

SERVING INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITIES: SERVICE-LEARNING AND TEAMWORK IN ECUADOR

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Abstract

This paper will discuss a study that describes the complex process involved towards the incorporation of an international service-learning program being developed at a university in one Midwestern state. The participants in this study were part of an exploratory team comprised of students, faculty, and staff members of a local NGO (non-governmental organization). The exploratory team was charged with visiting several rural communities in Ecuador to identify a site for the future service-learning project. Members of the exploratory team met with key stakeholders in each community to do a preliminary needs assessment and assess the feasibility of integrating a service-learning project to address identified community needs. Findings from this study show that comments of the students toward their experience were positive, and reflected their belief in the value of that experience; students felt they received more than they had given, both personally and professionally; students were able to make a connection with a real world community; and faculty members indicated active participation of decision-makers from in the community and a challenging learning environment are the two key factors necessary for implementation of an international service-learning project.

Introduction

The global environment is changing, and with these changes, the education sector in the United States is facing new challenges. Increasingly, “teachers are called on to provide quality education to all children and prepare them to live and work in a world transformed by rapid growth in new technologies, international competitiveness, economic globalization, and increasing demographic shifts” (Clark, 1998). Employment in the corporate world has increasingly become contingent on college graduates having international experiences, cross-cultural training, and expose to global political and economic issues (Patterson, 2000). Institutions of higher education can provide opportunities for their students to develop

capabilities and skills that will enable them to understand the concept of globalization through international service-learning programs (Annette, 2002).

Service-learning is a “grassroots movement that is springing up in community after community” (Silcox & Leek, 1997). It is defined as “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5). Service-learning is a “specific form of experiential learning that emphasizes completion of tasks that meet human needs in conjunction with meeting educational objectives” (Weber & Sleeper, 2003). It differs from volunteerism by the application of course content and by student reflection on service-related learning. Fisher and Bidell (1997) assert that both cognitive and personal growth occurs through experiential challenges that arise. These challenges tap into participants’ feelings as well as thoughts.

In the United States, service-learning as a teaching methodology has recently emerged as part of the school reform movement. Thousands of k-12 schools nationwide have been awarded grants to integrate what is taught in the classroom with the development of community and school service projects (Silcox & Leek, 1997). These service-learning programs are gaining interest and popularity “as a means of providing a valuable learning experience for students” (Pyle, 1981).

The purpose of this study was to assess the attitudes and perceptions of college faculty and students from one Midwestern Land-Grant University towards participation in an international service-learning project. Participants traveled to Ecuador to identify a site for future collaborative service projects between the university and a local community.

Literature

Today’s students are emerging from their college experience into a country where the population demographics are changing and a world that is becoming more socially, politically and economically interdependent. There can be no doubt that an increase in international awareness of social, economic, and political issues is essential for today’s graduates. In order to help more students prepare for this changing world, institutions of higher education need to provide experiences that not only help students develop intercultural competencies but also help them apply their knowledge to address problems that are faced by communities. The development of these competencies can be accomplished by employing a service-learning pedagogy in both a domestic and international environment. It is important that students have opportunities to understand and appreciate their own culture and make connections to appreciate the cultures and experiences of others.

Viable citizens need to be prepared to live and work in a complex and interconnected world community. They need to acknowledge diversity and build community by practicing hospitality, civility, and respect. In creating a respectful environment, individuals must become more aware and sensitive to the issues and challenges faced in multicultural communities. It is not enough for individuals and organizations to be culturally aware and sensitive; they must move beyond this point and begin a journey toward becoming competent in a culturally diverse environment. Therefore, it stands to reason that intercultural competence is an important aspect of personal and organizational development.

College students often experience significant personal, academic, and professional benefits from participating in an international service-learning program (Kiely & Nielsen, 2003). International service-learning projects bring together the collective skills and resources of a

diverse cast of characters, including students, faculty, the community, and the college, to assess and address the needs of a community. Some of these benefits include “increasing students’ intercultural competence, language skills, appreciation of difference, tolerance for ambiguity, and experiential understanding of complex global problems related to their academic program of study” (Kiely & Nielsen, 2003).

Service-learning is beginning to develop internationally, and can be found in diverse geographical locales such as Latin America, Japan, Eastern and Central Europe, the Philippines, and in Singapore, to name a few. A “remarkable range of universities and colleges [are offering] service-learning internationally” (Annette, 2002). Students involved in international service-learning projects spend a significant amount of time interacting with people in local communities to identify specific needs associated with that community (Kleinhenz, et. al., 2005; Monard-Weissman, 2003; Pyle, 1981). After having participated in the international service-learning process, students felt the experience had an impact on their future career thoughts and plans (Pyle, 1981). Stachowski and Visconti (1998) recommend the inclusion of a required service-learning assignment in overseas student teaching programs, for service-learning would “add a dimension to the experience that goes well beyond the usual components of school, home stay, and travel”. Through service-learning, students can develop more complex critical thinking skills and help them “reiterate their commitment to be agents of change not only locally but globally” (Monard-Weissman, 2003).

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to assess the attitudes and perceptions of college faculty and students towards participation in an international service-learning project. In order to determine this purpose the following research questions were addressed:

1. How do students define service-learning as it pertains to this international project?
2. What aspects of this service learning project will become an essential experience for students?
3. How do students think they will benefit personally, academically, and professionally from this service-learning experience?
4. What factors do faculty members believe to be the most important in implementing an international service-learning project?

It is important to note that one of the limitations of this study is that these findings cannot be generalized or replicated in other communities of Ecuador. Another limitation of this study involves the small sample size and that participants volunteered to answer the questionnaires. Those participants who were not willing to answer the questionnaire did not get a voice.

Methods and Procedures

Many previous studies at the collegiate level utilized quantitative methods to investigate service-learning. These methods often include pre- and post-survey data and questionnaires, which measure the attainment of goals for individual learning. It “focuses on the perceptions of college students and on what can be learned within campus boundaries – from talking with students, reading their journals, and/or measuring their attitudes (Boyle-Baise, 2002). Qualitative methodologies allow researchers to incorporate other aspects of service-learning, such as the community as a constituent group, into the research process. Shumer (2000) calls for the combination of research designs, which allow for “multiple perspectives and broaden the ability of researchers to present and complete holistic studies”. According to Boyle-Baise (2002), action

research as a part of this combination of research design can “prompt collaboration and reduce distance between researchers and researched”.

Qualitative research methodology was utilized in this study. Qualitative research methodology can uncover intricate pieces of evidence that are difficult to obtain using quantitative methods. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) define qualitative research as “multi-method in its focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring them” (p. 2). It was with this approach in mind that the researchers set out to determine college participants’ attitudes and perceptions towards their participation in an international service-learning project.

Researchers used a phenomenological framework to understand the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this group of students. Phenomenological approaches explore how “human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning” (Patton, 2002). Using this framework, researchers sought to capture participants’ experience as it relates to the service-learning project in Tumbaviro – how they ‘perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it’ (Patton, 2002).

This study describes participants’ attitudes toward the incorporation of an international service-learning program being developed at a university in one Midwestern state. The participants in this study were part of an exploratory team comprised of students, faculty, and staff members of a local NGO (non-governmental organization). The exploratory team was charged with visiting several rural communities in Ecuador to identify a site for the future service-learning project. Members of the exploratory team met with key stakeholders in each community to do a preliminary needs assessment and assess the feasibility of integrating a service-learning project to address identified community needs. Each member of the team kept a personal reflective journal and participated in nightly debriefing sessions. Reflection is an integral part of the service learning experience as it allows participants to look back on the implications of actions that were taken, and determine what was gained, lost, or achieved (Silcox, 1993). As a result of the exploratory trip to Ecuador, members of the team unanimously agreed to form a service-learning partnership with the community of Tumbaviro.

Tumbaviro is a community that has seen many changes in recent decades. The 181 year-old town has no industry, and heavy deforestation has affected the area’s water supply. As a result, agriculture, the main activity for the town, has been severely affected. In an area where the average farmer has 2 – 5 hectares of farmland, assistance will have to come from outside sources, as the government has provided no money for development and improvement projects. A service-learning partnership with this community could provide U.S. students with firsthand knowledge of host community problems, conditions, and needs. Students will also gain insight into the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the citizens of Tumbaviro, which will help to broaden participants’ “perspectives on life in the host nation and develop a greater appreciation of the common concerns shared by people” (Stachowski & Visconti, 1998).

Tumbaviro was chosen as the site for the service-learning project for a number of reasons. Collaboration between this community and the service-learning team would be beneficial to both parties. Tumbaviro desperately requires technical know-how and access to educational resources currently unavailable to them. The inter-disciplinary nature of the service-learning team allows them to bring the community a broad range of expertise, knowledge, and skills. In return, Tumbaviro residents are offering the service-learning team an enthusiastic and

dedicated community that is eager and willing to participate. They also bring to the project valuable local knowledge. All partners involved in this venture are deeply committed to the service-learning project, thus strengthening the collaborative process.

Like many developing countries, Ecuador is a land of disparities where areas of incredible natural beauty contrast with the pollution in the major cities and the poverty of the rural communities. Ecuador is one of Latin America's poorest countries. Wealth is distributed unevenly and along ethnic lines, with "the indigenous and black population bearing a disproportionately large share of poverty" (Roos & van Renterghem, 2000). Recent statistics show that more than 80% of Ecuador's population live in poverty and that many people survive on the minimum wage of \$160 per month. There is little governmental infrastructure to support basic needs such as health, education, or economic development beyond the most basic necessities. Due to the lack of communication between the government bodies and the rural communities, programs and policies are initiated by these government bodies that are totally opposed to the needs and wishes of these communities (Roos & van Renterghem, 2000). NGOs help to bridge this gap between community-based groups and government agencies.

Maquita Cushunchic Comercializando Como Hermanos Foundation (MCCH) is an NGO headquartered in South Quito and works in communities to strengthen the structures and relationships which form the Ecuadorian society. They also work directly with indigenous residents of rural communities to strengthen their connection to markets and economic development strategies. MCCH was receptive to collaborations with the service-learning team and has become an integral partner in the project. Ecuador was chosen as the site for the international service-learning project due to the great potential for learning, collaboration, and growth among all partners, as well as for the opportunity to positively impact the lives of all those involved in the service-learning project.

Data Collection

Students were given the opportunity to participate in a voluntary questionnaire aimed at assessing their attitudes and perceptions regarding this exploratory trip to Ecuador. Data from faculty members were collected from tape-recorded debriefing sessions that occurred at the end of every day. Development and dissemination of the survey instrument was consistent with guidelines provided by the Institutional Review Board for governing research using human subjects by the institution employing the researchers. Using an open-ended format, the questions on the survey instrument asked students their opinions and beliefs regarding their participation in the international service learning project in Ecuador.

Using purposeful sampling methods, these participants were chosen based on willingness and availability to respond to the questionnaire. A purposeful sampling method was appropriate in this study as it provided researchers with information-rich key informants. These informants are likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomena the researchers are investigating, and increases the utility of information obtained from a small sample (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). The sample selection consisted of two faculty members: 1 male and 1 female; and 3 college students: 2 females and 1 male. Of these three students, two were seniors and one was a first-year graduate student. All three students are currently enrolled in degree programs within the College of Agriculture at one Midwestern Land Grant Institution. Two of the participants had extensive international travel experience, while the other participant traveled abroad for the first time.

Data were collected from questionnaires and from the debriefing sessions, which occurred in June 2005. The debriefing sessions were tape recorded for accuracy and then transcribed. The questionnaires were completed within the first week of the students' return to the United States. Data were analyzed using an open coding system. Strauss and Corbin (1990) state "open coding...is the analytical process by which concepts are identified and developed in terms of their properties and dimensions" (p. 74). Conceptual labels were placed on the answers the students provided. The answers were then analyzed to determine similarities and differences. Conceptual labels were then grouped into categories comprised of similar properties.

As in quantitative research, the "basic strategy to ensure rigor in qualitative research is systematic and self conscious research design, data collection, interpretation, and communication" (Mays & Pope, 1995). The researchers used triangulation to address the issue of validity in this study. Triangulation refers to "an approach to data collection in which evidence is deliberately sought from a wide range of different, independent sources and often by different means" (Mays & Pope, 1995). In qualitative research, claims of validity rest on the data collection and analysis techniques. For this study, researchers used two strategies to insure the validity of the design: member checking and mechanically recorded data. Member checking involves researchers checking informally with participants for accuracy during data collection (Mcmillan & Schumacher, 1997). Tape recorders were used during the data collection process, thus enhancing validity by providing an accurate and relatively complete record.

Results/Findings

Research question one sought to determine students' perceptions towards the concept of an international service-learning project. Specifically, students were asked "how do you define service-learning as it pertains to this international project?" Students provided the following responses:

Service- learning is a shared experience between those doing the projects and those receiving the projects. The purpose is to help others while learning about yourself. (F-1)

I define service- learning as providing a "community" with time, experience, materials, and friendship. In turn, the person who does the providing also gains valuable experiences and grows as an individual. Service-learning involves discovering, evaluating and formulating the task with input and support of the "community."(F-2)

I find service-learning to be a symbiotic relationship between members of the community, professionals, students and others who are committed to a particular project. It is mutually beneficial process because people work in unison and learn from each other. No one is considered the expert and no one is coming in to the community to solve a problem. A process of education and collaborative work takes place which allows members of a community to feel involved in the process and also be part of the decision making process. (M-1)

Students' responses to research question one indicate their belief that service-learning requires reciprocity. Reciprocity is a concept suggesting that "every individual, organization, and entity involved in service-learning functions as both a teacher and a learner" (Jacoby, 1996, p.36). Participants are perceived as colleagues, and they "nurture mutuality by fostering respect and collaboration between community partners and service providers" (Porter & Monard, 2001).

Research question two sought to determine what students' believed they would be learning from their involvement in the international service-learning project. Specifically, students were asked "what aspects of this service learning project will become an essential experience for you?" Students provided the following responses:

For me, I am excited about the project because I can see the major improvements this would make. And the need for water is so basic, yet critical for everyday activities. I'm excited to begin learning about options for the community and to utilize my education in a way that will really help others. It is very important to me to have found a project that will actually affect and help people. (F-1)

An essential part of this service-learning project will be the need for students to see themselves as not the arrogant and always right American. Students will need to bring an open mind to Ecuador and realize that though they are coming to for service, they must be mindful of those they are serving. They must remember that the American way is not always the best alternative for communities worldwide. (F-2)

The development of relationships with members of the community, and the learning experience associated with the understanding of people and their environment, is one of the most important learning experiences I can obtain from this service-learning project. People from different cultures interact differently with their environment and the people around them. Being able to understand these differences and the needs associated with the community we are working with will result in a project that will be satisfactory to all of those involved. (M-1)

Students' responses to research question two demonstrate students' awareness of multicultural issues and the role this will play in the service-learning project. Participation in this project allows students to interact with another culture and people, while at the same time providing students with a new perspective on their own ethnic identities. This interaction challenges students to assess their own attitudes, perceptions, and routines, and recognize what role these will play in the collaborative process.

Research question three was aimed at ascertaining what benefits students' believed they would receive from involvement in an international service-learning project. Specifically, students were asked "how do participants think they will benefit personally, academically, and professionally from this service-learning experience?" Students provided the following responses:

I love helping others. I always feel I get more out of giving to others than they get. I learn a lot about myself and I feel really good knowing that I can make a small difference. Academically, this will satisfy my design requirement before graduation, which is great. Professionally, I think this is appealing to employers to have visited another country, assessed their needs, and returned to design a solution. I could foresee this as a possible future work experience. Just the initial trip has made me enthused and excited to begin working on the design. I may seek future jobs like this. Overall, I think my personal benefit far outweighs anything else. The ability to help others gives me such a motivation to be involved and do a good job. (F-1)

Personally I think that this experience would open my mind further to the fact that life exists in many forms and fashions. What is the "correct" way to life in one place may not be feasible or

practical in another. Academically I would gain real life experience in applying an area of study beyond textbook type examples. And finally professionally, I would gain experience in performing a large scale international project all while gathering community input to tailor the project to fit the actual needs of the community. (F-2)

I have been interested in Community Development for the last few years. My goal after graduating is to someday return to Venezuela and try to implement similar projects among the different communities that are in need. I am very interested in this project because it will allow me to see different techniques that I might be able to use. I will also be able to understand the logistics of certain operations and somewhat the costs and different difficulties that may present themselves and discover ways of solving and adjusting to them. (M-1)

Students' responses to research question three indicate the international service-learning experience will allow them to grow as individuals. Their exposure to the community of Tumbaviro engaged the students in activities they may not have experienced before the trip to Ecuador. Students indicated a greater awareness of what strengths they can each individual bring to the project. The fact that each participant has a different set of skills and academic background to offer is viewed as an asset to the collaborative process. Students also indicated the service-learning experience offered them the opportunity to gain knowledge and skills outside the normal academic setting.

Research question four was aimed at ascertaining what factors faculty members believed to be the most important in implementing an international service-learning project. Data analysis of the nightly debriefing sessions showed two main themes emerging: active participation of the community's decision-makers and the existence of a challenging learning environment for the students.

At the Tumbaviro site, the mayor of the town met with the exploratory team to discuss the issues facing his community. At this meeting, other key Tumbaviro decision-makers were also present to add their voices. Together these decision-makers and the exploratory team surveyed the town on foot to get a better perspective of the challenges facing that community. In order to ensure a successful partnership, all parties must be committed to the same goals and work together. As the international service-learning project is to be implemented in their community, it is imperative that the community of Tumbaviro be a part of the decision-making process involving the project and the direction the project will take. According to one faculty member, the presence of the mayor showed that "he really wanted something done [in his town]. He really wanted a partnership. It showed the magnitude of the commitment he was willing to give us."

Faculty members also stressed the importance of providing students with a challenging learning environment. Students should be engaging all their personal, academic, and professional skills and knowledge in partnership with community members. This collaboration should stimulate learning and encourage students to both ask questions and seek answers. The site that is chosen for a service-learning project has to be able to sustain a continuous partnership for several years. The community must have identifiable needs that can be feasibly addressed by the service-learning team. By living and working among the community members, students would be developing their problem solving skills and developing or enhancing their multicultural skills. According to one faculty member, students need be challenged mentally, not physically. If the physical environment or living conditions are too harsh or extreme, they could hinder the

learning process. The key is to find a site for the service-learning project that balances the opportunity for learning and engagement with multicultural experiences and some sense of adventure.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

Advocates of service-learning believe that “when performed in a cross-cultural setting, [service learning] encourages students to have a greater appreciation of different cultural traditions and makes them more aware of the problems facing other parts of the world” (Myers-Lipton, 1996). This belief is in line with our findings which show that comments of the students toward their experience were positive, and reflected their belief in the value of that experience. This implies that participation in an international service-learning program has the potential to help students develop as individuals and professionals.

An analysis of students’ responses to the questionnaire and the issues raised in the debriefing sessions indicate students felt they received more than they had given, both personally and professionally. Data analyses showed three major themes emerging from the data. They include reciprocity, health issues, and communication barriers. These three themes were taken into consideration when site selection for the international service-learning project was made, and the community of Tumbaviro was chosen.

Students’ participation in this exploratory trip to Ecuador afforded them an experience beyond themselves. They were able to make a connection with a real world community. The implication for students lies in the intellectual growth they can experience. Participation in this international service-learning project will challenge students to integrate their accumulated knowledge and technical skills in order to solve real-life problems, help students develop intercultural skills through working as part of diverse teams in both a domestic and international setting, and encourage students to develop a servant leader attitude by working with communities to help address critical issues and build on community assets. When “students are given the opportunity to work with diverse populations, community understanding and tolerance grow” (Williams, 2000).

This service project also provides a learning experience for the residents of Tumbaviro. By working alongside members of the service-learning team, residents will learn aspects of American culture and heritage while teaching about their own. This implies a strengthening of the trust and bonds between partners. Successful service-learning partnerships are based on a collaborative mindset and a commitment from all partners to remain unwavering in the long run. This has social and economic implications for the community of Tumbaviro. By addressing the agricultural production issues faced by the community and applying viable solutions for these issues, the partners aim to expand the agricultural production capabilities of the populace. Expanded production implies greater economic vitality for the struggling community. Investing resources into the economic development of the community could lead to an improvement in the standard of living for the area. Their commitment to these service projects will ultimately dictate future successes or failures.

The faculty members’ responses indicated that much consideration must be given to the actual site for the service-learning project. The site that is ultimately chosen must meet certain criteria. Specifically, the site must have a community committed to the project, and there must exist the opportunity for a good learning experience for participants. Ultimately, this service-learning project must meet the physical needs of the community and the academic needs of both faculty and students.

The results from this study highlight the need for future research. The researchers recommend an in-depth study be conducted with students, faculty, and community members upon completion of the first year of the international service-learning project in Tumbaviro. More research is needed to develop a greater understanding of how this international service-learning experience affects those that participate in the collaborative process, and what effect does such an experience have on students' career and life decisions.

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