



2016

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This article was originally published at:

<https://journals.sfu.ca/iarslce/index.php/journal/article/view/198/162>

Recommended Citation

Goertzen, B. J., & Greenleaf, J. (2016). A student-led approach to eservice-learning: A case study on service project effectiveness within a fieldwork in leadership studies course. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, 4(1), 119-135.

A Student-Led Approach to eService-Learning: A Case Study on Service Project Effectiveness within a Fieldwork in Leadership Studies Course

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The purpose of the study described in this article was to explore factors contributing to effective student-led eservice-learning (SLESL) projects and to provide insights for educators to enhance the delivery of SLESL courses. Utilizing a case study methodology, the researchers interviewed 12 participants who successfully completed SLESL projects. Analysis of the transcribed interviews revealed categories of factors that facilitated project effectiveness, including reasons for engaging, project strategies, project assets and asset mobilization, course interaction, and project outcomes. In addition to highlighting the study results, this article discusses the transferability of the findings and explores their implications for practice.

Keywords: service-learning, eservice-learning, effectiveness

The impact of service-learning on student learning outcomes has been well documented. Several meta-analyses of service-learning have reported positive student growth related to learning outcomes, personal insights, and cognitive development (Yorio & Ye, 2012), as well as increased multicultural awareness and enhanced social responsibility (Warren, 2012). Unfortunately, many of the studies examining the effectiveness of service-learning have focused on conventional, face-to-face courses, despite the tremendous growth in online education brought on by the advance of rapidly improving technologies. Indeed, research in online education has indicated that students in online environments perform better than students enrolled in face-to-face instruction (Means, Toyama, Bakia, & Jones, 2009). Yet, very little of this research has investigated service-learning in online education.

While student learning and transformation are critical outcomes of service-learning experiences, Dubinsky (2002) asserted that service-learning should not merely seek to benefit students; rather, it should offer real, measurable reciprocal benefits to the service organization in addressing community needs. While scholars and educators often cite the positive impacts of service-learning on communities, there is limited research supporting such claims (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009).

It is critical for scholars to understand factors that facilitate the positive impacts of service-learning initiatives both on nonprofit agencies and communities in order to inform educators about research-based best practices to enhance the likelihood of their success. Goertzen, Greenleaf, and Dougherty (in press) described a typology of impacts on nonprofit agencies and their communities based on traditional, face-to-face courses integrating service-learning projects. However, there is an absence of research examining the potential impacts of service-learning projects facilitated via online learning courses.

The tremendous variation in the design and execution of service-learning experiences poses a challenge to evaluating the impact of those experiences on a community. Included in that variation are the design and coordination of service-learning initiatives. We assert that student-led service-learning projects stand in contrast to faculty-led service-learning. Faculty-led service-learning projects consist of service projects that are prearranged prior to the course experience. Instructors and participating nonprofit agencies prepare in advance with to determine their expectations of one another and of the students, and to define the content of the service activities (e.g., Bennett & Green, 2001). Conversely, student-led service-learning projects afford students tremendous responsibility and ownership of both the context and

content of the service projects as they select the nonprofit agency within which the service will be performed and determine the nature of the project based on the agency's needs (e.g., Guthrie & McCracken, 2010a).

In this case study, we sought to examine the intersection between SLESL projects, project effectiveness, and online learning. A central research question guided the study: What are the factors associated with effective, student-led eservice-learning projects within a Fieldwork in Leadership Studies course?

Literature Review

Online Teaching and Learning

Online teaching and learning has become ubiquitous in higher education. According to recent estimates, 7.1 million students in the United States are enrolled in online courses, and over one-third of all students are taking at least one online course each year (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Despite the pervasiveness of online education, however, it has been the authors' experience that faculty express hesitancy, even trepidation, about embracing online education. Many have expressed concern regarding the effectiveness of online learning compared to traditional face-to-face course experiences; yet, extensive research examining this issue has countered such concerns. For instance, a meta-analysis revealed that students who took all or part of their coursework online performed better on average than students who took the same coursework via face-to-face instruction, and that online instruction appeared to be effective across a broad spectrum of content areas and learner types such as undergraduate and graduate students, and professionals (Means et.al., 2009). A follow-up study reported similar results, showing that online learners performed better than students in traditional face-to-face learning environments (Means, Toyama, Murphy, & Baki, 2013).

Moore and Kearsley (2012) asserted that the delivery of online education should be viewed from a systems perspective since it requires a range of both technical and human resources. As such, online education consists of component processes that operate in concert, including (1) sources of content knowledge and teaching, (2) course design organized by materials and activities, (3) course delivery through media and technology, (4) instructors and support personnel interacting with the learners, (5) learners in their different environments, and (6) management processes organizing policies and resource allocations.

"Sources of content knowledge and teaching" refers to the processes of determining what will be taught in the individual program and corresponding courses. Design of courses requires the instructor to possess important knowledge and skills beyond those of a content expert in a particular academic discipline. That is, effective course design must also blend instructional design skills and knowledge of technology.

Interaction between the teaching institution and the online learner takes place through some kind of technology. While the primary tools used in many online courses involve the delivery of text, audio, and video content via the Internet, there is no single technology that provides consistently optimal learning experiences for all students. Thus, Moore and Kearsley (2012) recommended that an online course experience should include one technology best situated for the delivery of content and another for interaction between learners and the instructor.

Instructors and support personnel serve important functions in the delivery of online courses. Whereas instructors are primarily responsible for helping learners understand the course content, support personnel oftentimes help students deal with challenges regarding poor study techniques or even personal problems.

The domain of "learners and their environments" refers to the spaces in which learners interact with course materials or instructors. These spaces commonly include locations such as students' homes or workplaces; however, popular places for listening to audio content (on discs or MP3 players) include

gyms, while students work out, or cars during commutes. Moreover, these spaces can also comprise virtual environments in which learners interact with each other or with instructors either synchronously or asynchronously.

The design and delivery of online education require a considerable degree of management and up-front investment of resources. Administrators must ensure that tangible resources (e.g. financial resources and technological infrastructure) and human resources are managed in order for tasks to be coordinated together to effectively deliver appropriate coursework. While the management and administration of online education fall outside the scope of the present study, the remaining five facets of Moore and Kearsley's (2012) systems perspective of online education offer important insights into this study's research design and interview protocol.

eService-Learning

Many service-learning scholars and practitioners have integrated eLearning principles and pedagogies into what is referred to as "eService-learning" (Waldner, McGorry, & Widener, 2012) or "service-eLearning" (Dailey-Hebert, Donnelly-Sallee, & DiPadova-Stocks, 2008). EService-learning is defined as an "integrative pedagogy that engages learners through technology in civic inquiry, service, reflection and action" (Dailey-Hebert et al, 2008, p. 1). It provides online students with "opportunities for hands-on community service that deepens their engagement with course theories and, thus, learning outcomes" (Waldner, 2015, p. 20).

Waldner and colleagues (2012) identified four distinct types of eService-learning: hybrid type I, hybrid type II, hybrid type III, and extreme service-learning. In a hybrid type I course, the academic experience is conducted online, but the service is conducted onsite. A hybrid type II course is conducted onsite while the service component is conducted entirely online. In hybrid type III courses, the academic component and service experiences are conducted both onsite and online. Finally, extreme service-learning occurs when both the academic and service experiences are conducted online, with no onsite component.

A review of existing literature yields articles and book chapters that give examples of hybrid type I eService-learning, representing various levels of coursework and academic disciplines such as undergraduate courses in sport management (Bennett & Green, 2001); general education (Nordyke, 2015); political science (Mironesco, 2014); education (Sandy & Franco, 2014); liberal studies (Guthrie & McCracken, 2010a, 2010b); and a graduate course in nonprofit management (Burton, 2003). These studies have tended to either simply describe eService-learning courses (e.g., Nordyke, 2015) or investigate student learning (e.g., Guthrie & McCracken, 2010b). However, previous research has not focused on understanding the nature of service-learning projects and how they impact their communities.

The present study examined a hybrid type I, eService-learning course in which only the academic component was facilitated online, while the service experience was conducted onsite. Although the authors investigated factors associated with effective SLES projects that may have positively impacted identified community needs, they did not systematically examine the impact of the eService-learning experience on the nonprofit agencies or their communities.

Student-Led Service-Learning

The student-led approach to service-learning draws insights from the andragogy theory of adult education. Andragogy is defined as "any intentional and professionally guided activity that aims at a change in adult persons" (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998, p. 60). Knowles (1978) identified several essential assumptions associated with adult learning, namely that "adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy; adults' orientation to learning is life-centered; experience is the richest resource for adults' learning; and adults have a deep need to be self-directing" (p. 31).

In light of the central tenets of andragogy, educators should design instructional experiences that are more student-directed than teacher-directed. As such, instruction should focus on task-oriented activities in the context of common tasks rather than simple memorization of concepts. Additionally, because adults

are self-directed, instructional design should allow learners to discover knowledge for themselves, with guidance and support available when mistakes are made (Knowles, 1984). This perspective centers largely on affording learners choices, whereby students have the freedom to design the service-learning project by (1) identifying a community issue, (2) selecting a nonprofit agency, and (3) collaborating with the agency members to define and execute the service project.

The authors believe this approach to service-learning is highly appropriate for a course in leadership studies. There are a variety of behaviors commonly associated with leadership, including (1) task-oriented behaviors, such as clarifying, planning, monitoring operations, problem solving; (2) relations-oriented behaviors, such as supporting, recognizing, developing, empowering; (3) change-oriented behaviors, such as advocating for change, envisioning change, encouraging innovation; and (4) external behaviors, such as networking, external monitoring, and representing (Yukl, 2012). Students likely deploy many of these leadership behaviors during a service-learning experience.

Methods

Case Study Method

When exploring and describing the effectiveness of student-led eService-learning projects in online courses, it is important to understand the factors associated with the identification, design, execution, and outcomes of those initiatives. Case studies emphasize experiential knowledge along with contextualized influences (Stake, 1995). Addressing “how” and “why” questions about effective SLESL projects and framing this exploration and description into a single, qualitative case study was appropriate.

Stake (1995) specified that an “intrinsic case study” is undertaken because of the need to learn about a particular case, while an “instrumental case study” sets out to “accomplish something other than understanding this particular” case (p. 3). This case study took into account elements of both intrinsic and instrumental case studies to both learn about factors that contribute to effective SLESL projects and provide insights for educators to enhance SLESL course delivery.

Context

The Fieldwork in Leadership Studies course is offered by the Department of Leadership Studies at a regional Midwestern university. Fieldwork is the capstone of a three-course sequence comprising the certificate in leadership studies. In the first class, deemed by the department as the “what” of leadership, students are exposed to past and contemporary theories that are foundational to the field of leadership. The second class, focusing on the “how” of leadership, highlights specific behaviors that are useful in understanding and implementing leadership. The fieldwork course—the “why” of leadership—is designed to challenge students to apply their knowledge of theory and behavior in the context of a student-led service-learning project. This course is taught via two modalities: traditional face-to-face and online instruction. The online modality represented the focus of the present study and fit Waldner and colleagues’ (2012) criteria of a hybrid type I course, as the academic requirements are facilitated through a mediated environment, while the service component is conducted onsite.

Students completing the Fieldwork in Leadership Studies course are expected to meet a variety of outcomes. They are expected to articulate an understanding of community service and service-learning, and put into practice the knowledge, skills, and abilities learned from previous leadership courses through critical analysis of social issues, reflection, and practice. Whereas many courses incorporate service-learning pedagogy into a course that contains academic content, this fieldwork course is designed with the service project as the focal point, integrating content from the prerequisite courses on leadership concepts and skills. In line with the principles of andragogy, students are given extensive freedom in selecting the civic need, context, and aims of the service-learning experience.

All assignments in the Fieldwork in Leadership Studies course are designed either to advance students’ service projects or to offer opportunities for them reflect on their experiences. Students define

the civic issue to be addressed for their project by the second week of the course, and the instructor works directly with each student to clarify the civic need and refine the project activities. By the fifth week, students have developed a strategic plan defining the objectives and activities of their project as well as potential collaborative partnerships necessary to address the civic need. Students also submit periodic progress reports and reflection journals in which they chronicle project development and reflect on the application of leadership concepts in the context of the service project. At the conclusion of the semester, students write a final report documenting the project outcomes along with a corresponding final reflection. In addition to submitting assignments directly to the instructor, students upload assignments to a discussion board forum, sharing their project activities and facilitating student-to-student reflection by reviewing other students' progress and providing feedback.

Data Collection

Using the central research question as a guide, the authors developed an interview protocol for facilitating semi-structured, one-to-one interviews. The primary purpose of the interviews was to elicit details regarding students' SLESL projects; however, we also wanted to understand students' motivations for enrolling in the course and the nature of the projects they selected; investigate the aims for their project; and examine processes involved in successfully completing their projects. Additionally, adhering to a systems perspective of online education (Moore & Kearsley, 2012), we investigated the impact of the course on students' SLESL projects, centering on the topics of course design, technology used to deliver content, faculty engagement, and student engagement.

The authors secured an exemption from the departmental institutional review board because the committee determined that the study involved minimal risk to the participants. We conducted 12 semi-structured interviews, each ranging between 35 and 58 minutes in length. Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. To protect the anonymity of participants, the authors "masked" the transcripts by removing any names that were inadvertently spoken.

Sample

Participants were purposively sampled by instructors recommending students who had completed effective service-learning projects. Instructors were directed to define "effective" SLESL projects as those which possessed the greatest potential for impacting the nonprofit agency or community; effectiveness did not necessarily correspond to the student's final grade. All participants were enrolled in the fieldwork course during the spring 2015 or fall 2015 semester. A total of six sections, three per semester, were offered with a total enrollment of 82 students. Instructors nominated 22 students (27%) for the study, and students were emailed invitations to participate. Approximately one week later, the researchers phoned prospective participants to determine their willingness and arrange the interviews. Of the 22 students originally contacted, 12 (55%) agreed to participate and were interviewed within four weeks after completing the semester. Eight of the 12 participants were female. The participants ranged from 22 to 59 years of age, with a median age of 40.

The SLESL projects represented a variety of aims addressing a spectrum of community needs, including public safety, resources for families of children with special needs, youth mentoring, and homeless (see Table 1). Several participants conducted their projects in urban settings ($n = 5$). While a majority of participants were located in the same state as the academic institution ($n = 8$), three were located in other states within the continental United States, and one conducted a project on a U.S. military installation in Japan.

Table 1. SLESL Project Aims, Description, and Community Demographic Summary

Project Aim	Project Description	Community Population^{1,2}	Community Location
Police shoulder cameras	Attended community meetings/public forums regarding police shoulder camera implementation	382,368	KS
Building community	Event planning and fund raising for area community center	216	KS
Resources for Families with Special Needs Children	Coordinated an informational fair to provide resources for families with special needs children	382,368	KS
Military Base Thrift Shop	Clean up the drop-off area for unwanted items when service-men and women and their families move away from base; created a non-profit entity to drop off and sell unwanted items	6,829	Japan
Sixty-Five Roses	Created awareness of cystic fibrosis and raised money for medical research	20,510	KS
Maternity Home	Extend the services and outreach of a pregnancy center for 'mothers-to-be'	6,136	KS
Peer-to-peer counseling	Create a support group for service-members returning from deployment	4,613	KS
Youth mentoring	Extend the outreach of local beyond academic-oriented, after-school programs to full range mentoring	20,268	PA
Blessing Bags	Providing needed personal, hygiene and non-perishable food items for homeless	145,786	KS
Engaging membership of civic organization	Working within the local VFW to engage membership and provide service to the community	2,131	KS
Social media marketing	Partner with an area service agency to create a social media presence	420,003	GA
Donation drive	Partner with area after-school program to provide resources and supplies	129,272	SC

Notes.

¹ Retrieved March 28, 2016 from <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>

² Retrieved March 28, 2016 from http://www.militaryinstallations.dod.mil/pls/psgprod/f?p=132:CONTENT:0::NO::P4_INST_ID,P4_INST_TYPE:2545,INSTALLATION

Data Analysis

Analysis of transcripts involved a multi-stage process that included both first- and second-cycle coding (Saldana, 2013). In an effort to preserve as much of the participants' language as possible, the researchers primarily used in vivo coding. However, to aid in the inventorying of topics during the initial coding stage, descriptive coding was also applied (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

An inter-coder agreement process (Creswell, 2013) was used to enhance the reliability of the analysis. After independently coding three transcripts, the research team met to discuss codes, code names, and text

segments. Based on this discussion, the research team developed a codebook with corresponding definitions and text segment examples. This process was repeated after the researchers independently coded four more transcripts, then the final five.

Limitations and Researcher Reflexivity

The present study was conducted in an institutional environment that is highly supportive of both online education and service-learning. The institution has been delivering various forms of online education for over 30 years. Additionally, with its mission statement espousing a commitment to “develop[ing] engaged global citizen-leaders,” the university provides intentional opportunities for students to learn and practice leadership and civic engagement.

Moreover, the university has offered the online fieldwork course integrating service-learning pedagogy since the fall of 2001. The course is required for students earning a leadership certificate as well as those seeking a minor or major in organizational leadership. Possible self-selection biases may have existed for study participants predisposed to enrolling in such a program, suggesting their affinity for developing their personal leadership capacities. However, nearly all students indicated that they had very little knowledge about the expectations of the SLESL course prior to enrolling in it.

Data analyzed consisted of written transcripts from interviews conducted by the researchers, and biases may have influenced the interpretation of the data. The lead author had facilitated other sections of the SLESL course during previous semesters, which provided an element of familiarity with the course and students’ experiences interacting with service projects. Yet, none of the participants included in the present study were directly instructed by either author, thus affording a level of objectivity in interpreting participant experiences. Another source of potential bias in this study related to the sample selection. Researchers relied on the recommendations from instructors who determined the most “effective” SLESL projects from their course, which introduced the possibility of a sampling bias.

Findings

Analysis of the 12 interviews revealed a number of interesting findings regarding the effectiveness of student-led eService-learning projects. These findings were divided into five categories: (1) reasons for engaging, (2) project strategies, (3) project assets and asset mobilization, (4) course interaction, and (5) project outcomes.

Reasons for Engaging

This category emerged as participants expressed various motivating factors for choosing to address the particular community needs upon which their service-learning projects focused. This category provided insights into the personal/social motivations of the participants for engaging with a specific project. The reasons were often related to personal experiences, commitments, or beliefs, and provided a link between the need to complete a project and the motivation held by the individual.

Several participants conveyed that they were either directly employed by or actively volunteered with nonprofit organizations in their community already and used this involvement as a pathway to develop their service-learning projects. One participant commented, “I was going to be working with the community anyway, and I thought, ‘Why not transfer this into my school work’ ... It just happened it coincided with my school.”

Other participants based their decision on personal experiences with the issue or through direct personal connections with others who experienced the issue. As one participant expressed, “Being prior military, recently retired, I have had a lot of frustrations with the Veterans Administration. So, I was having those frustrations, and everyone I talked to around me ... we have the same frustrations. There needed to be something done about that.” Similarly, another student commented, “My cousin suffers from cystic fibrosis. I wanted to do something that was meaningful to me that would be able to work well for this class.”

Several participants, however, sought intentionally to develop their projects with established and reputable nonprofit organizations. One participant commented, “I had a prior relationship with this particular nonprofit organization through my employer ... I wanted to kind of go into something and build out something with a company that I already had a relationship with.”

Most participants indicated that their project decisions were based on unmet needs. For example, one participant explained:

Our main goal is to combat veteran suicide. We are at 22 veterans a day, [which] is an all-time high. You cannot get the help that you need right now. If I was to call the [Veterans Administration] right now and schedule an appointment ... to get in to see a psychologist or psychiatrist right now, it would be a four-month wait.... That is unacceptable.

Another student, who chose a project related to the needs of children in the school system, said, “I have worked with children and families for 15 years...the schools simply can’t absorb all of the needs that these families and children have.”

Not only did participants understand the importance of the civic issues that their service-learning projects centered on, they often recognized that very little was being done to address these needs. One participant acknowledged, “Nobody wanted to step up and be that person to initiate it. People wanted it, but they just weren't willing to do the work for it.” Another described his or her motivation for working with the homeless in the community: “There is always going to be a need to help the homeless. It is going to be an on-going problem ... it is not one that we can outsource or we can someday see an end to.”

Intending to partner with established nonprofit organizations, others sought to help expand the agencies’ services or enhance their resources. For instance, one participant, who partnered with an organization that provided after-school tutoring sought to expand the organization’s services by establishing a youth mentoring program, commented, “Their program, again, was more geared toward school-work and helping students achieve good grades. There wasn’t a lot of focus on things outside of school. This was an opportunity to expand that into that realm.”

Project Strategies

The project strategies category, which emerged as participants detailed the design and implementation of their projects, comprised two primary themes: objectives and activities. Objectives related to overarching goals the participants sought to accomplish for their projects, while activities referred to the particular action steps taken to achieve the objectives.

Objectives

Objectives focused on what the participants envisioned or wanted to accomplish as a result of the project. Objectives often involved tangible support in the form of finances or supplies, social support in terms of raising awareness or engagement, and improving the physical environment. Describing the need for financial resources, one participant commented, “There [are] going to be events and things that they are going to do ... We realized it was going to cost money. That was a big focus for us; trying to find support and a budget that would support that.”

However, not all projects struggled with money. Other objectives sought to increase the engagement of members within the civic organization. One participant indicated, “[The] goal was simply, how can we, you know, maintain our membership and increase it, but more importantly, how do we get the engagement of member? And how do we attract newer, younger members to see it through?”

Other participants sought to improve the physical environment. One participant commented, “In the beginning, it started out as a clean-up. We just cleaned up the site.” However, the focus of the objectives quickly shifted to prevention. “And then, “How are we going to prevent this from happening again?”—because it is bound to happen.”

Activities

This theme refers to the processes by which students brought about desired changes. Activities varied widely depending on the project context. For example, one participant commented, “I passed out little paper roses. [School children] were able to take those home and get a donation through a sponsor,” while another said, “We put out flyers and things with information about the organization and what we were trying to do.”

Promotional activities were often associated with key events coordinated as part of students’ service projects. Events included recruiting events, fundraisers, and donor appreciation events. One participant explained his or her promotional efforts: “We did do an Appreciation Dinner, a member appreciation dinner which we just invited all of our members and we did a steak dinner.”

Project Assets and Asset Mobilization

The project assets and asset mobilization category emerged as participants described important resources they acquired and how those resources were utilized. These resources were divided into four themes including social resources, process for engaging others, tangible resources, and participant’s response to challenges.

Social resources

This theme refers to interpersonal relationships that provided support to participants throughout the projects. These network resources included connections made prior to the course as well as intentional and serendipitous connections developed during the project.

Pre-course connections often included family and friends who had relevant skills or held key positions. For example, one participant commented, “My father is actually on the board of network ministries, so that was a great network connection for me to utilize.”

Other participants who did not have previous connections were able to make new connections throughout their project. In one example, a participant explained, “I just called. I called my local patrol office ... I asked whoever was there, ‘Who do I contact about community events? By doing that I was able to connect with [the community partner].’” Participants also described serendipitous relationships that developed during the project and that were critical to addressing the community need. A participant described one such relationship:

This particular pastor [and] their particular church [were] moving away from mission-oriented outreach... They knew that was going to free up dollars as well as individuals who wanted to volunteer. And so, when the church was considering what they [were] to be interested in, they came upon a church in another community that had supported a maternity home. And that is why they came and talked to me, not knowing that I had already sensed that need in our community.

Students create their SLESL projects independently to address needs important to their local communities. Interestingly, two thirds of the participants created a collaborative team to spearhead the project. Two worked directly with the nonprofit board or civic group, and six assembled a team specifically intended to assist with the project. Commonly, these teams comprised close, personal friends. One participant shared that he was:

Sitting around with a bunch of buddies. These are guys that ... spent multiple deployments in combat operations. So the trust, you know, the brotherhood ... that we all share is actually closer than my biological brother ... I know that at any time if I called any of them, they would be there for me.

Others enlisted friends who possessed needed knowledge or skills. For instance, one participant said, “I have a friend who is a ... certified public accountant, so I actually brought him in ... [T]hat really helped us with our financial vision.”

Process for engaging others

This theme refers to the techniques of social interaction aimed at involving others in the project. One such strategy involved explaining the community issue and vision for the project to others in an effort to gain their support. For instance, a participant described her project to assist area homeless:

I went in and told my friend at church.... and told her about the Blessing Bags [bags filled with items such as food, clothing, gift cards, personal items, etc., to support homeless individuals], and she said that would be a real good idea. We should present it to the rest of the group.... We have to do this because if we had a Blessing Bag to give [the homeless man], that would be so much more than some food. You know, because that would then give him some other things that he could use.

Others explained the importance of sharing the project vision to motivate others. One participant stated simply, “I just shared my vision.... You know, the others that I shared my vision with, that have come along side us...that was confirmation to us that we ought to just continue to pursue this.” As a result, others could “see the passion” and were inspired to join.

Additionally, participants described the importance of providing structure for people enlisted to support the project. One commented, “The first thing I did was created a couple of committees. You know, one for recruiting and one for the engagement. That seemed to be very successful.” Another participant aligned specific opportunities with the unique abilities of those willing to help: “You know, we have older people that want to do things but ... they are limited because of age and ability... Those are the ones, you know, that they feel like they were a part of the project, but they don’t feel overwhelmed maybe physically, or whatever.”

All participants described the importance of collaboration with others in their service projects. One simply stated, “The biggest piece of this is making sure that you let people know what you need and you know what they need. Then working together collaboratively.... you are able to get the end result that you went in for.” Another stated, “You have these people that are coming to volunteer. And if ... I didn't give them voice or a place to give their suggestions ... a way of input, a way to contribute to this, I think that I would not have had the participation or made the connections with people.” While collaboration was often critical to engage others, several noted important instances when they needed to exercise authority and make independent decisions. For instance, one participant described the need to make critical decisions, noting “this is what we'll do.... so I just went with what I thought a mission statement should look like.”

Tangible resources

This theme refers to the physical resources instrumental in achieving the project aims, which included items such as monetary donations, access to buildings/facilities for meetings or events, and technology-related items. This theme differs from project outcomes in that the tangible resources included here were leveraged toward the fulfillment of other project goals—for instance, donations of both money and supplies. As one participant reports, “We were actually able to do everything off of donations from money that people gave.” Other tangible resources took the form of physical venues. One participant commented, “The VFW said they were more than happy to let us use their facilities on their nights off.” Another commented,

We needed a place that was secure, had four walls and a ceiling. We need[ed] the donations cleaned because they didn't have that where it was at. So we were able to obtain a vacant building on the base. And the base donated paint for us to paint it. So it was all our labor. We had

to paint the building, clean it out, dust it up ... because it was not dilapidated, but unused for quite a while. So we had to clean it up.

Participant's response to challenges

Participants experienced various challenges throughout their respective projects, including issues that emerged during the project as sources of frustration as well as specific events that caused significant setbacks. Participants experienced frustrations when interacting within their communities because of others' general lack of awareness about what the students were seeking to accomplish and the need to correct misperceptions. One participant experienced "a little bit of pushback" from the community. Participants often responded directly to this type of challenge. For instance, the same participant described how a community event directly addressed this issue, stating that it was necessary

to ease those frustrations...where people could come and kind of see what it was about; see what our business model was; what we intended to do with the money. Because they just kind of thought that this person is going to pocket all of this money. You know they really didn't understand that it was going to be invested back into the community. We had a potluck, which was really great. We got a lot of reception and more understanding from the community.

Others faced challenges regarding the social dynamics within the community, including long-term resentments held by some community members. One participant observed "grudges held between a few people ... rooted back to like 20, 30 years ago. And they just absolutely won't let it go, and go on and look at the future." However, this participant intentionally engaged community members who "were staying on the fringes":

I had to use different ways to approach them. Like this one lady, I knew you pretty much had to act like you didn't know any back-story to why she wasn't helping. And you had to ignore that she was irritated about how things were being ran. And I just went up to her and started talking to her like I always do, and just said, "Would you mind helping?" And she said, "Don't you know that I am having issues?" I was like, "Oh, you have been having issues with this? I am so sorry to hear it, do you mind telling me about it?" I was like, "We would still like to have your help." And you know, she actually ended up being a pretty big helper with the whole thing.

Participants described other challenges outside of their control such as waiting for permission to proceed with certain aspects of the project, setbacks due to illness, background checks disqualifying applicants, weather, and even property theft. One participant explained:

[It] was like a once-in-a-thousand-year flood ... many of the roads are still washed away. I have to go miles out of my way to just go where I would normally go.... So we experienced that a couple of weeks before this [planned event]. We were well in the planning stages and we were kind of at a loss.

In spite of this challenge, the participant, along with his planning team, moved forward: "It was a fun event and obviously worthwhile, but given all of those circumstances, that we still had the turnout that we did and the success that we did—I think that was really remarkable.

While many participants were able to cope with and work around challenging situations on their own, others interacted with the instructor to process their challenges. Describing her frustrations with her project, one participant stated:

By mid-November I contacted [the instructor] by email and I was like, "This isn't going to work. This isn't working. I cannot get the team even together. Can I go ahead and switch my

project?” And she said, “Not all projects work”—which I really needed to hear, because then it was like saying, “It is okay if this doesn’t come to pass.”

The instructor helped reframe the student’s perspective on the project, and within just a few short weeks, the student was able to develop a new partnership and leverage critical tangible resources. She commented, “We just keep going forward, you know, so it was exciting to me ... [be]cause all of that happened before the semester ended, and it was like ‘YES!’ [laughter] ‘Great!’”

Course Interaction

This category centered on findings related to how the relational dynamics within the fieldwork course affected the projects. Course interaction comprised three themes: two regarding the interaction between the participant and other students, and one focusing on the relationship between the participants and the instructor.

Student feedback received

This theme refers to direct comments from other students to the participants that offered encouragement or suggestions for improving the project. Participants categorized this student feedback primarily as asking questions, offering ideas, or providing encouragement. Commenting on the ability to ask questions of their peers, one participant said, “We’d have discussions amongst each other just asking certain questions about our project like who is all involved, you know, how often is this happening in the community... it was kind of nice that we were able to ask each other these questions.” Most participants appreciated other students’ ideas. One participant commented, “Some of my classmates had given me some suggestions that I hadn’t thought about.” For some participants, other students acted as cheerleaders for their projects. As one participant described, “Most of the feedback that I got ... a lot of it was mostly encouragement. You know, ‘That’s a great idea, or I hadn’t thought about that.’”

Social facilitation

This theme refers to indirect positive pressures participants felt from other students in the course. For some participants there were instances in which communication was not offered directly to the student, but rather the student borrowed ideas from others. Additionally, participants described feeling motivated and challenged to perform at a higher level based on the perceived difficulty of other projects. A participant said, “I really liked reviewing other people’s [projects]—the ability to see what other people were doing—because then I could kind of look back on my project and see—not just on their comments—where I could make change.”

Instructor challenge/support balance

This theme refers to the positive ways in which the instructor provided both challenge and support in interviewing participants over the course of the semester. The primary purpose of the interviews was for the instructor to provide feedback in an effort to improve the projects. Indeed, codes related to this theme often pointed to the instructor’s ability to offer constructive critique. Examples of instructor feedback included setting expectations, offering different interpretations of a situation, and holding students accountable. As one participant commented, “[The instructor] challenged us by giving us the information, and I think the challenge really was to say, ‘If you want to be a leader, then show me how to do it...like, you know, prove it.’” Others indicated that the instructor challenged them to rethink or expand their projects. One study participant recounted an instance when the instructor responded back with “Why don’t you redo the paper, and let’s do it without it being strictly faith-based. Let’s expand it out into the actual community.” At first I was like “Oh, man. I was looking to do it this way.” But it actually helped me ... expand the potential influence and impact that it would have in our community.

While students valued having their ideas challenged by the instructor, they also recognized the importance of instructor support. One participant commented, “[At] mid-semester I was ready to throw

the towel in. You know, I appreciated when [the instructor] said not all projects work ... I tend to be a perfectionist and that kind of gave me the, ‘Okay, you know, you just have got to accept that sometimes life doesn’t work out as we are planning it.’” Additionally, participants valued importance of both the timing and timeliness of instructor feedback. For instance, one participant said:

I think that [feedback] is necessary throughout the entire process. I think that at the midpoint it might be a little more important because that is really the heart of the project. But I think there needs to be at least some feedback throughout the entire course.

Regarding the timeliness of responses from the instructor, another participant commented, “I don’t have any problems getting information ... any time that I had a question, I could call her; I could email her, and she would get back quickly.”

Project Outcomes

The project outcomes category focused on the tangible and intangible outputs resulting directly from project activities and consisted of five themes: awareness and community engagement, clientele needs served, structures, tangible resources, and other community needs.

Awareness and community engagement

Awareness and community engagement refers to the recognition by members within the community of the civic need addressed by the project and to the generation of mindfulness for beginning to resolve the issue. One participant commented that community members “are so interested in seeing this project done,” while another asserted that the project helped “bring to light what we do.” This often resulted in engagement from community members to address the issue. Another participant said, “We actually got more people interested in coming out and helping and, you know, just being interested in becoming part of the community again.”

Tangible resources

Other outcomes focused on tangible resources acquired as a result of the project, namely money and supplies. The amount of money raised for projects varied from a few hundred to several thousand dollars. One participant commented, “So far we’ve brought in \$12,000 since May in proceeds.” Others described both the quantity and quality of supplies they were able to raise for needy individuals in their school system, saying:

When we were done it was just amazing at just the quantity, and not just the quantity but the quality as well. There were scientific calculators donated, it wasn’t just cheap [store name] items ... people put in a lot of thought to this, and that was pretty impressive.

Clientele needs served

Participants also assisted the clientele served by the community organizations in the projects. For instance, a participant who worked with veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder described his peer mentoring program:

We have had three individuals where they were at that point where they felt that they wanted to take their lives. Luckily we were able to intervene and get them medical help that they needed and prevent that. They are, all three, still are in out-patient rehab. That is pretty good. That is our main goal: prevent veteran suicide [and] help PTSD within the families ... begin[ning] with our local community, and over time we hope that we will expand to regional, maybe national.

Structures

The structures theme refers to the creation of community systems for addressing a particular civic need. For instance, two participants helped their project organizations to establish themselves as official nonprofits. One explained, “We registered the business” as an essential step to securing nonprofit status. Another participant said, “We have filled out all of the documents. We are of course ... waiting for feedback from the government to see, you know, if they are going to approve that license.”

Other community needs

Not only did participants learn more about the particular issue they sought to address through the project, they also came to recognize other critical community needs. For instance, one participant conducting her project with a local pregnancy center learned about the shocking prevalence of sex trafficking in her community: “I had no idea this would be something I would be looking at. It is frightening—honestly it is frightening.”

Discussion

Evaluation of Findings

The researchers took several steps to ensure the credibility of study findings (Shenton, 2004), such as including participants from multiple sections of the Fieldwork in Leadership Studies course as well as from multiple instructors of the students from the course being studied. The data yielded signs of theoretical saturation (e.g. no new codes were emerging), indicating that an adequate amount of data had been collected. Since the data were gathered after the completion of the course, they were unattached to any assignment or grade, reducing the likelihood that participants provided interview responses simply to please their instructor. Therefore, the participants appeared very frank as they reflected on their experiences. Additionally, the authors engaged in a member checking process with participants regarding the emerging theories (Miles et al., 2014); confirmation from participants further enhanced the credibility of the findings. The interviews were conducted no more than four weeks after the conclusion of the semester; however, several of the participants expressed slight difficulty in recollecting all of the project details. Also, the study was limited by the type of data collected. Triangulation of the results could have been achieved through the integration of additional types of data such as participant observation, written assignments, or interaction with other members within their nonprofit agencies (Miles et al., 2014).

Shenton (2004) recommended that qualitative scholars consider the transferability of their findings to other contexts. In the context of this study, themes associated with categories such as project strategies, project assets and mobilization, course interaction, and project outcomes are likely transferrable to other settings, particularly other SLESL courses in the field of leadership studies, since they often focus on strategic planning, social networking, and collaborative processes whereby individuals collectively mobilize others to leverage resources in order to meet community needs.

Admittedly, there are limitations to the extent of the transferability of present findings. Whereas many eService-learning courses are intentionally designed by the instructor, who carefully arranges the context of the service site (Mironesco, 2014) or crafts the content of the service project (Sandy & Franco, 2014), students in the Fieldwork in Leadership Studies course are generally afforded tremendous freedom and responsibility in identifying the community need and designing and executing the SLESL project. Because of this freedom, their personally and socially oriented reasons for engaging in service experiences could impact their effort and follow-through in the context of other SLESL courses.

Implications

By interviewing students about their experiences, the researchers were able to understand factors associated with successful SLESL projects in a leadership studies course. This approach contrasts with many other studies that have tended to focus primarily on student learning outcomes (Yorio & Ye, 2007); rather, the present study sought to reveal and understand pathways by which SLESL experiences promote

reciprocal and positive benefits of addressing community needs (Dubinsky, 2002). In this context, the categories pointed toward issues that students and instructors should consider prior to participating in a SLESL project. For example, thinking through personal and social reasons for engaging with a particular civic issue may prevent students from pursuing a project that fails to elicit personal or social motivations. Additionally, faculty who supervise SLESL projects could gain insights into project effectiveness by providing important course structures and meaningful interactions with their students.

In light of the participants' reasons for engaging, successful projects seemed to be connected to the student's passion about the community need. Many of the participants were either personally affected by, already volunteered for, or were employed by organizations directly addressing the community need. That is, the students engaged out of a personal passion and oftentimes already possessed prior knowledge about the issue, which substantially reduced the learning curve necessary for success.

Insights into mobilizing both social and tangible project resources emerged from an examination of the process of how participants engaged others throughout their service projects. Tangible resources, such as money, use of facilities, and technology, were certainly beneficial for the projects. However, participants also depended heavily on interpersonal relationships that were either previously established or formed during the project. While each student was responsible for designing and implementing his or her own project, many participants, surprisingly, established a core project team comprising personal acquaintances or professional colleagues willing to see the project through to completion. These individuals often intentionally recruited others who possessed specialized knowledge or skillsets instrumental for project success. Therefore, educators implementing SLESL should consider advising students to create important support systems to help achieve the project aims.

Participants experienced a variety of challenges related to their SLESL projects which were driven by a combination of internal factors (e.g., fear of public speaking) or external factors (e.g., delays or bureaucratic processes). Several participants demonstrated astute psychological capital capacities (Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007) by maintaining a positive attitude and self-confidence, persevering toward the project goals, and, when necessary, redirecting their pathways toward those goals. As these findings suggest, instructors must be sensitive and responsive to students experiencing substantial challenges and encourage them to persist in order to achieve project goals, while adjusting project activities when challenges necessitate adaptability.

Conclusion

Effective student-led eService-learning is not only possible but can be utilized effectively to provide service-learning opportunities to students across vast geographic distances. However, the dynamics of the online classroom are significantly different from those typical of traditional face-to-face settings. By examining the cases provided in this study, scholars and practitioners can gain a better understanding of factors associated with effective SLESL projects, including insights into project motivations, management, outcomes, and strategic course design. At the same time, this work opens new pathways for further exploration of SLESL, which will strengthen the collective understanding of theories and practices associated with effective SLESL programs.

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