

Changed for Good: Investigating How Students Become Agents of Change through Service-Learning Experiences

Abstract

Service-learning has been recognized as an experiential learning pedagogy with great power to transform students into agents of change by deepening their social awareness and responsibility. This session seeks to arrive at finer-grained understanding of how such development occurs. Through facilitated discussion, participants will explore this transformative process and identify key elements crucial to it. Both practitioners and non-practitioners of service-learning may take away new insights on supporting and nurturing their students' personal growth in experiential learning. Participants will also brainstorm to contribute towards a research agenda that deepens the discourse on the transformative power of service-learning.

Keywords: service-learning, experiential learning, student as agent of change

Introduction

The rise of experiential learning, particularly service-learning, in management education has led to many educators adopting such practice in their classroom. Success stories of changed students who transform into better citizens and leaders after service-learning projects appeal greatly to both practitioners who would want to replicate such success and researchers who would want to understand the phenomenon. While generally recognized as value-adding by both, service-learning still remains a “black box” wherein the students’ transformation process has not been broken down into clear components for our understanding. Gaining such knowledge has implications for teaching as service-learning practitioners can identify the key ingredients to such changes and be better prepared to support the transformation process. Through active engagement with the participants, our session seeks to spark discourse on the matter and develop future service-learning research to turn anecdotal evidence into scholarly findings.

Theoretical Foundation

There have been numerous calls to reform management education to meet new demands of a changing society. Manuel Escudero, founder of the United Nations Principles of Management Education (PRME) initiative, urges educators to innovate and redefine the future of management education (Alcaraz & Thiruvattal, 2010). He sees experiential learning as an important component to the much-needed paradigm shift in the role of business schools in social change. One particular form of experiential learning, service-learning, can address such challenge.

Service-learning, “an academically rigorous instructional method that incorporates meaningful community service into the curriculum” (Dipadova-Stocks, 2005), is gaining recognition by both educators and researchers as an effective pedagogy in management education. With the potency seen in experiential learning, it directly responds to Escudero’s

call for “getting students closer to reality” as students come face-to-face with real-life problems and solutions. Many management educators who practice service-learning in their courses can attest to the personal change and growth they have seen in their students who have gone through the experience. Although a good amount of the literature already documents and establishes its impact and benefits on students across various aspects such as aiding academic learning (Kenworthy, 2010), developing leadership skills (Snell et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2018) and ethical decision-making (Christensen & Woodland, 2018), we have yet to achieve finer-grained understanding behind the process of change.

The literature on service-learning has featured both qualitative and quantitative evidence of its efficacy as an experiential learning pedagogy in management education. Through a meta-analysis, Yorio and Ye (2012) have found that service-learning helps deepen understanding of social issues, personal insight and cognitive development. Several case studies (e.g. Bies, 1996; Marques, 2016) which follow a service-learning course from end to end have also provided further understanding as to the changes a student undergoes in the process of experiential learning. Although studies have looked into student attitudes and perceptions towards service-learning (Flannery & Pragman, 2008; Caspersz & Oлару, 2017), these do not account for which elements of service-learning trigger certain changes in the student. Service-learning has the great power to change a student’s world view and shape future behavior, and thus, it is worth investigating with other management educators the intricacies of this transformative process.

Potential areas of exploration within the session include if and how empathy develops when students confront members of their service-learning communities, how their social identity shifts throughout these interactions and reflections, and how they become empowered to proactively seek justice as future managers. Together with session participants, we contribute towards deeper discourse on service-learning and how our students become

agents of change. Through sharing of personal experiences and group discussion and processing, insights developed have implications for teaching as faculty, particularly those who practice service-learning in their courses, may refine their methods and projects to better suit their students' transformation and also gain compelling support to champion service-learning within their universities. Service-learning scholars can also identify avenues for future research and promote partnerships and collaboration, which Kenworthy (2008) notes the importance of in service-learning scholarship, within the Management & Organizational Behavior Teaching Society (MOBTS) community.

Session Description

Objectives:

- Create dialogue on the transformation process of students undertaking service-learning
- Identify key elements to becoming agents of change through service-learning
- Empower session participants to identify, support and nurture this process of change
- Generate research agenda to develop service-learning scholarship

1. Introduction – We will introduce the objectives of the session and contextualize the motivation for the session. We will also request for participants' consent to audio record the session.
2. Presentation of two service-learning cases – We will present two real service-learning cases wherein the students, both with very different experiences, experience meaningful personal transformation that has shaped future career and life decisions. This will serve as a jump off point to spark discussions on other individual transformations service-learning practitioners have seen in their own courses.

3. Small group sharing – Session participants will break off into smaller groups to include both service-learning practitioners and educators who have not made use of the pedagogy. Groups are to discuss their personal experiences with transformative student experiences in service-learning. We will provide the following guide questions:
 - a. What changes happened to the student throughout the service-learning project?
 - b. What were key elements to supporting such changes? E.g. student's willingness and openness prior to the service-learning project, amount of time spent with the community, regular reflection on learnings with peers etc. Each group will be provided with colored sticky notes to write down keywords for this
 - c. What personal role did you play in such transformation?
(Participants without experience in service-learning will be asked to be active in asking their groupmates further questions in investigating such experiences.)
4. Reconvene and big group processing – Groups will now return for whole group sharing. One participant per team will briefly summarize insights and stories shared among them. Each group will also present the keywords on the sticky notes to place on the board. Once all the sticky notes are on the board, we will ask the participants the following:
 - a. Are there any similarities or themes among key features of students' transformation process?
 - b. How can we categorize them? Participants can move around the sticky notes on the board to highlight identified themes
 - c. How do we as educators fit into this process? How can we support our students further? – We will discuss potential faculty initiatives to aid students
5. Brainstorming for future research agenda – Now that key elements have been identified in the transformative process of service-learning, participants will be asked how we can take anecdotal evidence to the level of sound academic research. New directions in

service-learning scholarship and research questions can be suggested by the participants.

We will wrap up the session with a summary of the insights gained and how we as a community can move forward in service-learning.

Activity	Time Allotted (Total 60 mins)
Introduction to the session	5 mins
Presentation of two service-learning cases	10 mins
Small group sharing	10 mins
Big group sharing and processing, placing sticking notes on the board	15 mins
Personal reflections on nurturing students becoming agents of change	10 mins
Brainstorming for future research agenda and wrap-up	10 mins

This session is submitted for consideration in the conference theme track.

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