Service-Learning: Does it Matter?

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Introduction

Service-learning, a similar construct to experiential learning, is primarily defined by Eyler and Giles (1999) as any program that attempts to connect academic study with service. Service-learning has been linked to a myriad of positive outcomes for those who serve, including increased self-esteem and self-understanding, enhanced academic performance, increased moral reasoning, awareness of social responsibility, and advanced critical thinking abilities (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Stukas, Clay, & Snyder, 1999). Much of this evidence of positive effects, however, is derived from data that is largely qualitative, anecdotal and post-hoc in nature. Stukas and colleagues (1999) have suggested a need for more systematic assessment. The purpose of the current study was to explore the impact of service-learning on a number of personal-developmental outcomes. Consistent with the suggestions of Stukas and colleagues (1999), we incorporated a pre/post assessment strategy (to evaluate change over time more systematically) with a sample of BYU undergraduate students. Moreover, we assessed service learning in an international context, such as the Romanian Orphanship internship in the School of Family Life (see photo of one group below). Given that an international experience (living abroad) may be challenging enough to provoke difficult but often positive change in many students, one may ask whether a service component enhances the personal growth that is in progress. Accordingly, we sought to control for international experience by comparing students who were enrolled in international service learning vs. international study abroad programs (where students engage in little service as part of their academic experience). Our control group were BYU undergraduates who were enrolled in a typical on-campus semester or term.

We hypothesized that those who participated in service-learning experiences, relative to the comparison group, would experience greater growth in self-perceptions or valuing of religious identity (RI), cultural awareness (CA), balanced living (BL), lifelong learning (LL), and critical thinking (CT). We also expected study abroad participants to experience more growth than our control group participants, given the demands and opportunities of an international experience.

Method

Participants were 366 female BYU students (age range of 18-25 years, mean = 20.75 years). Male students were excluded from the sample as females outnumbered males by nearly 10:1 in the final dataset. Accordingly, due to prohibitive cell sizes for men, particularly in the service-learning groups, we elected to exclude males from further analysis. This sample is almost entirely composed of students belonging to the LDS faith (99.7% of the sample). Participants also did not differ in average age at the pre-assessment (across the service-learning, study abroad, and control group). Over several years, we collected pre- and post- experiences data from 98 study abroad participants, 98 international experience participants, and 219 control group participants. Consent rates for study participation surpassed 75% across all groups. Students enrolled in international study programs were offered $10 for their participation in the pre- and post-surveys, given full participation in each. Students in the control group were assembled from various classes across several majors and were given extra credit points for full participation. The surveys required approximately 1 hour to complete (35 minutes for the pre-assessment packet, 25 minutes for the post-assessment packet). The majority of student participants (control or otherwise) were involved in assessment over the course of a 14-week semester, though some students were involved in assessment over the course of a 7-week term. We did not expect duration of experience to have significant impact, given the focus on consistent learning expectations across either a term or a semester. Exploratory analyses taking duration of term with account confirmed this, showing no evidence that student outcomes varied according to duration of the experience.

The instrument employed in this paper is a version of the BYU Alumni Survey (2001 edition), which was an item bank of 83 items designed to assess a number of dimensions. We extensively factor-analyzed this measure and we were able to produce five scales with adequate discriminant validity (see Results section).

Results

A maximum likelihood factor analysis with varimax rotation of the factors was conducted on the alumni survey instrument. The final factor analysis yielded four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1: (a) religious identity (eigenvalue = 3.55), (b) cultural awareness (eigenvalue = 3.55), (c) balanced living (eigenvalue = 1.85), and (d) lifelong learning (eigenvalue = 1.60), and (d) critical thinking (eigenvalue = 1.12). The factor loadings for all of the factors are shown in Table 1. Combust's alpha ranged from .72 to .88. We computed pre- and post- scales by summing the equivalent items at time 1 and time 2. The first step in multivariate analysis was to conduct MANOVA separately for Time 1 and Time 2 in order to ascertain potential group differences in self-perceptions and values. In these analyses, Group (study abroad, service-learning, or control) was the between-subjects factor. The dependent variables in each of these analyses included all of the self-perception or value scales (for Time 1 or Time 2, respectively).

The MANOVA conducted for Time 1 means yielded a significant multivariate effect for Group (Wilks's Lambda = .97, p < .001). Significant univariate differences were evident for religious identity (international service learning lower than control), cultural awareness (international service learning and study abroad higher than control), and critical thinking (study abroad greater than control). The MANOVA conducted for Time 2 means also yielded a significant multivariate effect for Group (Wilks's Lambda = .87, p < .001). At the univariate level, significant group differences were evident for cultural awareness (international service learning and study abroad higher than control), critical thinking (international service learning higher than control), and lifelong learning (international service learning and study abroad higher than control).

The next set of analyses were designed to better understand how groups may differ in their levels of change over time. We employed a 3 (Group: study abroad, service-learning, or control) X 2 (Time Interval: pre and post) mixed model MANOVA. Group represented the between-subjects factor and Time the within-subject factor in this analysis. The dependent variables included all of the self-perception and value scales (Time 1 and Time 2). The analysis yielded significant multivariate effects for Group, Time, and the Group X Time interaction (Wilks's Lambda = .88, .91, & .95, respectively, all p < .05). Univariate findings clarify the meaning of these multivariate main effects.

For the Group effect, univariate findings revealed significant group differences for religious identity, cultural awareness, and critical thinking. The group main effect reflects an overall group effect across Time 1 (pre) and Time 2 (post), in which the time variable is transformed to represent an average of self-perception across the two time points. Results of the post hoc test for religious identity showed that, across time points, service-learning participants reported marginally lower self-perceptions of religious identity. As for cultural awareness, the study abroad and service learning groups were uniformly higher than the control group. Finally, for critical thinking, differences between the groups were negligible. At Time 1, the study abroad and service learning groups were slightly higher than control. For the Time effect, univariate findings revealed significant differences between Pre- and Post-assessments for all study participants (not taking group into account). Significant practitioners identified themselves significantly higher, on average, at Time 2 for every variable.

The Group X Time Interactions are of most relevance to the hypotheses of this study. Univariate effects revealed significant interactions for 3 of the 5 scales: religious identity, cultural awareness, and critical thinking. Post-hoc comparisons showed that, for religious identity, the service-learning group experienced significant change, such that the time 1 difference approached significance. In regard to cultural awareness, the study abroad and service learning groups changed significantly over time, but the study abroad and service learning groups experienced much higher change (X2 compared to control). In regard to critical thinking, post hoc tests showed that only the service learning group experienced significant change in critical thinking over time. Although no significant interaction emerged for balanced living or lifelong learning, post hoc tests nonetheless show that service-learning participants were the only group to report significant growth for either variable (hence, they are the predominant force behind the time effect for these variables). Service learning participants, therefore, experienced significant growth for all variables considered in this study.

Discussion

Consistent with study hypotheses, we found that international experience was the most significant predictor of change over time. In addition, we found that it was the service-learning group that experienced the most change over time in all five domains (i.e., religious identity, cultural awareness, balanced living, lifelong learning, and critical thinking). The only domain in which the study abroad group was similar to the service-learning group was cultural awareness.

The findings of this study suggest the importance of international experience for young people in the development of self-perceptions and values. This may happen because international experience places a young person in challenging situations and scenarios which force them to complete a journey of self-discovery. This journey may lead to more positive perceptions and outcomes in various areas. In particular, these findings are also consistent with the benefits of service-learning, especially when the experience is sustained over just two to four months, service-learning participants may experience significant change in the areas noted above (e.g., religious identity, cultural awareness, balanced living). This gives us further reason to believe that service-learning not only promotes goodness for those who are served but also promotes positive growth and change in participants.

References


