not just on their personal growth but also toward more socially contributive action.

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