

International Service-Learning: Students' Personal Challenges and Intercultural Competence

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Abstract

International service-learning offers students a complex cluster of educational opportunities that include cultural competency acquisition combined with professional development. An interdisciplinary program in a remote area of Tanzania revealed that the journey toward competence can be an arduous one. Drawing from students' reflections in journals and focus groups, the authors identified students' personal apprehensions and challenges, intra-group relationships and processes, reciprocity with the community participants, and students' emerging self-confidence and competencies as the major developmental experiences. The affective domain of learning was prominent in the students' reflections on their experiences and personal development. Constructivist grounded theory guided the qualitative analysis of journals and focus group transcripts. The authors suggest that faculty contemplating an international service-learning program prepare not only for program logistics, but also for processing personal and intra-group challenges, and incorporating them as part of the international service-learning experience.

Introduction

International service-learning is an increasingly popular pedagogy that spans many disciplines. It provides an alternative to traditional study abroad programs and an expansion of the learning processes available in domestic service-learning. Bringle, Hatcher, and Jones (2011) describe international service-learning as a unique pedagogy that incorporates the domains of service-learning and international education but with the added dimension of intercultural learning opportunities. International service-learning, through its cultural immersion, enables students to encounter their own ethnocentric perspectives, while simultaneously enlarging their disciplinary knowledge as they apply what they know (and learn) to their experiences in another culture abroad (Sternberger, Ford, & Hale, 2005).

The complex learning opportunities within international service-learning have been described as "transformative" (Grusky, 2000;

Kiely, 2004), in that the experiences available to students in an international setting, particularly one without a familiar infrastructure in relation to language, physical comforts, culture, and/or belief systems, stretch students in both expected and unanticipated ways. Although the experience has the potential to be transformative in its culmination, the processes through which that transformation happens have not been explored in depth. The authors sought to gain insight into the ongoing experiences of students as they coped with the challenges of international service-learning. Such an understanding could assist faculty members in preparing to lead international service-learning programs.

The purpose of this study was to explore the internal challenges, coping processes, and developing competence acquired during international service-learning through the lens of a group of nine students who were enrolled in a 4-week interdisciplinary program. The location was a remote island in Tanzania. This program was arranged under the auspices of a university-community partnership. The students and faculty members shared a mutual commitment to the program goals and objectives that included working with local community groups on their priorities for improving the quality of their living conditions. Concurrently, inherent in this experience was a focus on developing students' global understanding and acquisition of competence for working in international settings.

The dearth of scholarship in this area led the authors to focus on the affective processes that appeared to be an intrinsic part of the students' experience and possible maturation. Drawing from the students' reflections on their daily experiences as recorded in journals and expressed in focus groups, the authors identified nuances within the dynamics of this international service-learning experience that clustered in four themes: personal apprehensions and challenges, intra-group relationships and processes, emergence of reciprocity with the community participants, and development of self-confidence and competencies. The observations and conclusions presented herein are intended to benefit faculty members planning to engage in international service-learning programs.

Literature Review

International Service-Learning

Among the myriad definitions of service-learning offered during the past two decades, Jacoby's (1996) succinctly captures the

intent of the program in Tanzania: "Service-learning is 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" (p. 5). Much has been written about the unique learning benefits available in an international service-learning course.

The benefits of this pedagogy for students that have been identified in the literature include increased global awareness; development of leadership, management, communication, and teamwork skills; personal development in areas of adaptability, flexibility, maturity, values, and spiritual beliefs; and the ability to analyze and appreciate local customs and cultural contexts (Bringle et al., 2011; Crabtree, 2008; Gillian & Young, 2009; Jacoby & Brown, 2009; Johnson, Johnson, & Shaney, 2008; Maher, 2003; Pagano & Roselle, 2009; Sternberger et al., 2005; Tonkin, 2004). Other research suggests that service-learning offers students transformational learning outcomes. For example, Kiely (2005) describes how transformational learning theory (as developed by Mezirow, 2000) applies to the personal empowerment that occurs in service-learning, ideally leading students to become more socially responsible and self-directed, and less dependent on false assumptions.

One way to evaluate the learning that comes from this pedagogy and to enable students to integrate and deepen their learning experiences is through the process of reflection, both spoken and written. Reflection has its roots in the work of John Dewey (1910), and its centrality in service-learning has been extensively discussed (Bringle et al., 2011; Cooper, 1998; Correia & Bleicher, 2008; Eyer & Giles, 1999; Eyer, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996; King & Kitchener, 1994; Pagano & Roselle, 2009; Silcox, 1995). The most frequently identified benefits of reflection are development of intercultural competence and the promotion of critical thinking about experiences that challenge students' previous assumptions (Dunlap & Webster, 2009). According to Whitney and Clayton (2011), reflection is particularly important in the international arena. Pagano and Roselle (2009) propose that in successful reflection, the application of critical thinking leads students to synthesize the academic content of a program with the practice or related work and context in a process they call "refraction." Furthermore, structured reflection helps learners integrate experiences that can positively affect future behavior, according to Rogers (2001).

In this article, the authors focus on the affective domain of learning as it was captured through reflection. The affective domain

and its connection to overall learning is an area of increasing focus in higher education, particularly in the context of the scholarship of engagement. The affective domain can be best understood as the values, attitudes, and behaviors linked to direct experience (Shepherd, 2008). Researchers suggest that affect plays an important role in learning outcomes (Batchelder & Root, 1994; Picard et al., 2004; Shepherd, 2008; Sipos, Battisti, & Grimm, 2008).

Contribution to the Literature

The advantages in the experiences of service-learning are well documented and seemingly intuitive, but little attention has been paid to the intra-group processes that contribute to students' maturation and personal growth. Conflicts that emerge when any group works, lives, and travels together under close and unfamiliar living circumstances are especially compelling and are typically understood to be an expected part of the experience. Still, personal issues and difficult peer relationships in such living arrangements have the potential to overshadow the academic learning. Practical issues and institutional challenges related to international service-learning have been addressed (Chisholm, 2003; Jacoby, 2003; Jacoby & Brown, 2009; Kezar & Rhoads, 2001; Sternberger et al., 2005); however, the tensions and challenges experienced by students (and faculty) when engaging in service-learning, as well as the processes of working through them toward competence, have received relatively scant attention (Carver, 1997; Grusky, 2000; Lowery et al., 2006; Williams & Nickols, 2011). How students relate to and with each other may contribute to developing their competencies at least as much as the learning gained through interaction with community partners; however, there is little attention to intra-group dynamics in the service-learning literature.

The authors hope that this study of students' responses to an international service-learning experience extends the literature on international service-learning by exploring students' social and affective responses to their intercultural experiences. It provides evidence of the value of reflection through focus groups and journaling as processes for coping with personal, intra-group, and intercultural issues. As a contribution to the literature on international service-learning, it lays a foundation for further qualitative studies of the developmental processes students experience in international service-learning programs.

Logistics of the Tanzania Service-Learning Program

The service-learning program was developed as a result of a collaborative relationship between a member of the Parliament of the Republic of Tanzania who represented the district in which the service-learning program was located, and the University of Georgia. The destination site was a remote area of Ukerewe District, a cluster of islands in Lake Victoria, accessible by a 3-hour ferry trip from the mainland. The site was chosen following a visit to ascertain the feasibility of working in selected communities (*for further description of the site review, see Nickols, Mullen, & Moshi, 2009*). Identification of the partnership groups and translators, as well as local arrangements for lodging, meals, transportation, and cultural activities, were handled by staff of a Tanzania nongovernmental agency working with the Tanzanian host.

Course Format

The service-learning program was held during “Maymester,” a period of nearly 4 weeks. Students enrolled in directed studies (electives tailored to students’ interests) for 3 to 6 hours course credit. The first three authors of this article were the faculty members for the service-learning directed studies courses. Faculty members met with students periodically to discuss assigned readings and students’ observations and experiences related to women in development, child welfare, community organization, African studies, and professional development. Students enrolled in the program to gain firsthand experience working in an African community, to increase their cultural understanding, and to explore their interests in international development.

Local Partners

The community groups in the service-learning program were a self-managed women’s economic cooperative, an agro-forestry project led by a retired forester, and a girls’ organization led by women volunteers. The women’s cooperative included six women, each of whom worked her family’s small-scale farm. They had been formally organized into a cooperative for about five years, and had developed a set of bylaws and a system of accounts to keep track of revenue they earned from selling cassava flour. Their goal was to purchase a manually operated machine that presses chalk into classroom chalk sticks that they would sell to schools to generate additional income. However, they had been unable to secure

enough money (about 400,000 Tanzania Shillings, equivalent to US\$350) for the purchase of the machine.

The agro-forestry project had been functioning for several years to develop seedlings for reforestation projects and to serve as a model for sustainable small-scale farming practices. This group of women and men was well-organized with nominal leadership from an elected committee and oversight by the retired forester. Residents of nearby neighborhoods who participated in the agro-forestry program received modest payment for preparing seedlings, tending small plots of row crops, and caring for a few chickens. Ironically, though located on an island in Lake Victoria, the most pressing need of the group was a deep well to secure irrigation water. The cost of the well was estimated at 6 million Tanzania Shillings (approximately US\$3,000).

The program for girls focused on personal development and goal setting. Public officials and local women teachers set a high priority on the girls' program as a means of reducing the gender disparity in school drop-out rates and empowering girls to cope with the challenges they face in a society that favors male privilege and power. Local goals for the girls' program were reaching a larger number of girls and training adult leaders.

Students and Faculty

All nine students were female and from the University of Georgia. They represented a variety of disciplines: social work, wildlife biology, consumer economics, child development, international affairs, and ecology. Six were Euro-American and three were African American. Their ages ranged from 19 to 38, but most were in their early 20s. Five were graduate students and four were undergraduates. Two of the graduate students had extensive international experience in other African countries, another had lived in an African country during her childhood, and one had been a member of a mission trip to Mexico. One undergraduate had previous study abroad experience; another had traveled internationally with her family. The remaining two students (one undergraduate and one graduate student, both African American) had never traveled abroad.

The faculty members' disciplines and ethnicity were as follows: family and consumer sciences (Euro-American), social work (Euro-American), and comparative literature (Tanzanian and fluent in Swahili). Each was affiliated with the African Studies

Institute of the University of Georgia and had previous study abroad experience.

Activities

Prior to the 3-week residency and engagement in Tanzania, the students and faculty members met monthly during the academic year to discuss goals, activities, logistics, and local culture. The “home base” for the program was a guesthouse, comparable to a modest hotel in the United States, where everyone had a private room. A large walled space partially covered by a tarp at the center of the facility served as an area for meals, study, Swahili and other classes, and relaxation. Students chose to work and interact with one of the three community groups, based on the fit with their academic majors and interests. Each faculty member worked with a specific student group at the community site. The typical daily schedule was that each team worked with the local partners in the morning or the afternoon, and classes or group activities were held during the alternate periods. Free time was available almost daily, allowing the students and faculty members to visit the local market and other merchants in the small community. In the evening, the students and faculty members planned for the next day’s activities as needed, wrote in their journals, or informally discussed their experiences.

Assessment Method

The design of this study of students’ affective experience in international service-learning was developed by the first and second authors. The study sought to understand the challenges, coping processes, and development of competencies during an international service-learning program from the perspective of the student participants. Data were collected from student journals and five focus groups conducted during the time abroad. The second author facilitated the focus groups, and the fourth author transcribed the recordings and the journals. Transcripts of the journals and focus group tape recordings were content analyzed for themes characterizing the students’ reflections about their experiences and responses by the first, second, and fourth authors. The third author, who reviewed the findings and contributed to the article, was the overall study abroad program director. Well in advance of the departure for Tanzania, the research plan was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Georgia.

Methodological Approach

The methodological approach for this qualitative study was constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2009), a revision of classic grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is a method to study process, using the inductive, comparative, emergent, and open-ended approach, and iterative logic (Charmaz, 2009). The analytical process itself benefited greatly from the detailed description of procedures for qualitative analysis, interpretation, and representation by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011). Charmaz (2009) points out that constructivist grounded theory rests on social constructions, which are influenced by the researcher's positions, perspectives, privileges, interactions, and geographical locations, all of which the authors acknowledge were present in the service-learning program in Tanzania. The assemblage of experiences were filtered through the students' reflections and then again filtered through the authors' attempts to make meaning of the students' experiences.

Data Collection

Eight students' journals and the transcriptions of the five focus groups provided the data for this qualitative analysis. Students were informed that submitting their journals was voluntary and would not affect grades in their courses in any way. Signed consent forms indicated the students' permission to use their journals and the focus groups as the source of data for the study. Although all the students signed consent forms prior to departure, one student did not submit her journal at the end of the program.

Educators agree that reflection is a necessary part of service-learning because reflection helps students make connections between theoretical perspectives, observations and plausible interpretations, and practice. Furthermore, reflection facilitates personal and professional growth in that it helps students make meaning of the often dissonant observations and feelings they experience. Journaling and focus groups are among the methods recommended for facilitating reflection. Indeed, reflection has been described as "the operational linchpin of contemporary service-learning pedagogy" (Cooper, 1998, p. 52) and particularly important in the international arena (Whitney & Clayton, 2011).

In writing their journals, the students were asked to reflect on their experiences, focusing on their observations about self: what they were learning, experiences and feelings they found challenging or rewarding, and the meanings they were making of their experi-

ences. Five focus groups were conducted in evenings at various times during the program to facilitate group sharing about experiences and to promote communication among the participants. After the service-learning program, the journals and focus group tape recordings were transcribed.

Analysis

Journal entries and focus group transcripts were analyzed separately by three of the authors, as noted previously, to identify emergent themes about the students' experiences, self-insights, understanding of the community, connection to their previous knowledge, and relationships with the local participants and within the service-learning group. The interpretations of themes were then discussed by the authors and compared for consistency. This open coding technique from grounded theory methodology, which Moustakas (1994) describes as "composite textural descriptions," facilitates the emergence of insights by grouping together participants' reflective comments. The most prevalent themes contributing to an understanding of students' emotional and developmental experience were personal apprehension and challenges; intra-group relationships and processes; reciprocity with the community participants; and self-confidence and competencies. In reporting the findings, a letter of the alphabet was assigned to each student ("Student A," etc.) in order to provide anonymity.

Findings

Using the student journals and transcripts of focus groups, four themes emerged from the narrative analysis. In this section, brief descriptions introduce each theme and selections from the students' journals or the focus group comments illustrate the theme.

Personal Apprehension and Challenges

Questions reflecting uncertainty and mild anxiety about having adequate expertise needed by the community groups were expressed by the students during the pre-travel monthly meetings. Although reassurances from the faculty seemed to ameliorate the expressed concerns, as events unfolded, the anxieties were again expressed, sometimes in the focus groups and more often in the student journals. The sub-themes related to personal challenges clustered around anxieties and doubts, and physical and emotional stress.

Anxieties and doubts.

Anxieties and doubts took many forms, including performance anxiety, and feeling unworthy, incompetent, or even “too American.” Student H, who was traveling out of the country for the first time, initially focused on her mixed feelings as she succinctly stated, “I am extremely excited but nervous at the same time.” Early in the program, it became apparent that most of the students’ anxieties were not about travel-related issues, but rather focused on their ability to carry out the purposes of the program. A seasoned traveler, Student A, echoed the feelings expressed by Student H as she wrote:

I’m still feeling apprehensive about the work we’re going to do there. It will be nice to be involved in a community for a while though. I’m excited but definitely nervous. I don’t like being unprepared . . . and that’s exactly how I feel for this venture.

A similar concern was expressed by Student E as she voiced her discomfort with her own perceived shortcomings as a learner in a new culture: “The greatest challenge I have already faced is my own ignorance and self-consciousness. I am growing more and more afraid to fail.”

Student G’s anxiety took a slightly different twist as she wrote, “I was feeling like I was the only nervous one and the youngest and least knowledgeable. . . .” Part of her learning was realizing that her initial anxieties were shared by others, and sharing in the group could normalize her concerns and provide relief, as her journal entry suggests:

but now I think some of my anxiety is just characteristic of the nature of our project and ambitions. Honestly, I never thought about bringing up my anxiety in a group meeting or really at all but I think expressing those feelings took a huge burden off and furthered the development of trust within our group.

Student A’s self-consciousness began before she boarded the airplane in the United States, as she reported: “I was horrified when I got to my gate in the airport, looked at myself and all my gear and realized how American I looked. I’m sure I can be identified a mile away!” Her anxieties continued as she experienced irritability in her work group, as she commented in her journal: “Today was

a hard day for me. I found myself impatient and sometimes even a little annoyed with other people. My insecurities are showing up right now . . . it's just building inside me.”

Most students exhibited or expressed feeling stressed, and some had unique ways of understanding it. Also an experienced traveler, Student B observed that her areas of discomfort were challenging for her due to past experience as well as inexperience. She wrote:

I am starting to realize that my last 10 years have been monopolized by a male-dominated profession. . . . I have not fully developed my more intuitive/introspective side. I'm also nervous (trepidation) about working with children. I'm not a natural with children.

Physical and emotional stress.

Fortunately, there were no significant health issues during the program. However, students experienced physical fatigue and lack of energy, and emotional states that included irritation, annoyance, and intolerance. Often this stress was attributed to the structured schedule necessitated by the availability of the local partners and limited transportation, as well as the course expectations. Student G shared her frustration as follows:

Right now I am really annoyed but I feel like I'm not allowed to take time out for myself so I can't do anything about it. I also don't feel well at all but I am not being given sufficient time or space to take care of myself. I'm burnt out on journaling.

Without some quiet time, Student A recognized that the quality of her time with other people was compromised, as she wrote: “I need a balance of being alone and being social and it's hard for me to find that balance in this situation.”

Homesickness was an emotional strain experienced by some of the students. A passage by Student F reflects a common theme of ambivalence, expressing both negative feelings and appreciation of the gains inherent in the service-learning program.

I think I officially miss home now. Today was not one of my best days. I am having a lot of mixed emotions in terms of my purpose here, my relations with other members in the whole group. I think this transition in emotions began a few days ago. However they seemed

to intensify today. I began becoming extremely homesick. I am missing my family, my boyfriend, and my car. The interesting thing is that this has been a very fulfilling journey.

The interactive effect of the intensity of group living, working within another culture, and personal stress appeared frequently in the journals. This may account for a large portion of the students' fatigue, as well as their complaints about having very little time to themselves. The strain was evident, for example, when a planning session with the local group was protracted. Student B commented on her need to recuperate:

It was a good day. All of the haggling and debating and compromising paid off, yet it also left me drained. I needed time alone in the afternoon and a long nap just to be able to recover. Otherwise, I could feel myself too stretched and unable to deal with the slightest frustration. The group living does strain everyone.

Intra-group Relationships and Processes

Group dynamics, a term coined by renowned social psychologist Kurt Lewin, refers to the interacting forces that define how a group functions. Brown (1988) credited Lewin's "field theory" with strongly influencing the understanding of group process. These concepts seemed particularly relevant as students shared the rigors of an international service-learning experience.

The challenges of group living include sharing living quarters, traveling and eating together, and working collaboratively. The intense group interaction can generate emotional reactions around a sense of belonging and emotional safety. Negative feelings such as hurt, annoyance, lack of tolerance, and rejection—often brought on by fatigue—can emerge after an initial "honeymoon" period. A typically stressful middle stage can develop into mutual support, affirmation, acceptance, and shared feelings of accomplishment as the group's work moves forward. This intra-group process indeed manifested itself in the Tanzania program. Tuckman's (1965) model of group development, with stages that he labeled "forming," "storming," "norming," and "performing," is particularly applicable.

Stage I (Forming).

In this beginning stage, group members build trust and focus on being liked and finding one's niche. For example, early in the

program, Student G, who was struggling to feel competent about her contributions, discovered the positive potential of finding support within the group as she wrote:

It was like a huge weight was lifted off of me though it was a great leap of faith for me in terms of putting my trust in our group not to judge me and to recognize my feelings. When I said it, [Student A] actually said she shared identical feelings. . . . I hope others realize I have a lot to offer even though on occasion I can lose that confidence.

Student A used her group experience for self-reflection and also emerged early as a group leader, which contributed to bolstering her confidence. She wrote in her journal,

I was the [appointed] leader today and it was a task—organizing and keeping track of everyone but it was fun. I got many compliments from people and even a short round of applause, which made me feel good. I haven't had much leadership experience and authorities and peers have never put me in leadership roles. It's nice that I'm finally getting some experience.

The students' diversity was noteworthy in terms of their different backgrounds, races, ethnicities, ages, and disciplines. This greatly added to the richness of the early group process. Student A commented enthusiastically about this early on:

A feeling of appreciation for our diverse group has stuck with me all day. I'm loving seeing this experience through the eyes of people who have a different view from me and how all of our interests overlap and combine in so many necessary ways. I'm continually amazed by how much I love the people in our group.

Student H was especially sensitized to the issue of diversity and her wanting to be seen in her entirety as she, too, commented, somewhat more skeptically,

Most say how proud they are of the group but there are underlying issues that I hope can be worked out. I have to understand and I do because I have dealt with being

uncomfortable all my life. I am a woman but not just that I am also a woman of color.

Stage 2 (Storming).

Typically this stage occurs as group members are feeling that their personal needs are not being met or are being compromised. They begin to test or question the leaders' competence, and dyads and triads within the group often form. These issues can become the source of conflict and can escalate to work against the general sense of well-being of the group. However, they can also provide the fuel for personal growth and insight as true group bonding can emerge. Many of the students commented regularly on the state of the group in their journals. For example, Student H expressed this conflict: "I am extremely frustrated and irritated with some people. This is the day that hands down, I wanted and was ready to go home. I didn't want to go to the focus group let alone participate in any discussion."

Student A, too, was not only sensitive to the group tension but was also aware of the feelings this triggered in her, as she wrote:

There's some conflict going on in our group which makes me sad. Of course it's going to happen but it seems pretty destructive and I'm not sure how it will be fixed. It would really suck if anybody left this experience completely at odds with another person. It's especially difficult in a situation like this where roles are not so defined. . . .

Student F dealt with her discomfort with the group tensions by withdrawing, as she reflected, "Group living was tough, but it sure was nice to have my own room. There was tension in the group. I did not fully understand it. . . . I like when people just get along and are nice to one another."

Toward the middle of the program, when group tensions were highest, the group participated in an activity by dividing into two subgroups for a day. Most of the students enjoyed this change, and the experience seemed to function relieve the tension. Student G commented, "It was also nice to have a smaller group for a while. Being in a large group gets kind of exhausting and it was great to have fewer people to coordinate."

Stage 3 (Norming).

As the program progressed, activities with the local partners were implemented, and increased acceptance between most of the students appeared to occur. Interestingly, this intra-group acceptance seemed to coincide with self-acceptance and increased self-confidence. While some intra-group tensions continued for Student H, her journal entry suggests that she had developed a level of realistic acceptance and, although still annoyed, had come to terms with the intra-group relationships. She wrote:

The people here are amazing but the people we brought with us should have stayed in America. This trip wasn't just service-learning, the most valuable lesson I learned was how to deal with people you have to work with. We not only worked together, we played together and lived together. It was/is too much we are bound to get on each others nerves or have disagreements.

Stage 4 (Performing).

As the program's end loomed, the students' energies became more externally focused, and they worked more harmoniously to accomplish tasks. Student A expressed a sentiment shared by many as she made meaning out of the group experience, including a sense of accomplishment. She reflected:

Trying to get that grant done is a huge task! It took a lot of adjustment for our group as a whole, as well as me individually, but I feel like I'm finally in a good place with it. I'll leave here feeling like I contributed something worthwhile. I'm pretty happy about that.

Student B described the cohesiveness that developed among the local participants and the students as she admired another student's demonstration of building an improved mud cook stove.

I like the way she started with a series of strategic questions, asking if they used three rocks to cook on; if they ever had problems with their skirts burning; whether they had to walk far to get firewood . . . "ndiyo, ndiyo," "yes" again and again. [Student C] had built her case for the improved cook stove . . . we all took handfuls of mud and patted them on the circular wall.

Student B concluded that everyone felt they could reproduce the same stove at home, and the demonstration fostered relationship building among the students and between the students and the community, “as we all got muddy together.”

Ultimately, most of the students developed tolerance for the small obstacles and challenges of everyday life, as one student noted in a final focus group with a helpful touch of humor: “And we always said all along, this is Africa, ‘hakuna matata,’ go with the flow.”

Reciprocity with Community Participants

The notion of reciprocity is a key component of service-learning, and programs are designed to facilitate students’ doing things *with* others rather than for them (*Jacoby, 1996*). Some of the challenges of achieving clear communications between the host country participants and the service-learning team became apparent during the initial meetings with the local groups in Tanzania. Although the local groups had been briefed ahead of time about the intentions of the students and faculty to work with them, an early misunderstanding was the expectation on the part of leaders of the local groups that the group from the university were experts who would have answers for their problems. While the meaning of service-learning may never have become entirely clear to the Tanzanian partners, the activities undertaken were ultimately jointly determined and executed.

Early gaps in expectations led to initial anxiety on the part of the students, as noted in their journals. For example, Student D, who worked with the girls’ empowerment group, wrote: “Something else that surprised us was that the women were expecting us to train them—not to work directly with the girls. They were expecting seminars and workshops on working with the girls—something we were completely unprepared for!” After a session with the agro-forestry group, Student C reflected on their level of organization and high expectations:

We had a long meeting describing why we were there and what the Garden’s main priorities were. I was pretty surprised at how organized they were. Very intimidated as well! One of their questions for us was: “What qualifies you to come here and help us?” I gave my Peace Corps résumé, feeling inadequate. . . . I feel uncomfortable . . . this is a whole different culture.

As the students, faculty, and local participants communicated and worked together during the ensuing days, mutual understanding developed. Students working with the girls' program appreciated the eagerness with which the Tanzanian girls engaged in group activities and the effort it took for them to attend the sessions. Some of the girls walked for nearly half an hour after doing chores at home in order to participate.

Students gained appreciation for the indigenous knowledge they observed among the Tanzanian women and men. The degree to which the women's cooperative and the agro-forestry group were organized prompted a high level of respect from the U.S. participants, such as Student H's comment about the women's group: "they know their big project is to purchase a chalk machine. They had the numbers, how much it would cost, and what profit they would make, so that was surprising to me." A faculty member's knowledge about grants for community development in Tanzania enabled the students to assist the women's group and the agro-forestry group in developing applications for a chalk machine and the deep well, respectively. The U.S. group perceived that the Tanzanian participants recognized and appreciated the goodwill, knowledge, and skills of the U.S. participants. For example, Student B commented in her journal,

Today we worked on the chicken coop some more. We made sure they knew we liked their approach better than our own. Everyone jumped in and helped with the work—men, women, and children. It was a lot of fun, and it felt that we were very accepted and absorbed into their community. It definitely seems to create a stronger partnership to acknowledge the good work and skills that folks already have.

Some students were immediately aware of specific aspects of their new surroundings; for example, Student G recorded in her journal,

The first experience I had today was waking up to the 5 am prayer call (from the mosque). It was amazing to me the devotion people have to wake so early everyday to pray. Even the "extremely" devout people in the US hardly do anything similar.

Sometimes students pushed themselves to be more cognizant of their intercultural attitudes and understanding. Student E commented on her efforts to understand, and thus appreciate, the culture, as she reflected in her journal,

I told myself that today I want to find something I really like about this culture. There are already aspects that fascinate me, such as the performance styles and the food, but I feel those aren't substantial enough reasons. So, while walking through the marketplace I looked on all the vendors and decided that entrepreneurship is an aspect to praise.

A week later, she added:

Reflecting on the day of work with the women . . . , I am amazed at the work and load of responsibility put on women and girls. They toil in order to provide comfort and shade and provisions for their families. They are confined by society to stand in the background . . . their power is not recognized.

Through the many hours of activities with the local people, the students became a familiar presence in the community. Comfort levels increased on the part of local participants and the students, and a sense of reciprocity emerged. Awareness of this was expressed by Student F, who worked with the girls' group:

One of the girls kept inviting me to either sit or stand with her every time we engaged in a new activity. They are definitely beginning to trust us. I am glad they are becoming more comfortable with us. I am also starting to become more comfortable with them.

Self-confidence and Competencies

The benefits attributed to international service-learning include personal development related to adaptability and maturity. Many of the students identified increased self-confidence and other personal competencies as growth areas. A variety of experiences, both planned and unanticipated, contributed to the students' development. For most students, their journal reflections revealed self-discoveries, personal insights, and clarifying goals, as Student G expressed:

I feel more independent, have had more thoughts about my own aspirations and dreams on this trip than in a long time. It's partially because I am in a new place and that always inspires me. But I also think it is partly due to the people I am around right now. Because they are all older and have had incredible adventures I think more about where I want to be in my life when I reach their age.

The challenges and rewards of continuous interaction and communication were noted throughout many of the student journals. For instance, Student B wrote: "The discussions reinforce my understanding of the difficulty of communicating ideas between different cultures, genders, and economic levels." Later she wrote that after protracted discussion a plan was in place for an activity, and work commenced: "men, women, and boys were all hammering nails with us and everybody wanted their picture taken."

Participating in cultural activities, such as joining in the dances of a local performance group, provided opportunities for the students to immerse themselves in other aspects of the culture, and in so doing develop a sense of competence and solidarity. Student G's description of dancing with a large group at a local community gathering captures many layers of response to the experience and the self-insight she gained from it:

In the afternoon . . . we drove to a small village and were met by traditional dancing and singing. We watched a performance, which I was amazed by. They never stopped moving with the incredible intensity but their shoulders and hips were so loose and comfortable. [Soon] I realized we were all about to be up there dancing. The anxiety I felt was unbelievable . . . after they tied a kanga around me I couldn't stop laughing and felt super awkward. Once we started dancing, though, I realized I had more to lose from not participating than from doing it imperfectly. It was a huge moment for me because it made me realize that I finally have the confidence to put myself out there and fully enjoy experiences . . . [Dancing together] helped me build trust with them so that I may feel vulnerable among them, but it can be okay because it is a safe place. When we finished dancing no one was ready to leave.

Student B's conviction about the value of experiencing other cultures was written after a trip to the weekly area market at a distant place on the island. She observed,

Speaking with, or trying to speak with, different strangers stretched my envelope further. Seeing the types of goods in their market brings home the reality of their limited resources. Cheap children's bags, one-speed bicycles, cloth, vegetables, flours, grass mats, used shoes, and cheap flip flops. Seeing it all spread out in a muddy field on a rainy day is so much more meaningful than reading a statistic in a textbook. Everyone should experience other countries and cultures firsthand.

Summary

The use of reflective journals and periodic focus groups offered structured opportunities for students in an international service-learning program to express their personal anxieties and doubts, make observations about other participants and group dynamics, explore their feelings about the relationship with local participants, and consider the development of their intercultural competence and ability to cope. These reflections resulted in insight about the affective development experienced in the unfamiliar surroundings of international service-learning. The international service-learning experience was an arduous one in many respects, yet students gained personal insight and intercultural competence that will have an enduring impact on their personal and professional development. The methodological approach of open-ended coding to identify themes related to the students' experiences produced a deep and rich understanding of their journeys. Although this study had some limitations, the insights gained can be of value to faculty as they develop international service-learning programs.

Limitations

The authors acknowledge that there are limitations inherent in the generalizability of qualitative research. In this study, a different combination of gender, subject matter expertise, age, international experience, and personalities of the students, as well as different international settings, most likely would have resulted in different experiences and conclusions. Conversely, the dissimilar age and experience factors could be viewed as strengths, because they brought diversity to the program. Diversity of age and expe-

rience are often lacking in service-learning programs involving only undergraduates or graduate students in a specific discipline. A second limitation of this study is the possible reticence on the part of some students to fully express their thoughts and feelings in journals that were to be read by faculty members who assign grades for the course. Moreover, in this study, some journal entries indicated “journaling fatigue” that may have affected the scope and quality of the entries. Although the length of time (4 weeks) in the international setting could also be considered a limitation, the richness of the data indicated that the students experienced a range of emotions and opportunities to develop knowledge, coping strategies, and intercultural competence.

Finally, like so many other service-learning programs, this program did not attempt to gather detailed feedback from the local participants, a repeated and often-criticized omission in studies related to the impact of service-learning projects (*Billig & Eyster, 2003; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008*). However, the U.S. participants learned later that their assistance in facilitating the agro-forestry group in preparing a grant proposal for a deep well resulted in funding for the well. This represented one direct benefit to the community.

Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore the personal challenges, intra-group dynamics, coping processes, and emerging competencies of students in an interdisciplinary service-learning program. These personal elements are an often under-examined part of understanding the impact on students of an international service-learning experience. Thus, the study helps fill a gap in the literature about the personal experiences of students. The findings may also offer guidance regarding these seldom-explored aspects for faculty members who plan international service-learning programs. A list of “lessons learned” as they relate to the predominant themes of the student experience in this study follows.

Personal Apprehension and Challenges

In this study, even experienced student travelers identified personal apprehensions as they embarked on the international service-learning program, and all students met a variety of challenges during the stay abroad. When planning international service-learning programs (and other study abroad experiences), faculty members need to be aware of the emotional ups and downs experienced by students and how those processes may contribute to their

personal development. The pragmatic aspects of preparing for a program of this magnitude may include travel itineraries, facilities, local partnerships, translators, health precautions, course offerings, student recruitment, finances, orientation sessions, and institutional policies. These aspects often overshadow the social and affective aspects of the experience that are likely to occupy a considerable amount of the students' attention and energy throughout the program. Students may outwardly express a sense of self-assurance and enthusiasm, but silently harbor anxieties about their abilities and competencies for international service-learning. Faculty members' acknowledgment of these personal uncertainties can provide early reassurance. Mentoring can lay the groundwork for a richer overall learning experience.

Intra-group Relationships and Processes

The time-tested model of stages of group development was apparent in the Tanzania service-learning program. Tuckman's (1965) model of group development provides a conceptual framework that can serve to ameliorate the effects of intra-group dynamics in daily living that may otherwise be vexing for individuals and the group. Anticipating the typical group dynamics of close travel and living experiences, and using them as opportunities for learning, can help faculty members as they facilitate student learning. Periodically incorporating structured reflection experiences (e.g., group debriefing sessions, faculty-led focus groups) can provide not only a coping mechanism for students, but also a formal learning experience about group behavior and interpersonal relations.

Reciprocity with Community Participants

In this study, entries from student journals revealed that building reciprocity with local participants was an interactive and iterative process. Students in service-learning programs usually approach the experiences with a desire to make a positive difference in the circumstances at the service-learning destination, even as many harbor anxiety about what lies ahead. Local participants have expectations that may or may not be consistent with the collaborative philosophy of service-learning. The process of working with local groups requires continuous communication, clarification, and interaction with oversight on the part of the faculty members. It may be difficult to convince the international partners in a service-learning venture, especially in situations where they have

been accustomed to hosting “experts,” that students and faculty want to work with them and learn from them. Faculty undertaking new international service-learning programs may need to put additional effort into clarifying the purpose of the program, and leaders who direct sustained programs may find they must reiterate the service-learning philosophy and goals as new local participants become engaged in the program.

International service-learning has almost daily frustrations and rewards. One of the rewards for faculty is sharing the successes with students, but faculty should also expect to offer support and counsel when efforts fall short of a student’s or the program’s ideals. This too provides an opportunity for faculty members to mentor students as they process misunderstandings and disappointments. Finishing a program well is also an important part of the overall experience. A myriad of emotions are likely to be generated at the end of such an intense experience. Rituals of leave-taking and affirmation, such as a closing meal or exchange of memorable moments and tokens of appreciation, are opportunities to show respect for the local participants. Faculty who plan ahead for the leave-taking experience can help to solidify the reciprocity that has developed between student groups and community members.

Self-confidence and Competence

The experience in international service-learning described in this article corroborated the centrality of the process of reflection in acknowledging students’ affective concerns and insights about their emerging self-confidence and international competence. Individual adjustment to the international setting did not follow a prescribed pattern; rather, the development of coping skills and competencies was an ongoing process, as was reflected in the students’ journals and in the focus group transcripts.

In this program, reflection occurred formally in journals, focus groups, and class sessions. It occurred informally in student small group discussions, and in individual conversations with faculty members. As a research tool, the journals were invaluable to the analysis of the students’ lived experience. The assignment to keep a journal let students reflect on their experiences and what they learned from them; further, it provided students an opportunity to take time for themselves, and to recuperate away from the intensity of activities and the ever-present group dynamics. As faculty present the pedagogy of journaling to students, it would be helpful to also acknowledge the likelihood of “journal fatigue,”

while emphasizing the value of gaining self-insight through this process. Furthermore, journaling offers a mechanism for retrieving details of the service-learning experience that are likely to fade from memory as time goes by.

Although focus groups provide an opportunity to process experiences and make observations, they also hold significant potential to digress into gripe sessions as students express disappointments and frustrations with challenging situations. Faculty who are alert to this group dynamic and who are prepared to shift topics or ask for counterbalancing observations can maximize the benefit of the group process while providing a climate of emotional safety.

Faculty Self-care

Faculty members who lead international service-learning programs should expect to do much more than be distant bystanders, available in case of emergency. In fact, faculty, especially those relatively new to service-learning in an international setting, would be well advised to anticipate that they may experience anxieties similar to those of students. It is suggested that faculty members recognize their own vulnerability to the demands of international service-learning, and build collegial relationships with co-leaders and local partners that help to diffuse stress.

Faculty members who facilitate international service-learning programs will assume many roles that are atypical of the classroom environment. The close living arrangements of an international service-learning program mean that conversation, reflection, and learning may occur over a meal, while doing the dishes, on a bus, during a trip to the marketplace, or after a knock on the door in the middle of the night. Faculty members who are also fatigued and a long way from the support systems of home are not always immune to the drama of group dynamics or their own diminished coping skills. However, allowing students to see their humanness may offer another opportunity for student learning and group cohesiveness. It was the authors' experience that one of the most rewarding roles in international service-learning was functioning as mentors and coaches while students experienced challenging situations and gained mastery.

In conclusion, preparing students to live and work in a global world has become integral to the mission of higher education, with particular emphasis on global citizenship and engagement. Participating in an international service-learning experience provides a unique opportunity to accomplish those goals. This

study underscores the need for faculty members who plan to lead international service-learning programs to adequately prepare to facilitate the many challenging aspects of their students' experiences that are part and parcel of this form of experiential learning. Navigating the arduous journey of international service-learning with students is rewarded by the evidence that students have coped, matured, learned, and otherwise transformed during the process. The benefits to the service-learning team and local participants are mutual respect and appreciation, a cornerstone of intercultural competence.

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