

It Renewed My Faith in Humanity: Alumni's Perception of Global Servicing-Learning

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Introduction/Need for the Study

Multicultural programs like global service-learning promote diversity in learning through many students' field experiences, critically reflecting on those experiences (Cipolle, 2010). O'Grady (2000) adds that such programs provide for the participation of a diversity of students which prepares them to work in multicultural settings. Studies (e.g., Ikendi et al., 2022a; Jay, 2008) have encouraged such professionals to be role models in handling diversity-related issues in learning environments through activities like dialogue and reflections. Collaborative learning among diverse learners constitutes efforts where needs are met productively through dialogical sharing of thoughts which reduces bias among learners. However, the ability of service-learning to reduce bias in learning rests on how it effectively implements the intergroup contact theory in its program planning (Conner & Erickson, 2017). This study sought to determine global service-learning alumni's perception of their intercultural development as measured by self-perceived awareness of structural inequality (ASI). We defined ASI construct as a system of privilege created by institutions within an economy where students get immersed during service-learning.

Theoretical Framework

The intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) grounded this study which provides three factors that suggest the development of intergroup relations including the individual status of members, the nature of interactions, and the support of authorities. Allport puts it that, unless all members of the groups are of equal status, the likelihood of stereotyping of group members in the minority groups will persevere which reinforces negative perceptions among members. Equal status can be achieved by allowing members to equally participate in all activities and equal resource allocation to facilitate the activities of all members for a common goal. The nature of interaction focuses on the intrinsic and extrinsic value of the frequency and authenticity of intergroup interactions. Competition breeds intergroup conflicts which leads to devaluing and outright hostility among members. Allport advocated for greater and more genuine conversations among group members who are different from themselves. Support of authorities focuses on rules, regulations, and the local working environment which all influence the success of intergroup interactions. In service-learning, the type of institution, thoroughness of critical reflections, and the support of supervisors influence one's perceptions of peers (Ikendi et al., 2022a). The biases held by individuals over peers "may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals, [that is] sanctioned by institutional support" (Allport, 1954, p. 281). These three factors reinforce each other for successful interactions.

Methodology

This study was part of a larger census that involved 291; 166 (Makerere University [MAK]) and 125 (Iowa State University [ISU]) alumni who completed a summer program named Creating a school garden: Service-learning in Uganda between 2006-2019. IRB at ISU approved our study #21-263-01. We used Qualtrics to reach the alumni using emails provided by the Program Director. The main survey instrument had 23 questions designed based on the guideline of Dillman et al. (2014) Tailored Design Method. We focused on two questions for this paper i) alumni's university and ii) the ASI question which comprised a six-point Likert scale with 19 Likert items. These items sought the degree of dis/agreement among alumni who reported that their knowledge, awareness, and attitudes about intercultural issues changed due to participation in service-learning. The scale was composed of "1=Strongly Disagree" through "6=Strongly Agree." The main instrument was reviewed by a panel of 7 professors and 5 graduate students

based on the authors' panel of expert guidelines to assess content, construct, and face validity. We modified all items as needed and retained them. We sent an advance notice to 291 alumni, but 17 emails were returned, and we settled with 274 to whom we sent an invitation letter with a survey link and three reminders. MAK alumni in Uganda received a \$10 internet fee sent to their mobile money accounts. Consent was in the first question where participants who chose to participate, clicked "Yes". Data collection closed in 30 days on March 10th, 2022, with an overall response of 258 (94.2%). The Cronbach's alpha was .922 – strong consistency.

Findings

Descriptively, the Mean ($M=4.88$; $SD=.696$) for 19 Likert items was established with 231 (91.7%) complete responses for all alumni. We determined if there existed any differences between MAK and ISU alumni who reported that their knowledge, awareness, and attitudes about intercultural issues changed as measured by ASI. An independent sample t -test was performed, the Levene's Test for Equality of variances showed no violation, $p=0.188$. The combined complete responses were (MAK=129, ISU=102) and results indicated that ISU alumni had higher changes in their ASI ($M=4.93$, $SD=.762$) than MAK alumni ($M=4.84$, $SD=.639$) $t(229)=-.945$, $p=.188$, but these differences were not significant. Overall, the means for ISU alumni were high for most of the ASI Likert items, and eight of the 19 items were within the scale of 5.0–6.0. The scale of 5.0 in this study represents an "agree" with the statement on the ASI construct. Statistically, only four ASI items revealed differences among the MAK and ISU alumni, of which one of the four showed that ISU alumni had higher mean differences than MAK alumni. For instance, ISU alumni reported that they developed more complex ways of analyzing problems faced by students in under-resourced communities ($M=5.17$, $SD=.879$) than MAK alumni ($M=4.69$, $SD=1.215$) $t(248)=-3.483$, $p=.001$, $d=.45$. On one hand, MAK alumni reported that they developed a commitment to helping people in communities through charity ($M=5.19$, $SD=.992$) than ISU alumni ($M=4.43$, $SD=1.209$) $t(247)=5.466$, $p=.005$, $d=.66$.

Conclusions

Alumni developed higher changes in their knowledge, awareness, and attitudes toward intercultural issues as measured by the self-perceived ASI. They developed an understanding that social inequality in opportunities in the educational sector limits development. Alumni's development of more complex ways of analyzing problems faced by communities and students in under-resourced communities drove them into different ventures over time to contribute to solutions. For instance, through inventions like a pedal-operated grain cleaner which has been adopted by the program in schools and communities (Ikendi et al., 2023). Alumni have gone further to initiate fundraising campaigns and also contributed to the program campaigns that are revitalizing community livelihoods (Ikendi et al., 2022b; Ikendi & Retallick, 2023a; 2023b). These sentiments echo the findings of Paige et al. (2009) that participating students in study abroad programs have a likelihood of participating in charitable work.

Implications

Alumni developed the skills, knowledge, and awareness of how to challenge social injustices through critical analysis and civic actions. Multicultural service-learning is such an important pedagogical approach where learners learn and promote social justice through advocacy, commitment to solving community social problems, and philanthropy. Students require proper pre-departure orientations (Ikendi et al., 2022c; Ikendi, 2023) to tame the perceptions of bias and also help to break the tendency of holding white saviorism in their charities which promotes reciprocal learning between learners and the communities and good intergroup relations.

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