

# SERVICE-LEARNING IN A GLOBAL STUDIES COURSE AT A JAPANESE UNIVERSITY

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**Abstract** - This paper describes the evaluation of service learning that was implemented as one component of a global studies course at a Japanese university. University educators who are teaching content that is far-removed from their students' lives often struggle to engage their students in the classroom. Although programs like study abroad and internships offer rewarding experiences for students outside the classroom, they are not usually well-linked to course content at the students' home institution. Service-learning is a pedagogical approach that combines classroom study with community service projects. The benefits of service-learning on various student outcomes are reviewed and service learning at one institution in Japan is evaluated using established criteria. Suggestions for educators planning to start or develop their own service-learning programs are given.

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**Keywords** - Service-learning, language education, global studies, program evaluation, English as a foreign language.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Young people today are expected to graduate from university with not only knowledge in their chosen field, but also a range of interpersonal skills and depth of real-world experiences that are not possible to acquire in the traditional classroom alone. Although many universities offer study abroad and internship programs, these efforts may fall short in bridging the gap between course curriculum and authentic off-campus experiences. Furthermore, these types of programs often focus on gaining language and technical skills and do not always have a purpose that meets student and community needs. Service-learning is one type of educational program that has had success in not only connecting classrooms to the real world but also engaging students by allowing them to have an important impact on their community. This paper will give an overview of the benefits of service-learning as well as look at a framework for evaluating service-learning programs. Then, it will use this framework to evaluate one service-learning program that was implemented in a global studies course at a Japanese university. Finally, there will be recommendations for evaluating and improving future programs.

### Definition of service-learning

Before looking at the benefits of service-learning, it may be useful to establish a clear definition of the term. Service-learning can be defined as "a teaching and learning strategy that attempts to integrate community service with an academic curriculum" (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011, p. 165). It is important to note that it is both a unique way of teaching and a way of learning. Although this could likely be said of most pedagogical approaches, what makes it significant in this case is that in a well-designed service-learning program students and teachers work together in the design, implementation,

and reflection on the projects that they are involved in, and that they are not limited to their traditional roles of knowledge transmitter and knowledge recipient. Another key feature of this definition lies in the word "integrate." It is the integration of curriculum and service that differentiates service-learning from volunteering or community service on their own. Service-learning experiences lie at the crossroads of classroom study and community service.

Kaye (2004) provides a more detailed definition that sheds light on some of the specific practices involved:

"Service-learning can be defined as a teaching method where guided or classroom learning is deepened through service to others in a process that provides structured time for reflection on the service experiences and demonstration of the skills and knowledge acquired" (p. 7).

This definition highlights one of the main goals of service-learning, which is to deepen learning. This deeper engagement with learning comes about through both the service experience itself and the reflection and demonstration aspects of the project. These different aspects of service-learning are all parts of the process that is followed in some form by most service-learning programs.

### Process of service-learning

A typical service-learning project follows four primary phases: Preparation, Action, Reflection, and Demonstration (Kaye, 2004). In the Preparation phase the teacher and students carry out a needs analysis and then develop an action plan. This would typically be started in the classroom but could involve doing research in the library, online, or in the community. As they better understand the needs of their community, the students and teacher negotiate an action plan, a set of specific steps that they will take

to help their community through some kind of service. Examples of popular service activities include neighborhood cleanups, reading to the elderly, tutoring younger students, or raising money for a charity. In the Action phase, students carry out their service in a timeframe that depends on their local context, goals, and available resources. The next phase is Reflection. This part of the program “integrates learning and experience with personal growth and awareness” (Kaye, 2007, p.11) and is often done before, during, and after the actual service activity. Many service-learning programs make use of a range of modes for reflection, including journaling, response to art, literature, or music on related theme, and classroom or online discussion. The final phase is Demonstration. Students analyze and show evidence of what project their project achieved and progress that they themselves made. This could take the form of a presentation, a display, a performance, letters to the editor, class lessons for peers, and even a celebration with their school or community partners.

### **Rationale for using service-learning**

Research on service-learning has consistently shown a wide range of positive outcomes for participants. One meta-study compiles the results of nearly a decade of research into the following categories: Personal outcomes, social outcomes, learning outcomes, and career development (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001). The personal outcomes include a positive effect on students’ personal development, ability to work with others, leadership and communication skills. Numerous studies also demonstrate benefits to social outcomes, for example facilitating cultural understanding and an increased sense of social responsibility. Furthermore, their analysis of the literature shows a positive impact on learning outcomes, in particular academic learning as well as applying what was learned in the classroom. Finally, several studies in their analysis point to service-learning having a positive effect on career development.

A more recent meta-analysis by Celio, Durlak, and Dymnicki (2011) confirms many of the conclusions of the earlier research on service-learning and does so with stricter research criteria, requiring more standardized methodology and a control group. They focus on four standards from the National Youth Leadership Council’s “K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice (2015)” as a framework for evaluating effective practice. These standards are: connecting service-learning to curriculum, including student voices, working with community partners, and allowing opportunities for reflection. Let us look at each of these in more detail. As mentioned earlier, one key feature of service-learning is the link between community service and classroom learning. This connection needs to be clearly identifiable and compatible program and curriculum goals (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005).

Second, whenever feasible, students should be included in all phases of the planning, implementation, and evaluating of a service-learning program. This could include choosing project themes and negotiating the best plan of action. In fact, studies have shown that involving students correlates with improved outcomes, including self-confidence, school involvement, academic success, and community responsibility (Melchior & Bailis, 2002; Meyer, 2006; Perry & Katula, 2001). The third standard that they included in their meta-analysis was related to the degree to which a service-learning program fosters strong and equal community partnerships. The final standard that they looked at was how a program encourages students to reflect on their experience with the objective of linking service and education (Billig, 2009; Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996).

Celio, Durlak, and Dymnicki (2011) found that programs that met more of these four standards had more positive outcomes in four areas: attitudes toward self, attitudes toward school and learning, civic engagement, social skills, and academic performance, with academic performance showing the largest effect size. The current study will utilize the same four standards as a framework for evaluating service-learning in a global studies course at a Japanese university.

## **II. METHOD**

### **Research questions**

The current study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Was the service-learning project sufficiently linked to the learning goals and course curriculum?
2. Were the students involved in the planning, implementing, and evaluating of their project?
3. Did the project address community needs in a way that was collaborative and mutually beneficial?
4. Did the students engage in meaningful reflection that made use of a variety of modes before, during, and after the service activity?

### **Global-issues themed service-learning projects**

This project took place in the department of foreign studies at a mid-sized, mid-level university in western Japan. The participants were 26 first and second-year intensive English students with intermediate English proficiency (TOEFL-ITP range 470-520). The course was a content-based English course that met for four 90-minute sessions per week over 15 weeks. The overall curriculum goal was for student to acquire the academic skills that they would need for study abroad at a partner institution. The theme of the course was “Global Issues” and covered such topics as population, wealth and poverty, human rights, global

conflict, and climate change. Students read articles and listened to lectures about each topic and engaged in group discussions and writing tasks related to themes that arose. In the final part of the course, they chose one issue to focus on for the service-learning project, which lasted approximately five weeks. Students who showed interest in the same topic worked in groups of two to five students to brainstorm either “non-violent action” or “field research” that was connected to the global issue that they had chosen, and that they could carry out locally over the final third of the semester. They were told that after their project was completed, they would give a presentation to the class about their experience. Students were also expected to keep a journal in English for the duration of the project and communicate regularly in English with group members in class discussions and via an online forum. Action projects included promoting HIV/STD awareness and prevention on campus, making posters to inform students about suicide prevention counseling on campus, planning an ecotour for international students, volunteering at a child welfare

facility, and raising awareness about animal rescue. Two groups chose field research projects, in which they investigated the environmentally-friendly features of the campus and carried out a survey of current issues facing elderly care facilities in the region.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher evaluated the service-learning portion of the course based on the course syllabus, teacher notes, and student journals. This information was matched with the criteria used in Celio, Durlak, and Dymnicki (2011). Features of the program that matched each of the four categories were then coded as follows:

1. The feature met one or more element of the recommended standard (+)
2. The feature did not meet the recommended standard (-)
3. It was unclear whether the feature met the recommended standard (?)

The results of the evaluation are listed in table 1.

Table 1	
Recommended Standards	Evaluation
Link to learning goals and curriculum (research question 1)	Students (+) practiced academic presentation skills (+) practiced academic discussion skills (+) carried out research in English (-) often spoke Japanese during planning phase
Student voices (research question 2)	Students were involved in (+) planning (+) implementation (+) evaluation of the project
Community partnerships (research question 3)	(+) groups interacted with community (?) projects were mutually beneficial (-) community partners were not involved in planning or evaluation of the project
Reflection (research question 4)	students used (+) multiple modes (+) before (+) during (+) after

Additional evidence of the students having a successful service-learning experience were found in their journal reflections. Students often reflected about their changing perception of language as their understanding of the issues they were studying deepened:

#### (Animal Rescue Project)

“We thought that saying ‘Animal Shelter’ is really ironic way to say ‘pound.’ Shelter means a place where something or someone would be protected. However, in reality at animal shelters, we humans are killing animals which are our friends.”

The projects involved using time management and organizational skills effectively. One student reflected on this challenge in her journal:

#### (AIDS/STD Awareness and Prevention)

“I was overwhelmed with how busy I will be until winter break...so, instead of losing it, I have to force myself to stay very organized; otherwise I’ll lose it. So far, we have separated our jobs. Miki and Taka will be looking for an organization, arranging for an appointment and brainstorming on how we can pass out flyers. Sumi and I are researching and gathering information on AIDS and ordering the condoms.”

Furthermore, students were able to engage in critical thinking outside of the classroom:

**(Suicide and Campus Counseling)**

“I’ve still got a lot of things to talk about with [the counseling staff]. I love arguing about stuff with grown-ups. They have values/views/opinions that are completely different from mine, so I can learn a lot from them. Sometimes they change my opinion or attitude, but most of the time they don’t.”

These opportunities for critical thinking in real world contexts allowed them to practice empathy that could only be imagined in a traditional lesson:

**(Suicide and Campus Counseling)**

“During the winter break we got together and made posters. It took a long time because we had to think about what kind of picture would be appropriate. We also had to put ourselves into the shoes of those who are depressed. We were like ‘Let’s imagine we’re considering suicide. We don’t have friends to talk to. Then, what kind of poster would lead us to the student counseling room or peer room?’”

Several students reflected on their own personal growth and achievement through their service-learning project as in the following example:

**(AIDS/STD Awareness and Prevention)**

“I’m glad we were able to end the semester with a group project. The scale was pretty big, so I liked the challenge and work we had to do. It differed from the normal academic, so it was refreshing....I enjoyed working on this project and the sense of accomplishment I felt. Thank you for giving me this opportunity!”

And another:

**(Child Welfare)**

“Through this project and presentation, I could widen my outlook on life. I think it was my first time to make an action on my own (for example make an appointment for volunteer activity). It took a long time to make it, but I like it. I think I will visit the institution again as a personal volunteer activity someday.”

This student also mentioned learning from both her own project and other groups demonstrations of their projects:

**(Suicide and Campus Counseling)**

“When I look back, I strongly feel this project was totally worth it. Not only did I learn from our project, but also I learned a lot from others’ presentations... This project is definitely one of the highlights of my freshman year. I think I feel more confident with myself than I was before.”

There was a wealth of reflection in the students’ journals, and these excerpts were just some of the highlights.

The service-learning that was evaluated in this study met all four of the recommended standards to some degree. The projects were clearly structured to give students opportunities to connect their classroom learning and curriculum goals to the community service and field research in which they were engaged. Students investigated course-related topics more deeply and practiced academic skills that they would need when studying abroad. Furthermore, their teacher involved the students in all stages of the process creating a personal investment that was clearly reflected in the students’ journal entries. In addition, projects were chosen that would benefit the community, not simply acting as proving grounds for the students’ study. Finally, reflection was an integral part of this course and students communicated important ideas, thoughts, and feelings.

However, there are certain areas in which this service-learning activity could be improved. One of the major goals of the course was to practice English-language skills and the program generally follows a language immersion protocol. Steps should be taken to encourage the students to use their target language in all parts of the project, in particular during the planning phase. Another area that could be improved is in the community partnerships. It was unclear whether these projects met needs that the community wanted, and the partners’ opinions were not solicited before or after. Clearly, this aspect of the project could be improved.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Service-learning can be an effective way to improve students’ academic achievement, engagement in their learning, and participation in their community. It can lead to personal growth and increased civic awareness. In order to create and develop a successful service-learning program, educators should follow established standards that have been developed based on research of successful and unsuccessful endeavors. The program evaluated by the current study met these standards successfully.

The following are questions for language educators who are hoping to start their own service-learning programs:

1. What aspects of your curriculum could be best linked to a service-learning project?
2. What are the parameters and available resources for your students’ projects? In which aspects of the program the students participate?
3. How will you and the students establish and develop community partnerships?
4. What are the best ways for your students to reflect on their experiences?

Service-learning can be an effective pedagogical approach and a rewarding experience for teachers, students, and their community. However, it is important to carefully consider those involved and the choose the course of implementation based on proven standards.

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