

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY COLLEGE STUDENTS IN AN INTERNATIONAL ALTERNATIVE BREAK COURSE

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of a multi-disciplinary international alternative break course involving service learning as part of the curriculum. Nursing, Consumer Science & Retailing, Hospitality and Tourism Management, and non HHS students integrated each discipline into a holistic service-learning course, successfully meeting simultaneous learning objectives in the Colombia study abroad course. Participants in the course wrote pre and post reflections, completed weekly journals and a final reflective presentation and research paper. The initiative was deemed a success on the basis of post metrics / discussions with host recipients and student travelers. Three themes emerged from the qualitative data which included (1) appreciation, (2) empathy, and (3) learning about self.

Keywords: *qualitative, service-learning, alternative break, reflection, multi-disciplinary, appreciation, empathy*

INTRODUCTION

Alternative break programs are a relatively new concept in higher education. Its roots transpire from international service learning, allowing students to venture out into a new location on a shorter time period, usually during spring break. While the popularity is increasing, the research is growing at a slower pace. This article supplements the developing research by sharing qualitative data on an international alternative break program with service-learning created by three professors from three different disciplines. Due to the course being open to all students, it attracted a variety of majors from nursing to engineering. The course's main purpose was to educate students on marketing feasibility and the management of international nonprofit agencies through service-learning. This allowed students to engage in new material, yet reach a higher understanding of their focused major with the coordinating professor. Coursework involved several classes prior to the alternative break consisting of research assignments, group discussions and discourse, traditional lectures on material, and reflection activities. The "nucleus" of the course was an alternative break in Colombia where students immersed themselves in the local population through service-learning activities. This article discusses the qualitative results found in this alternative break program that encompasses service-learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Comparative to other forms of learning, service-learning is recent to the academic world, with its beginnings occurring in the 1990s. However, its origins appeared in the 1930's by the philosopher John Dewey. Dewey (1938) was a great advocate of "doing" rather than "sitting" and allowing information to be deposited into a student's mind without interaction (Freire, 1970). Dewey argued that this was not conducive to learning, and students must interact with their environment for productive learning to occur. When students are engrossed in their environment, they become inquisitive and want to learn, a concept very different during this time. Though there were followers of Dewey's reform, their form of learning and teaching didn't quite "catch on" until Kolb emerged.

Kolb (1986) is the founding father of experiential learning, a concept of learning not very different from Dewey's model. Kolb, being a proponent of active learning, believed that students must go through four phases. These phases, cyclical in nature, beings with actual interaction between student and the experience, reflection on the nitraton, analysis of the experience, and then using his/her analytical skills to move on to more challenging experiences. Then, the cycle continues as the student advances intellectually.

Service-learning is supported by research demonstrating great learning potential. Service-learning, considered to be very hands-on through the use of community service, has several founded benefits. Astin & Sax (1998) discovered that service-learning increases grade point average and inspires civic responsibility amongst its participants. Eyler & Giles (1999), known for years of research on service-learning, found the service-learning experience to be positive among students. In addition to higher academic learning, Eyler, Giles, Stenson, Gray, & At (2001) found that personal development transpired, and improved "the learning experience" (Joseph, Stone, Grantham, Harmancioglu, & Ibrahim, 2007, p. 328).

Transformative learning theory naturally lends itself to the concept of service-learning, as it focuses on the transformation of the person within. This transformation can

be activated when a student is propelled into a new environment and culture, creating shock waves in his/her's own ideal perception of the world. Due to the "tremor" enforced on their schema of belief patterns and convictions, they become cognizant that they may be wearing biased lenses, not allowing them to truly learn.

"Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. Transformative learning has both individual and social dimensions and implications. It demands that we be aware of how we come to our knowledge and as aware as we can be about the values that lead us to our perspectives. Cultural canon, socioeconomic structures, ideologies and beliefs about ourselves, and the practices they support often conspire to foster conformity and impede development of a sense of responsible agent (Mezirow, 2000, p.7-8).

Transformative learning can arise through reflective discourse (Mezirow, 2000). Similar to service-learning, reflection is a necessary element for the stimulation of intellectual development. Through alternative breaks, many opportunities surface for dialogue to transpire, allowing students to ponder about their thought processes and compare their own personal and preconceived knowledge to their peers.

Complementary to transformative learning, Vygotsky (1978) argues that any progression of self and erudition happens at a particular point designated as the zone of proximal development. "The zone of proximal development defines those functions that will mature tomorrow but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). According to Vygotsky, this zone stimulates internal growth. Alternative breaks can incite the zone of proximal development through its group interaction and teamwork, as well as a focused goal on providing services to a deprived community. This amalgam of such activities triggers a higher level of comprehension not discovered in a typical lecture classroom.

ALTERNATIVE BREAK

Alternative breaks assist service-learning curriculum in higher education, as its main purpose to help certain communities when and where needed. This learning experience is called an alternative break, because it usually occurs during spring break, which dedicates a much shorter time period than a traditional study abroad course. This concept is attractive to students, as they only have to devote a week of community service and travel. When the alternative break is curriculum-based, it tends to start in the beginning of the semester, have the alternative break in the middle or near the end of the semester, and conclude with a debriefing class.

As mentioned earlier, there is limited research on alternative breaks. However, some researchers have found ways to research alternative breaks, acknowledging its academic value. McElhaney (1998) found that alternative breaks support a positive transformation among students on their biased perceptions of the world, and acknowledge they have the power to make change in the world. In an alternative break class organized by DuPre (2010), she found that relationships were of utmost importance. "Students

learned not only about themselves through their interactions, but also about the world beyond their campus walls" (p.26).

This alternative break study describes the results of a group of multi-disciplinary college students that experience an academic alternative break course involving a service-learning project. The key question the researchers wanted to answer was whether students are affected by service-learning sustained by an international alternative break course? In order to find the and discussions.

METHODOLOGY

Thirty-one students participated in the study with twenty-six females and five males (females = 26, males = 5). Ages ranged from 19-23. The students derived from a plethora of declared majors including nursing, hospitality and tourism, management, consumer sciences and retailing, liberal arts, science, engineering, economics, public relations and advertisement, and education. The three professors responsible for the class held four classes prior to the alternative break that involved traditional lecturing, reflection assignments, and research papers concentrating on the analysis of international marketing, feasibility analyses for business and nonprofit organizations, and international nursing by nonprofits.

The service-learning project involved participation in nonprofit humanitarian activities involving children at a public hospital, nonprofit organizations, and impoverished communities by distributing toys, hygiene kits, educational kits, painting a mural on a public children hospital wall, conducting eye exams, doing fluoride treatments, blood pressure measurements and body mass index calculations. All activities were sponsored through Bridges of Hope International and Foundations Cartagena Global in Cartagena, Colombia. In addition to the pre and post-test, reflections occurred throughout the semester and at the end. This venue of community service was chosen to support the literature of the class.

Several procedures were followed to concrete the analysis of the data by coding the data and interpreting the data through three different viewpoints. The data collection process first began at the beginning of the semester. Researchers received informed consent for all participants (Cooney & Kleinsasser, 1997).

Prior to coding, researchers began looking for themes arising within the collected reflections (Foss & Waters, 2007). In an attempt to uncover new insights or typologies, the researchers analyzed the data by using content analysis. The results of the content analysis were shared amongst the three faculty researchers to check for inter-rater reliability. Agreement was reached amongst the three faculty researchers (Neuendorf, 2001; Bown & Sparks, 1998). All three researchers color coded general themes among the written reflections (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). To ensure credibility of the emerging themes, all three researchers compared information discovered among their analysis when coding was complete. Researchers conversed among each other to discuss themes and subthemes (Cresswell & Miller, 2000). The combined sources supported a triangulation of data in order to understand the phenomenology (Mathison, 1988).

The multi-disciplinary course consisted of four classes and two packing parties including a personal journal that combined detailed notes and comments about the Colombian people and culture, as well as artifacts from the trip. This was collected near the conclusion of the classes. The post-travel class required students to deliver presentations with teaching aids. Students returned to the United States and were required to attend a post-departure class where they presented their research and/or reflections to the class and professors. Throughout the course, students were expected to respond to their highest selves through reflections and discussions. Logistically, professors reviewed safety procedures before and during trip. Also, professors made certain to have a debrief of closure and full-circle class on learning and impact.

The schedule for Cartagena, Colombia occurred during spring break in March for seven days. This trip had a multi-faceted focus including: Cultural opportunities, educational opportunities, recreational activities and humanitarian projects which included the following: (a) Visit to Casa Del Nino – only children’s hospital on the coast of Colombia focused on treating those who are marginalized and often medically neglected. Visits were made to each of the hospital rooms, as well as the emergency rooms. Students were dressed as clowns, fairy-tale characters etc. and distributed toys, games, clothing, shoes and sandwiches and juices to parents who were staying with their children. Over 250 people were served in the hospital; (2) Visit to FunDaVida – home for children suffering from cancer. Thirty children are currently in treatment. Bookbags, school supplies, toys and hygiene packets were distributed at this location. Over 50 people were the recipients of these items; (3) Visit to Actuar Por Bolivar – This non- profit institution is focused on helping to break the cycle of generational poverty through education of children and training provided to young people and adults who need to learn a skill or trade. Over 250 children received new shoes, toys and school supplies; (4) Visit to Los Granitos De Paz – A non-profit organization focused on one of the poorest communities, Rafael Nunez with over 15,000 people. Their program includes an early childhood center, production patios (micro-enterprising initiative focused on growing fruit, vegetables, and herbs to sell), and outreach program to Sr. Citizens through recreation and feeding program. Over 250 children received shoes, clothing, and school supplies. The teaching and support staff (approximately 50) received educational resources and teaching aids; (5) Visit to INHASAOR – School for approximately 100 deaf students. Shoes, clothing, toys, games were distributed to over 100 deaf students (preschool age through 20 years old); (6) Eyeglass and Health Clinic – Over 250 low-income individuals received eye exams, new glasses and health screening at the clinic. Each patient also received new shoes and clothing; (7) Exodo Center - feeding center and program focuses on children and young people at high-risk, received clothing, toys, shoes and school supplies for over 350 children. This program is connected with the National Police of Colombia; and (8) Playa Blanca – small community where students distributed clothing, shoes, hygiene packets, etc. to those living in communities near the beach. Approximately 15 families were impacted.

RESULTS

Three main themes emerged from the data and analysis. A brief description of the themes is described as (1) appreciation: This theme involves a newfound perception about being aware of one’s surrounding and beginning to appreciate what he/she has; (2)

empathy: The theme identified students' higher level of empathy. Empathy is defined as "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner relationships with their classmates, faculty, service recipients, and community" (Merriam-Webster, 2012); and (3) learning about self: This theme was based on students' comments that they were beginning to learn about more about their inner selves.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this research support that service-learning does affect personal development and emotional maturity (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, Gray, & At, 2001). Students were emotionally affected, appreciating their lives and resources lived (Markus, Howard, & King, 1993). One student said "It changed my perspectives a lot and made [me] much more thankful for everything I have". Other students said:

"It changed my perspectives a lot and made much more thankful for everything I have".

"We should be grateful for the life we have."

"I am blessed. Even people impoverished in America have more than those who are impoverished in the 3rd world country."

"I learned to be more appreciative of what I have."

Students participating in the service-learning project felt more "empathy" toward others (Billig, 2000). Students' experiences of simultaneous wealth and poverty was difficult and yielded a heightened sensitivity to the needs of the poor. One student stated "it made me realize the type of things I could do to help other people". Others mentioned:

"It increased my awareness about poverty..."

"Definitely, I am inspired to use my good fortune to further help those in need."

"I feel like everyone has a chance to show their true compassion."

"It made me realize the type of things I could do to help other people."

The final finding of the study, researchers discovered that students were learning more about themselves. This could have occurred due to their time spent with others (students and Colombian residents) and the reflective process required of them. Reflection is significant in service-learning, as it allows students to analyze what their experience was and what it meant to them (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000). One student wrote "it had decreased a few hidden prejudices I had that I don't think about everyday", while another student mentioned that "I have learned very much about myself as an individual." Other students said:

"This trip really put my life in perspective."

"I have learned to really appreciate what I have and how much my family means to me."

Additionally, the quality of instruction attributed to the success of the alternative break course, as it prepared students for the week in Colombia. Although having three professors create and manage the course was challenging and time-consuming, the professors felt that the experience was enlightening and extremely beneficial to students. One of the professors said the experience was "life-changing" and plans on continuing her international alternative break endeavors.

These findings suggest that service-learning is a necessary element of an alternative break course, as it supports scholarly and personal progress. It also suggests that service-learning enhances students' level of appreciation and empathy not discoverable in a traditional classroom.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, the qualitative nature does not allow the results to be generalized to other populations. The results could be different for an alternative break trip in North America or for participants that are not multi-disciplinary. However, this study discovered three themes among its participants that support the value of service-learning integration. Second, the amount of participants was small and their academic focus significantly varied. A future study should use a larger scale of participants that are in majoring in one particular discipline. Lastly, the lack of a male's viewpoint should be noted. Though service-learning is not gender-based or gender-biased, it tends to attract a more female population. It would be ideal to compare reflective thoughts between genders for a more thorough conclusion.

Future research

Though cultural awareness was not explored in this qualitative study, continued research should investigate on how an international alternative break course can affect the level of cultural awareness, responsiveness, and understanding. Additionally, alternative breaks should be further explored as a form of curriculum that stimulates personal, social, and academic growth.

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