Analyzing Service-Learning Curricula Worldwide:

Service-Learning in a Global Context

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Abstract

Over the last four decades, service-learning education has become an increasingly popular part of university curricula worldwide due to its experiential approach that sees students engage in serving community needs. Accordingly, this paper seeks to elucidate service-learning in a global context through the analysis of representative programs in Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Canada currently offered at tertiary-level education institutions. It is important to recognize that content can vary among countries, but this paper will contrast the frameworks in a global context. Following a discussion of the findings from an experiential education perspective, the paper will conclude with a summary of the potential implications and possibilities for service-learning education in the future.

Keywords: service-learning, experiential education, community needs, curriculum design, global citizenship

I. Introduction

Service-learning has long been considered a distinctive and valuable opportunity for students to gain firsthand experience through the combination of academic study, volunteer-based community engagement and learning reflection. As a result, in recent years, there has been a budding interest in this type of experiential learning because students can benefit by way of personal growth and an enhanced sense of citizenship both regionally and globally (Kuh 2008; Bringle, Hatcher & Jones 2011, O'Connell 2020, 2021, 2022).

Looking on a global scale, it is clear that many secondary and tertiary education institutions have embraced this experiential educational model as a way of teaching the importance of cultivating civic responsibility and social engagement among students. Many institutions focus on hands-on experiences in an effort to foster empathy, encourage active citizenship, and give students an avenue to develop a better understanding of the challenges faced by different segments in society. At its core, service-learning education seeks to develop well-rounded individuals that can combine academic knowledge with a deep sense of social responsibility. Students engaged in service-learning are able to participate in various community service projects, traversing a wide range of areas such as elderly-care, disaster relief, environmental

preservation as well as community development through cooperative activities with the community and local government and city offices. Through these activities, students are encouraged to step out of their comfort zones and engage directly with the communities they are serving. In other words, experiential approach seeks to give students the opportunity to develop a heightened sense of an empathy as they witness the struggles and hardships faced by individuals from diverse backgrounds. In turn, this empathy translates into a greater understanding and appreciation for the values of inclusivity and compassion.

As Birdwell, Horley and Scott (2013) explicate, service-learning education fosters active citizenship by inspiring students to become agents for positive change. Involvement in community-service projects means that students not only address immediate needs but also learn to identify the root causes of societal problems. As such, service-learning encourages critical thinking so as to foster a sense of agency among students, inspiring them to develop creative solutions and collaborate with others to influence meaningful change. Naturally, another integral part of the learning process is reflection. It is common for any service-learning curriculum to have this as part of the format in which students are encouraged to reflect on their experiences. Part of the reflection is for students to consider how they can apply the knowledge and skills gained through service to their academic studies, and in many cases, their future careers. In short, this reflective practice allows students to connect theory with practice and develop a deeper understanding of the impact they can have on society.

For the past three years, the author has been engaged in a Grants-in-Aid Scientific Research (Type C, No. 20K02978) project entitled *Creating a research-driven collaborative framework for global citizenship and international service-learning studies*. The research project is in its final year, and as such, this paper acts as one part of the final summary of the findings from the project. The remainder of the paper will focus on an analysis of current service-learning curricula worldwide to elucidate the current trends, goals and achievements of this pedagogy. It then concludes with suggestions for further development of collaborative frameworks in the context of international service-learning studies.

II. Service-Learning Curricula Worldwide

This section will provide a thorough analysis of the current trends, goals and achievements in service-learning curriculum development and implementation. Specifically, it will focus on representative programs that have been implemented in the following countries: (1) Japan, (2) Australia, (3) New Zealand and (4) Canada.

Japan
Most of the author's research to date has focused on the current trends of service-learning education in Japan (O'Connell 2020, 2022, 2023). Through the combination of fieldwork, literature review and desktop auditing, several commonalities have become apparent through the research. The basic premise of service-learning education in Japan aims to develop students who possess a well-rounded balance of academic knowledge, practical skills and a

deep sense of social responsibility.

In previous research, the author has introduced and discussed a number of programs currently available in Japan. Depending on the region, the focus within each service-learning program varies. For example, Fukushima University runs a service-learning program that focuses on recovery initiatives in Fukushima Prefecture to contribute to community engagement since the Great East Japan Earthquake hit the Tohoku region in March 2011. Conversely, Ehime University located in Shikoku, Japan, uses it service-learning program to contribute to regional development and to help solve rural area problems such as workforce shortages caused by depopulation, community system decline, poverty and environmental deterioration (Ehime University, 2022; Koichi University 2013). In addition to these programs with a specific-focus, there are several volunteer-based programs run throughout the country by over 50 universities with many of them allowing students to choose their own point of focus and place of engagement (see O'Connell, 2022 and 2023).

One of the key aspects of Japanese service-learning education is the emphasis on experiential learning. Students are encouraged to step out of their comfort zones and immerse themselves into community-engagement based volunteer activities. These experiences give students an opportunity to develop a heightened sense of empathy, which in turn can translate into a greater understanding and appreciation of the values of inclusivity, social responsibility and citizenship. As such, the Japanese government has recognized the immense value of service-learning education and has made efforts to incorporate it into the national curriculum not only at a tertiary level but also a secondary school level (O'Connell, 2022).

Australia

Service-learning education in Australia focuses largely on experiential education, volunteering and community-engagement. What could be described as a once ad hoc volunteer based approach, the last thirty years has seen service-learning pedagogy evolve into a structured framework within both K–12 and tertiary education settings. Like Japan, whether it be within the K–12 curriculum or at tertiary-level, students engage in community service projects that align classroom learning to real-life scenarios. As Patrick et al. (2019) explain, Australian universities have been at the forefront of service-learning initiatives as can be seen by many institutions establishing dedicated centers for community engagement and service-learning programs. These dedicated centers play an important role in facilitating partnerships between students, faculty, and local communities. As will be explained further through a description of representative examples, programs at Australian universities have expanded to encompass a wide range of disciplines, from healthcare to business, providing students with diverse opportunities to engage with communities.

As first introduced in a previous study, one representative example of good practice in service-learning education at tertiary level can be seen by the work done by Griffith University. This curriculum has been designed to promote leadership skills, academic development, critical thinking, conflict resolution and a sense of community. It comprises of 50 hours of volunteer activities in the community which are planned and reflected up in the classroom. Each year, over 600 students take this course for credit, and it enjoys the full support of the

university and community, which are both integral constituencies, as Bringle and Hatcher (1996) emphasize, to ensure the success of service-learning program (O'Connell, 2022).

Other universities throughout Australia also provide service-learning education in various forms. For example, Deakin University located in Melbourne, Australia, has been committed to community-engagement focused activities since 1974. Presently, the university endeavors to establish meaningful relationships with local communities so that students can take their learning out of the classroom into the real-life community situations. The type of activities used to engage with community include volunteering, teaching within seven local communities, sponsoring local events and initiatives, and establishing work-integrated programs such as internships with local organizations that benefit students and the local communities (Deakin University, 2023).

Another noteworthy example is that of the Victoria University, also located in Melbourne. Victoria University has several community-service focused diploma and undergraduate degree programs comprise of a balanced design blending in-class study with regular off-campus experiential education opportunities. This mixed approach is made possible through partnerships with local community organizations and features programs such as a Diploma in Community Services, Bachelor of Community Services, Bachelor of Social Work, and Bachelor of Youth Work. The common focus of these programs is the aim to equip students with practical knowledge and skills that can be used to deliver meaningful programs and support for people with diverse needs in the community (Victoria University, 2023).

New Zealand

Like Australia, service-learning education has gained an increasing prominence in New Zealand universities over the past few decades. This section will introduce some representative examples of current programs and their significance.

The most significant example of a robust service-learning program is that of the University of Canterbury (UC) located in Christchurch, New Zealand. After Christchurch city experienced a destructive earthquake in 2011, UC quickly responded by gathering more than 10,000 students to form what is now known as the University of Canterbury Student Volunteer Army (SVA). This is a recognized volunteer group that continues to provide help in many community-linked volunteer activities with local NPOs and public organizations (O'Connell & O'Steen, 2020). After establishing the SVA, further efforts were made to give students the opportunity to be engaged to the point where the class 'CHCH101: Rebuilding Christchurch' was created. This class combines volunteer-based service learning in the community with academic and critical thinking learning. One course focus lies in student reflection. Specifically, students must reflect on their volunteer experiences and how that experience connects to relevant academic content about post-disaster response and volunteerism (O'Connell, 2022). In fact, to date the course has attracted many domestic students as well as international students from countries such as the Australia, China, Japan, and the U.S. totaling over 1000 students since 2012. Moreover, the popularity and significance of this course has served as the impetus of the establishment of a new degree—the Bachelor of Youth and Community Leadership—launched in 2020 with a focus of having students engaged in

community projects throughout the degree. (O'Connell & O'Steen, 2020, University of Canterbury, 2022).

In previous research (O'Connell, 2021), the author has discussed the influence UC and the SVA efforts has had on other educational institutions in New Zealand. During the lockdown period following the initial outbreak of the COVID−19 pandemic in 2020, the SVA again used its experience to conduct community-based volunteer activities such as shopping and delivery for elderly people as well as staffing for COVID testing centers. These activities stimulated other universities such as the University of Auckland and the University of Otago to utilize their own student volunteer networks to help with the COVID−19 pandemic efforts. Even before this, New Zealand has experienced a gradual focus toward more widespread development of service-learning education due to the Ministry of Education's *Tertiary Education Strategy 2014−2019* which requires New Zealand universities to be more engaged with local communities and establish strong likes to organizations, industries, schools and global economies.

Among other relevant initiatives that see students engaging with local community is the addition of community-engagement to the core curriculum of the Bachelor of Arts program at Massey University. After studying issues related to identity and belonging in New Zealand and global-related encounters in the first two years, students must take a course that focuses on practicing community engagement in their third year. This course combines the academic study conducted until that point with opportunities for students to plan and implement contribution to the community and professional contexts in a practical sense (O'Connell, 2021). However, as Thomas et al. (2019) critiques, other New Zealand university community engagement initiatives are mostly small scale and heavily reliant on individual participants (teachers, organizational heads etc.) to maintain their existence. As can be seen here, the educational strategy common among New Zealand universities seeks to benefit students and to have a profound impact on local communities and society, but the level of commitment at an institutional level is still somewhat sporadic.

Canada

According to Taylor et al. (2015), service-learning education in Canada is a relatively new field with real traction not being made until the 1990s. A desktop audit of 40 universities by the author suggests that the pedagogical approach tends to be a mix of experiential education, action research, critical theory, community-based research, and multicultural education. Accordingly, this section will discuss some representative examples of curriculum design currently being used at Canada universities.

Whether service-learning education is domestic-focused (local student and local community) or international-focused (international students and local community), the fundamental goal remains the same—i.e., the aim to increase the student participants' community awareness and mindedness, leadership skills and sense of citizenship. One significant structure in place for service-learning education in Canada can be seen in the McConnell granting program. Known as the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, it provides a funding program to assist Canadian universities in designing and implementing service-learning programs that have positive benefits, as Cameron (2010, p. 5) explains, that combine "knowledge, experience and

commitment to tackle local issues." Funding is provided so that universities can enhance the experiential education curriculum at university and the impact of collaboration with the local community through service-learning for students (Kahike & Taylor, 2018).

One of the oldest service-learning programs in place can be found at St. Francis Xavier University which focuses its attention on social justice. The service-learning curriculum at this university is two-fold—one with a connection to the local rural community of Antigonish in Nova Scotia and the other being an international program in which students connect with communities globally. According to the university's website (St. Francis Xavier University, 2023), the local rural community-based program is referred to as the 'Course Based Service-Learning' program which is a component within existing academic courses that sees students placed in community partner projects run through local non-profit community agencies. Through an experiential education approach, students participate in local projects for approximately 20 hours per semester to link their theoretical learning with practical experience. The international service-learning model, referred to as `Immersion Service-Learning', is an intensive overseas experience conducted in the winter and summer vacations. In this course, students engage in service-learning projects in the host communities as well as attend lectures with the goal of developing the ability to reflect on issues related to global social justice and community development.

Another representation of service-learning education at tertiary level in Canada is that of the program implemented at Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières. The area of Trois-Rivières has faced a number of challenges over the years including high unemployment, out-migration of youth as well as deindustrialization. In an effort to support the community more, this university has designed service-learning projects that center on creating interactions between students and the local community. Projects such as student-led marketing of local businesses, volunteer work at health clinics and participation in camps for people with disabilities are among the many examples of how students engage to answer community needs and contribute to the social economy of the area. The delivery of the service-learning education is often project-based through the cooperation of government and private foundations and set up as part of a large interdisciplinary project or within n establish disciplinary course (Cameron, 2010; Kahike & Taylor, 2018).

III. Findings

Here, a discussion will be provided of the commonalities and differences found from the curricula trends and characteristics introduced in the previous section.

Firstly, one of the noteworthy commonalities evident in service-learning education worldwide is the experiential education approach undertaken by many education institutions. In this paper, examples of programs implemented in Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Canada have been discussed and all clearly show a heavy emphasis on experiential education. As Kong (2021) and Piscalkiene & Lottrup (2019) point to in their research of the role of experiential education in learning, the benefits of this approach are clear. First, this approach provides the

opportunity to bridge the gap between theory and practice by allowing students to apply what they learn in the classroom to real-life situations. Second, this approach plays an important role in fostering the development of life-skills through engagement in hands-on activities by the students. Third, as reflection of the experience gained is an integral part of the experiential education process, students can look back on the blend of theoretical and practical learning from the viewpoint of benefits and personal growth gained related to critical thinking skills, a sense of community and citizenship, decision-making, and leadership to name a few. Naturally, these essential skills are not only valuable at university in terms of self-efficacy but are also highly valued attributes in the modern job market. In short, students can explore and become more conscious of the interests, strengths and weaknesses by stepping out of their comfort zones and engaging in new experiences.

It is clear to see that the structures and foci of service-learning programs among the above-mentioned four countries contain similarities and differences. When comparing Japan to the other countries discussed, the promotion of the activities is one area which shows a clear difference. In Australia, New Zealand and Canada, there appears to be more transparency and emphasis on the university and local community organizational collaboration in terms of information provided. For the students participating, this information can be important as it clearly shows the connection to the community in a wider sense. Whereas, in Japan, most of the information still tends to emphasize what the university is providing with little information on the collaborative connections with community organizations.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to shed light on the current global situation pertaining to service-learning and its experiential education approach. Analysis of the four countries-Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Canada show a large amount of commonality. Simply put, the current design and implementation of service-learning education worldwide offers numerous benefits that contribute to students' academic and personal development. While the comparison of course content highlights some variability, the common aim throughout elucidates to that fact each program is tied to a distinct social and community context that seeks to answer the current needs of each community.

From a pedagogical standpoint, it is evident that the representative programs introduced in this paper are endeavouring to bridge the gap between theory and practice so that participating students can foster essential life skills. In that sense, it can be said that experiential learning provides a holistic approach to education. In other words, through service-learning, no matter in which of these countries it is experienced, students participating in service-learning programs will be able to enhance their critical thinking, problem-solving and self-awareness, which are skills and mindsets required to succeed in both academic pursuits and future careers.

As educational institutions increasingly incorporate experiential education into their curricula, ensuring that students can gain meaningful and practical experiences that go beyond

traditional classroom learning is essential. While service-learning education in all four countries shows continued promise, one of the future challenges is to consider how more global dialogue can be achieved to create further growth in international collaboration. To achieve that, factors such as logistical issues in coordinating international community partnerships, assessing student performance, and ensuring a mutually beneficial outcome for all stakeholders will become an important part of future discussions. However, with recognition of the shared common vision toward service-learning education and the proper support, these challenges can be addressed.

   As shown in this paper, service-learning involves students actively participating in organized service experiences that meet identified community needs while also reflecting on their experiences in a structured academic context. Looking ahead, the future of service-learning in worldwide is promising and as tertiary education institutions continue to embrace this pedagogical approach it can further exemplify a commitment to both academic excellence and civic engagement. As a result, service-learning should be able to contribute to producing a more socially conscious and academically proficient generation of graduates who are ready to tackle the complex challenges of the 21st century.

Acknowledgements

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