

An Inquiry Into Preflections on Students' Participation in Global Service-Learning

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Author Note: This interpretivist inquiry was conducted when I was a Ph.D. Student at Iowa State University in the Department of Agricultural Education and Studies.

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Introduction/Need for the Study

Preflections describe the learning phase of educational activities before learners engage in those activities (Jones & Bjelland, 2004; Ikendi et al., 2022). In multicultural global learning programs, an examination of preflections detects preconceptions that affect learners' time abroad. The past decade saw an increase in students' participation in global service-learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011; Ikendi, 2022). Institutions embracing these programs increasingly begun to understand the importance of preparing students to have effective learning as they reciprocally provide services to communities. Students who go through preflections are believed to have preconceived ideas and perceptions about their programs and the processes; gaining this knowledge guarantees a qualitative investigation. The overarching question of this inquiry was what perceptions students have regarding preflections in preparing them for global service-learning programs.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

Preflections provide a connection between the experience and learning from the activity itself in the actual implementation. A reflective stage provides a starting point for Kolb's experiential cycle (Kolb, 2015), beginning not with the experience itself, but with a conscious assessment of pre-existing thoughts that may impact the learning process. Kolb (2015) attests that learning is a process than an outcome because it develops out of learning and re-learning. According to Kolb (2015), experiential learning highlights the fundamental role that experience plays in the learning process, "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 49). In this aspect, we embrace involvement in specific experiences, reflecting on them, intellectualizing those experiences, and actively participating in experimenting with those experiences. Learners learn and re-learn from their experience in the hands-on activities resulting in mastery of concepts through assimilation and accommodation processes. The historical records that are gained from the learning activities represent the learning outcomes.

Methodology/Procedures

We based on a constructivist orientation that focuses exclusively on the meaning-making activity of the individual mind (Crotty, 1998) to conduct this inquiry. We employed a case study as a research methodology where each participant was treated as a case/unit of analysis which, in turn, allowed us to collect and analyze data on an individual case basis. Further, we utilized across case approach to data analysis considering our participants as members of a community (Creswell & Poth 2018). The potential participants were seven students who were undergoing orientations for a Spring Break Service-learning trip to Uganda in March 2020, which was canceled due to COVID-19 but three had participated in one-on-one in-depth interviews. All three participants were female (pseudo names used), two were seniors in Agronomy and Animal Sciences; both grew up in town. The third was a sophomore in Agriculture Communications and grew up in rural farming. I first created a rapport with the students by attending the trip orientations upon request for this study and invitation by their instructors. I engaged in in-depth personal interviews with observations and field notes taking both during the orientation and interviews. The interview guide had four questions focusing on a particular category e.g. farming systems and sub-questions for probing. Interviews took place in a secured office space where each participant was welcomed, consent was sought related to the study purpose and signed, and voice recording consented to. Each interview took 30 minutes including effective recording time and pre-and post-rapport building and discussions. During analysis, I first played the audio for each case and transcription was done word by word while actively listening to the audio, keeping

note of the relay time that potentially signified a change of theme or a need for clarification. I engaged in a dialogue with the data seeking to recognize and classify commonalities across the cases and perspectives that appeared distinct. I wrote analytic memos to reflect on emerging unique ideas and triangulated them with the observation notes that formed the themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saldana, 2016). I shared drafts among peers for reviews to help in conclusions.

Findings

Thematic analysis and extraction of verbatims were adopted on a case-by-case basis for each of the four guiding questions here termed as the categories. Themes emerged inductively for each category as coding progressed. In the motivation category, eight themes emerged including academics, skills, knowledge, community service, cultural diversity, career, inspiration, and adventure as their motivators to participation in the program. Students, for instance, were driven by the motive to provide community service, “... *what stuck out to me about the trip to [country] was the service part. ..., and I just like doing the service stuff...*” Zari. Regarding the orientation category, six themes emerged including satisfaction, structure, awareness, team-based learning, current affairs, and health. Students expressed satisfaction with the prelections as this created awareness, “... *it’s a good experience, I am glad we learned about all we are going to be doing and what to expect...*” Rona. In the agricultural systems category, seven themes emerged including the scale of production, technology, gender, crop improvement, livestock, food security, and infrastructure. Through prelections, Agronomy majors, for instance, had ideas related to exploring a remedy for food insecurity through crop improvement. “... *I want to know their perceptions of GMOs as if there would be GMO seeds available to them if they would be receptive to it or resist...*” Rona. Related to the challenges and barriers category, for internal barriers, eight themes including cultural shock, homesickness, vaccination, personal security, commitment, personal shyness, environment, and parent restriction emerged. Students expressed homesickness, “... *I am also a little fearful of traveling so far away... I will be away from home on spring break... I sometimes find myself feeling selfish about going away...*” Nia. Four themes emerged from external barriers including financial, diseases, healthcare, and travel bans. “...*the external barrier that almost made me reconsider the trip is the expense. I can pay for myself to go, but I sometimes found myself trying to decide if I should ...*” Zari.

Conclusions

Despite being their first trip to Uganda and Africa, students’ readiness to participate in this service-learning trip was clearly expressed. Findings revealed that students had preconceived ideas about the program which motivated their participation. They also expressed a high level of satisfaction with prelections. Students had preconceived ideas about the agricultural systems in Uganda as well as internal and external barriers that were likely to impend their participation. Some of the ideas were informed by their experiences during prelections, however, some of these preconceived ideas changed while engaging with instructors and guests during prelections.

Implications

Quality education prepares students for lifelong learning. Students must participate in global programs to experience a new array of environments in preparation to work in a globalized world. Learning about students’ motivation and existing knowledge are vital indicators for the success of prelections and experiential learning programs. Preconceived ideas cause fictional barriers which impend participation in global programs and the perceptions of threats are graver to learning (Zull, 2002). Conducting prelections with experienced instructors in global programs and guest speakers like alumni address such perceptions to allow learning to proceed smoothly.

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