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Students' Emotional Experiences in Direct Versus Indirect Academic Service-Learning Courses

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Research in psychology has emphasized the important role emotions play in learning (Pekrun, 1992). The purpose of the study highlighted in this article was to compare the emotional experiences of college students enrolled in direct academic service-learning (AS-L) courses with those of students enrolled in indirect AS-L courses. Eighteen college students participated in individual interviews, discussing positive and negative emotions resulting from their AS-L experiences. Students who engaged in direct AS-L reported significant emotional responses to interactions with people at their AS-L site. Students who engaged in indirect AS-L courses emphasized their emotional responses to working with peers and community partners. Participants in direct service-learning classes made very few references to the emotional aspects of discussions, assignments, or other activities that occurred in class, while college students in indirect service-learning classes more frequently reported emotional responses to the coursework.

Keywords: *service-learning, college students, emotions*

Higher education faculty have turned to academic service-learning (AS-L) pedagogy for the educational and personal benefits it provides to students. Research has shown that students in AS-L courses advance their cognitive and written language skills, critically examine their attitudes toward diverse populations, and advance their understanding of larger societal issues (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997). Yet while research in psychology has established the importance of emotions in learning and academic achievement (Goetz, Frenzel, Pekrun, Hall, & Lüdtke, 2007; Pekrun, 1992; Pekrun, Goetz, Frenzel, Barchfeld, & Perry, 2011), AS-L scholarship has yet to investigate the role of emotions in AS-L courses.

Felten, Gilchrist, and Darby (2006) highlighted the importance of connecting cognition and emotions in the reflective practices employed in AS-L pedagogy. They noted:

By ignoring emotions that exist and shape learning, we threaten to shirk our responsibility as educators and to limit the potential for real academic learning. Indeed, neglecting emotions in our classrooms and service learning experiences may leave students to do their most difficult work alone. (p. 43)

Recognizing the importance of emotions in AS-L, Noyes, Darby, and Leupold (under review) extended the work of Felten, Gilchrist, and Darby (2006) by examining the influence of emotions on academic achievement in AS-L. Using Pekrun's (2006) questionnaire based on the control-value theory of emotions, they surveyed 205 college students enrolled in an AS-L course. As in Pekrun's work, Noyes et al. found that participants in their study experienced enjoyment in learning-related settings. However, their data contradicted Pekrun's finding that hope is the emotion that occurs least often in learning. Noyes et al.'s study also supported Pekrun's finding that students experience anxiety most frequently and relief least often in testing situations. Additionally, Noyes et al. found that students experienced enjoyment most often and shame least often while at their service-learning site.

To further explore students' emotional experiences in AS-L classes, Noyes, Darby, and Leupold (under review) interviewed 12 college students enrolled in an AS-L course involving mostly direct service. They found that "a majority of the emotional experiences occurred on site (73.01%), with fewer related to the general experience (10.38%), class experiences (9.69%), and working on assignments (6.92%)" (p. 16). As theorized by Felten, Gilchrist, and Darby (2006), students enrolled in AS-L courses experience a range of emotions, especially at their AS-L site.

Purpose of the Study

Research in psychology has emphasized the important role emotions play in learning and academic achievement (Goetz et al., 2007; Pekrun, 1992; Pekrun et al., 2011). Pekrun (1992) found that positive emotions increased academic achievement, while negative emotions hindered it. However, the knowledge gained from scholars in the field of psychology needs further application to the study and teaching of AS-L. With only two previous studies in this area, it is critical for researchers to examine further the emotions students experience in AS-L courses and how they cope with these emotions.

The purpose of this study was to advance the understanding of students' emotions in AS-L courses. The researchers analyzed differences in emotional responses and the situations eliciting these responses among students enrolled in direct versus indirect AS-L courses. Service-learning is considered "direct" when students interact face-to-face with individuals in the community (Kaye, 2004). In "indirect" service-learning, students do not come into contact with community members; rather, they apply the information learned in an academic course to create a service or product in order to solve a problem or meet a community need (Connor-Linton, 1995). The researchers hypothesized that there would be differences in the emotion categories reported by students engaged in direct versus indirect AS-L, although some overlap was expected.

The research questions guiding the study were:

1. What situations elicit emotions from students in direct and indirect AS-L courses?
2. Which emotions do students experience in direct and indirect AS-L courses?
3. How are the emotional experiences of students in direct service versus project-based (indirect) AS-L courses similar, and how are they different?

Participants and Methods

The participants were 18 college students attending a small, private liberal arts university in the southeastern United States. The 14 female and four male participants were all enrolled in academic service-learning courses at the time they participated in the research. Nine participants participated in direct service-learning, and the other nine were engaged in indirect projects. The AS-L courses involving direct service were in the fields of psychology and engineering; the indirect AS-L courses were in communication, business, and engineering.

With the professors' permission, the researchers visited the AS-L classrooms briefly to inform students about the research and invite them to volunteer by filling out individual contact information

forms. The researchers subsequently contacted each interested student to schedule a date and time for the interview. As an incentive for participation, four participants' names were randomly drawn as winners of \$20 Target gift cards.

Each college student participated in a one-on-one interview with a researcher. The individual interviews were semi-structured based on the researcher's main instruction to each participant: "In as much detail as possible, describe a particularly emotional experience you had during your AS-L course." The mean length of the interviews was approximately 30 minutes. All of the interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim, and each participant was assigned a pseudonym in the transcription.

The 18 transcripts were then analyzed using Atlas.ti. Inductive data analysis (Boeije, 2010) was used to identify codes and categories across the direct and indirect AS-L transcripts. The researchers coded each transcript for emotion words and for situations that elicited an emotional response. Codes were then sorted to allow the researchers to recognize patterns and identify which codes had the highest number of participant responses. The patterns and frequency of response led to the development of categories. After identifying categories, the researchers discussed which categories connected to each other, resulting in the emergence of themes for direct and indirect academic service-learning courses.

Results

Five categories of emotional situations emerged from the indirect AS-L transcripts and three from the direct AS-L transcripts. For indirect AS-L courses, researchers identified the following categories: (a) positive and negative aspects of course structure, (b) project contributions to community partners, (c) challenges in working with others, (d) gaining a better understanding of community organizations, and (e) the ups and downs of facilitating focus groups. The categories for direct AS-L courses were (a) negotiating relationships with supervisors, (b) interacting with children, and (c) determining one's role in the service-learning placement. A description of each category and quotations that provide insight into the categories are presented in the next section.

Indirect AS-L Categories

Positive and negative aspects of course structure. The category of positive and negative aspects of course structure represents situations in which students experienced emotions in response to the academic coursework in their AS-L classes. Six of the nine indirect AS-L participants discussed an emotional situation resulting from the course structure. The emotions experienced were diverse: enjoyment, excitement, and stress or worry. Sally, for example, shared her feelings of frustration with her AS-L course:

Then other aspects of the class were kind of frustrating. So, for instance, we just didn't like meet very much in class, which was fine because it was a project that we were really gonna do on our own and there wasn't a need for a class. However, when we did meet in class it was kind of tedious and pointless.

In contrast to Sally's frustration, Tory reported feelings of enjoyment related to her coursework. "I mean, I've been, I've really enjoyed it. I didn't think I would like research that much but it's been enjoyable."

Project contributions to community partners. The category of project contributions to community partners describes the participants' feelings about generating ideas in their AS-L classes that help organizations and/or individuals in the community to solve the problems they face. Five of the nine indirect AS-L participants contributed to this category, expressing feelings of surprise, accomplishment, satisfaction, excitement, stress, and fun at having contributed something meaningful.

Sally recalled the pride and excitement she and her group members experienced after receiving positive feedback from a community partner supervisor:

It became a lot more exciting to get to work for it and, um, we gave our presentation on Tuesday to one of the, um, supervisors for agricultural classes, or I guess just career technical education classes in general. And she was actually really excited so we got some great feedback from her. So we all felt really proud and excited that we had done something that was meaningful and impactful and, um, actually going to go places and be utilized, which was something that we had worried about a lot at the beginning.

Sally's initial concern that her group's work would not make a contribution was transformed into pleasure when she learned that their proposal would be implemented and would make a difference.

Francine also reported that knowing that her work would be utilized made it easier for her to focus on the task at hand:

It was kind of nice to have like a real-life, hands-on learning experience. I usually, my past classes, not at [the university], but like in high school, you'd come up with campaigns, but they wouldn't really be for anything, they would just be for a grade. And this is like, yeah, it's for a grade, but it's also something that [the community partner] can use, so that's what was the best part I think.

Working with community partners who would implement and benefit from the students' ideas made the work more pleasurable for these class participants.

Challenges in working with others. The category of challenges in working with others encapsulates the emotional situations students experienced as a result of the interactions required to complete their AS-L projects. Four of the nine participants in indirect AS-L discussed emotions related to working with group members or with a community partner supervisor. These emotions included anxiety, helplessness, stress, and trust.

Mikey described the stress he experienced as a result of the difficulty of coordinating with a very busy community partner supervisor:

When we were working with [the supervisor] it was very difficult 'cause she was always busy with the kids. So when we'd email her, it'd literally take like three weeks to email us back, so it took us a while to actually complete it. Like we got the final go yesterday and like the semester's over, so we have to like print all those brochures out. So that was kind of stressful.

Mikey and his group were hindered in completing their AS-L project because of the delayed responses from the community partner supervisor, creating anxiety as the semester drew to a close.

The annoyance Harold experienced in implementing the focus group for his class led to an emotional experience for him as well:

I was very annoyed with the focus group when I was doing it. I think with the group of people I was working with as well, it was a lot of me doing a lot of the work, getting, it was just pulling my friends in there. I felt like I kind of had to use my friends just to do a focus group, just so I could complete an assignment, which made me feel bad because I had to get my friends to talk about something they didn't really want to talk about. It's just, it was just very, it was just an awkward frustration.

Harold resented being left on his own to recruit participants and lead the focus group, and felt uncomfortable about asking his friends to sit through the focus group.

Gaining a better understanding of community organizations. Four of the nine indirect AS-L participants reported gaining a better understanding of community organizations through their AS-L experience. This category captures participants' emotional responses to learning about the programs and services their community service organization provides, as well as learning about the hardships these programs experience, such as lacking a sufficient number of volunteers. Participants also gained a clearer understanding of how community members, such as families of children with disabilities and families seeking an afterschool program for their children, might benefit from the programs. The emotions reported in this category included inspiration, sadness, shock, and disappointment.

Kim discussed an eye-opening experience she had visiting an AS-L site that served children with disabilities, where she was working on a volunteer recruitment campaign:

Oh man, I guess eye-opening, to be honest, because I've never really seen something like that. Like you see it around but you don't see, like, how hard it is to be a parent of these children, even how hard it is for those children, because they don't get the opportunity to do half the things that like kids without those disabilities have. So it's just nice to see that they had somewhere to go.

Similarly, as part of a group developing an informational brochure to publicize an after-school program, Mikey observed the stresses experienced by the volunteers and children:

It's important for the kids also, so it's just having that responsibility, making sure they're safe and having a good time and that they are distracted from their home life. 'Cause [the supervisor] also talked about, like, some kids might be domestically abused, some kids might have these issues at home. We bring them here so, not so they can get away from them but so they can enjoy themselves and have a good time. So just, it's a good kind of stressful in a way, 'cause you are helping other kids deal with their stress.

Mikey recognized the volunteers' responsibility to help children from difficult home situations mitigate and deal with their stress.

The ups and downs of facilitating focus groups. The final category that emerged after analyzing transcripts from the indirect AS-L group referenced the ups and downs of facilitating focus groups. For their course projects, these participants had to organize and lead focus groups to determine exactly how much and what kinds of information other college students and citizens possessed about the community partners. The participants then presented this information to their community partners to help them identify effective ways to meet pressing organizational needs, such as recruiting more volunteers.

Three of the nine participants reported emotional responses to facilitating their focus group, including annoyance, enthusiasm, shock, stress, and enjoyment. Randy described his positive response to hearing the focus group's comments about his community partner:

I was enthusiastic, in a way; I was interested in what would be said. I didn't know how the students would view volunteering, or, and I was shocked that some of them had a high opinion of it and were really interested in volunteering and encouraging others to do the same. So I was surprised also with that, but like I said, enthusiastic and didn't really know what to expect or how they would view it.

In contrast to Randy, Tory described the process of organizing the focus group as stressful:

Sometimes stressed, just because it's like, you don't really know how, like how many people are going to show up to the focus group or how willing they are to participate, um, and also just getting people to participate is so hard.

The difficulty of recruiting participants for her focus group prompted a negative emotional reaction from Tory.

Direct AS-L Categories

Negotiating relationships with supervisors. Each of the nine direct service participants identified his or her relationship with the community partner supervisor as a source of emotion. Because all of the direct service AS-L projects took place in an elementary school environment, these supervisors were either classroom teachers or guidance counselors. The emotions reported in this category included joy, fulfillment, gratitude, discomfort, frustration, worry, and fear.

Laila expressed concern about the way her supervisor interacted with the children and voiced frustration and fear in response to this individual's professional demeanor:

I mean, frustrated a lot of times. I tried to like have an open mind and recognize that I've never taught first grade in a school like that and it's gotta be super hard. Um, my emotions? A little bit intimidated because I always felt that she was gonna, like, get on to me the way that she got onto the kids, even though she never did. Um, so I guess intimidated, frustrated, lack of understanding, if that's an emotion.

Unlike Laila, Helen reported pleasurable emotions resulting from a positive relationship with her classroom teacher:

I think she really liked me too, we would like talk and she would always be like, "It's such a rough morning, it's so early, I haven't had my Coke." And I was like, no, I definitely feel you, this is so early for me. And she was a psych major as well and we had a lot in common and I liked that she spoke to me, I know that other students didn't really have a relationship with their teacher but I definitely had one with mine.

Helen enjoyed talking to the classroom teacher and felt grateful that the teacher seemed to appreciate her assistance in the classroom.

Interacting with children. Seven of the nine participants reported emotional responses to interacting with children, who represented the community members they served in their AS-L courses. Their emotions included joy, pleasure, pride, happiness, frustration, and fulfillment.

Joshua discussed his frustration when the children refused to pay attention during an assigned activity. He explained:

Well, there was one day where there was this book that [a student] found on the shelf that was nearby, and it did not exactly have the most appropriate content in it; it was definitely not for elementary school kids. And he, we couldn't get him to focus that day; he was too wound up in the book . . . It's, well he was kind of reading it out loud to everyone in the room and it was getting very out of control for us, because we were trying to maintain some order and he was distracting the other kids and we couldn't get him to focus. . . . It's frustrating, it really is, really grinds my gears here trying to get these kids to focus and they just, they're not into it because they're too into this book that probably should not be on the shelves.

Conversely, Becky reported feeling pride as a result of her ability to connect with the children:

I feel proud of myself when I can come up with a different way to teach them or creative way to explain something, or when I just feel like I'm getting across to them in a way I hadn't thought of before.

Becky's success in helping the children in her classroom understand the material yielded a sense of accomplishment and pride.

Figuring out one's role in the service-learning placement. The final category that emerged from the direct AS-L transcripts was figuring out one's role in the service-learning placement. This category captures participants' emotional responses to the process of understanding their responsibilities at their AS-L site. Three of the nine direct AS-L participants contributed to this category, reporting emotions of confusion, fun, frustration, awkwardness, and uselessness.

Wendy, who was supervised by the school counselor, discussed her emotions when she felt she had nothing to do at her site:

I just kind of felt awkward because I knew going into it that I would not necessarily be allowed to be in, you know, any meeting that she was in if she had to meet with a student confidentially. Like, I knew that going into it, um, but during those times she would just kind of place me wherever, you know, with whoever was in the office because I couldn't really wander around by myself.

In contrast, Kay discussed feeling appreciation that her teacher supervisor ensured that Kay knew what was happening in the classroom:

She always made sure I had something to do, that I wasn't just sitting there, um, and if I was confused about something she would clearly come over and tell me this is what we usually do now and this is the classroom routine, things like that, um, so she never kept me bored or out of the loop or anything like that.

By explaining classroom routines and making certain that Kay felt comfortable in her classroom role, Kay's community partner supervisor helped her to feel a sense of belonging at her site.

Comparison of Indirect and Direct AS-L Courses

The researchers in this study found that participants in both indirect and direct AS-L courses had emotional experiences primarily when working with other people. Participants from both types of AS-L courses reported emotional responses in their relationships with the community partner supervisors to whom they were assigned. While indirect AS-L participants identified working with community partners and peers in their groups as a source of emotions, direct AS-L participants experienced emotions in response to working with community partners and children at their AS-L sites. The positive and negative aspects of course structure, which was a category applicable to indirect AS-L, did not emerge as a category for direct AS-L participants. Direct AS-L participants mainly discussed on-site experiences—rather than experiences in their university classrooms—as the source of emotions.

Discussion

The findings of this research suggest that, overall, college students experience a variety of emotions in their academic service-learning classes. College students involved in both direct and indirect service-learning reported emotional responses associated with working with others. For students engaged in direct service, these emotions resulted primarily from interactions with site supervisors and the children at their

site. For students involved in indirect service, emotions generally resulted from the challenges associated with working with their peers and community partners.

As in Noyes et al.'s (under review) study, the direct service participants in this study identified their experience at their AS-L site as the source of their most frequent and intense emotional experiences. However, the results of the indirect AS-L interviews differ from Noyes et al.'s finding that fewer emotions were related to students' general experiences, class experiences, and work on assignments. The students involved in indirect service had emotional experiences that differed from those of the students engaged in direct service, with emotions provoked by interactions with peers and responses to course work.

Adding to previous research on AS-L, the researchers illuminated the ways that differing designs (indirect vs. direct) for AS-L courses can produce different emotional experiences (Felten, Gilchrist, & Darby, 2006; Noyes, Darby & Leupold, under review). Faculty need to keep such differences in mind when designing personal and instructional support for their AS-L students. Direct AS-L courses need to incorporate reflective activities and forms of support that address interactions with supervisors and community members. Faculty teaching indirect service-learning courses would be wise to assist their college students in their interactions with one another.

While highlighting a number of important findings related to college student emotions in AS-L, this study has some limitations as well. Including more male participants would have allowed this research to examine similarities and differences of perspective between male and female students. Additionally, the participants in this study all attended the same university and interacted within similar community settings; thus, the findings are not generalizable to other higher education institutions or other types of AS-L sites. Moreover, the majority of the interviews were conducted at the end of the participants' academic semester, causing the participants to reflect back on earlier situations that elicited emotional responses, rather than discussing them soon after they happened.

Future research on student emotions in AS-L should study a larger sample of students drawn from a variety of colleges and universities and AS-L sites. Gender differences in emotions should also be noted. Looking at student emotions in real time is another area of interest. It would also be beneficial for future researchers to study the ways AS-L faculty members are already supporting their students in understanding and managing their emotions, and how these strategies differ for indirect versus direct AS-L courses.

Conclusion

Emotions comprise an important component of learning (Pekrun, 1992), and academic service-learning is a pedagogy that inevitably evokes emotions in students. Specifically, this study found that students in direct AS-L courses experience a variety of emotions related to their service-learning site, while students in indirect AS-L courses respond emotionally to their interactions with peers and community partners, as well as to the coursework itself. Faculty can enhance the educational experience in AS-L courses by teaching students not only how to work with community members in unfamiliar environments, but also how to collaborate with each other on projects. By preparing students for the variety of emotions they may experience in an AS-L course and providing them with plenty of opportunities to reflect on and share their emotions in a supportive environment, faculty members utilizing AS-L pedagogy can support students and advance student learning.

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