Service learning and critical thinking

A literature review

March 2014
Context

This literature review was written by Deanna Milne, High School Humanities teacher and CAS Coordinator at ACS Doha International School. In May 2014, Deanna successfully completed a Masters of Education at Concordia University in Portland, Oregon.

Her action research project, “Service Learning and Critical Thinking: International versus Local,” investigated the qualities of student service learning experiences arising from international and locally-based projects. Deanna’s research was based on the ACS Doha International School’s first high school ‘enrichment week.’ The programme provided a range a Doha-based service learning opportunities, and for a self-selected group of Grade 10 students, the opportunity to engage in a volunteer tourism project Nepal.

Deanna’s action research project investigated the qualities of the critical thinking skills students’ developed through the Doha-based and Nepal-based service learning experiences. She acknowledged that both types of experiences had the potential to challenge students to practice critical thinking, but hypothesized that the experience of community service in an unfamiliar place and culture would stimulate and require deeper critical thinking.

Recognising that there are a range of ways that student critical thinking data could be collected, she focused on student reflective writing. As a required element of the International Baccalaureate’s Creativity, Action, Service (CAS) programme, Deanna decided to use this existing formative assessment as a primary data collection method.

While the assessment method had already been established, a method for coding the qualitative data it captured had not. In her research, Deanna developed substantive and selective codes for recognising critical thinking skills and their associated performance levels. To do this, she combined literature from service learning, thinking skills and cognitive complexity.

The literature review that follows informed her Masters capstone project and also provided the starting point for her 2014 – 2015 cim project. In this piece of work, Deanna worked with CAS coordinators from two additional ACS International Schools campuses to develop a rubric for student reflective writing. That research continues in 2015 – 2016, with a new project aimed at creating a continuum for assessing student reflective writing from grades five through 12.

Deanna’s use of action research to address a question grounded in practice, and to use that learning to frame a subsequent cycle of action research, is at the heart of the practitioner-led action research process.

Benedict Hren
Head of the Centre for Inspiring Minds
8 June 2015

The Centre for Inspiring Minds
ACS International Schools
West Lodge, Portsmouth Road
Cobham, Surrey
KT11 1BL
England
Introduction

Service Learning is not a ‘new’ pedagogy, however it seems that it is not used as often as it could be, considering the results it has the potential to show. Not all schools can afford to send students to another country, nor can all families afford to send their children, making local service learning opportunities a necessity for students to gain the experiences their peers who travel get. Zaff and Lerner (2010) assert that students who do participate in local service learning programs still show noteworthy improvement in skills such as civic knowledge and efficacy, social capital and an overall commitment to being involved in their school and local community. They also point out that these results are seen in both required and voluntary service programs. Wang (1998), concluded that students participating in a local service learning program showed increased levels of self-esteem, depending on age, the focus of the program and the overall community support.

Coulter-Kern’s (2013) study on the connections between career decisions and service learning showed that college students who participated in a local service project where they spoke to high school students about future decisions helped the college students to refine their career goals, as well as high school students their future education decisions based on what they wanted to do. Coulter-Kern states, “A service-learning experience similar to the one described in the present study may be an especially useful way increase students’ confidence and help them understand career decisions, something they consider both important and personal.”

When considering local service learning opportunities, Bamber and Hankin (2011) expressed concern that with ever-increasing technology, our definition of ‘globalism’ seems to have changed because of our ability to connect through media with others on the other side of the world. This, in turn, has made it much easier to become aware of issues that are facing communities further away, and recognize issues of social injustice that may be on the other side of the planet. This, they suggest, has led to the development and growth of the ‘gap year industry,’ where students pay companies to take them across the world to engage in community service.

While this is obviously a great opportunity for any student, Bamber and Hankin assert that a trend has now been noticed of people missing out on opportunities to help their own local or national communities because they feel that they are needed elsewhere. They state, “The volunteerism industry, with its ethos of ‘holidays for humanity’ and ‘the giving trip’, has
been cast as, at its best, self-serving, at its worst providing students with life-enriching experiences at the expense of people living in poverty. “This danger is a real threat to the core values of service learning, and institutions and individuals must always take the time to research who they are working with in the ‘gap year industry’, or any other company for that matter. In this researcher’s experience of planning an international service trip, many companies had to be sorted through until one that was genuinely interested in the development of the projects they support was found.

International Service Learning Experiences

Hammersley (2013) states that international service learning (ISL) has the potential to give students an experience where they take part in a service project that addressed a community need that has been identified, directly interact with and learn from others and cross-cultural dialogue, and reflect on their experiences to better understand course content, inter-cultural issues, the host country itself, and their own responsibilities as global citizens. She points out the importance of the division between the ‘here to learn’ and ‘here to help’ ideas, and that ISL is about, “Changing people’s place in the world, rather than about changing the place students happen to get that experience.”

There are, however, important factors to remember that can degrade the value of ISL experiences. Hammersley (2013) points out that, Development practice and international aid can easily, unintentionally, and sometimes unquestionably replicate forms of neocolonialism.” Dymond (2008) also points out that more attention needs to be paid to the participation of disabled and at-risk students in high school service learning programmes, and that the impacts of these elements requires further study.

In an international service learning program that has been recognized as one of the leading programs in the UK, and awarded with a Queen’s Award, Liverpool Hope University’s Bamber and Hankin (2011) outline what makes it successful. They state, “Scores of teams of staff and students have been dispatched to settlements across India, Africa and Brazil, to provide immediate relevant assistance in educational terms.” They also stress, however, that it has taken near three decades of work to develop, “A set of guiding principles for developing sustainable… partnerships committed to reciprocity with relationships grounded in a spirit of openness, mutual respect and integrity.” In taking this time to develop their international service learning programs, this university has
recognized the importance of avoiding the ‘industry’ side of global service.

Green (2011) writes about the experience of health care students, working in Honduras with goal of bringing mobile medical clinics to remote areas where there was little access to care, and engaging with people from communities that were largely different than their own. In a study of post-secondary students participating in an international service-learning program in Honduras, Green studied the effects the international program had on the cultural competencies of the participants.

Cultural competencies can be associated with elements of critical thinking, and as such, even though this study’s participants are post-secondary students, the effects could be similar with high school students. Participants in this study were influenced by the experience of making connections with people of different cultures. They vocalized their admiration for the people in the villages they visited and their sense of community, regardless of the lack of material goods. This enabled them to problem solve when presented with a situation and limited resources (Green, 2011). When asked after the study if they felt that their service learning experience has impacted their practice, several nursing students replied that they had more confidence and understanding when dealing with people of different cultures (Green, 2011).

This international service learning experience offered an advantage over a local program. While diversity in the United States (the country of residence of the participants) is increasingly becoming diverse, and opportunities for interacting with those of other cultures is commonplace, the learning arising from being completely immersed in an unfamiliar culture is exceptional. If there were students participating in a local program of a similar nature – they would still have the comforts of home, possible access to the resources they needed, and the people they would be working with would be somewhat adjusted to life in the U.S., making them not as culturally different as those who the international participants dealt with.

**Service Learning Programs and Critical Thinking**

Service learning should be carried out in a way that student voice and design is at the forefront of a unit. Students must be able to identify an issue, create a plan for action and reflect on their experiences both during the process and after (Zaff & Lerner, 2010). Moreover, the efforts of the students must be taken seriously by the community and other adults, and must be relevant to the students if positive benefits for development are
to occur (Zaff & Lerner, 2010). In a sense, service-learning units pose the potential to create positive learning communities. Learning communities often, “incorporate active and collaborative learning activities and promote involvement in complementary academic and social activities that extend beyond the classroom” (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Additionally, because service learning units pose the potential (almost a requirement) for cross-curricular ties, they allow students to apply the knowledge and strategies from one course of study to another – improving both critical thinking and creating positive learning communities (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

In her study on undergraduates and bringing about social change through service learning, Mobley (2007) conducted a pre- and post-test to, “measure dimensions of student attitudes, knowledge and skills as they relate to policy and advocacy.” In measuring attitudes towards homelessness, students who participated in a service learning project focused on the topic were able to show better critical thinking strategies as to why homelessness occurs, as well as a more confident feeling that they could have a positive impact on social issues.

In their study of nursing students and the effect of service learning on critical thinking skills, Sedlack et al. (2003) begin by defining critical thinking as, “A reasoning process reflecting on ideas, actions and decisions.” They use nursing clinical experience and Sedlack’s dimensions of critical thinking from 1993 to assess the improvement of critical thinking through narratives. The researchers found that critical thinking skills were developed through reflecting on the service-learning experiences, and that participants developed a professional self-perspective and a community perspective.

In a study of service learning and its effects on the civic attitudes and behaviours of Grade 10-12, academically gifted high school students, Lee et al. (2007) looked at the differences between participating in a service learning program and a summer school program. When defining ‘gifted’ students, they state that these students generally have, “a more highly developed sense of social justice, fairness, morality, concern for others, and interest in global issues.” These attributes could be connected with critical thinking, as the identification of the aforementioned issues would need to be present for students to take an interest in them. Based on SAT scores, students were selected to participate in a three-week service-learning program run by the Civic Learning Institute (CLI), or in the three-week Equinox summer school program (Lee et al., 2007).

Researchers used three different types of surveys to assess the civic attitudes and behaviours of students in each group: a civic responsibility
survey, a civic behaviour survey, and an RSL survey, which is a self-report survey which focuses on leadership. These surveys were administered three times over the period ranging from summer 2003 to spring 2004 (Lee et al, 2007).

In the end, the only major difference was in the area of civic responsibility. Those students that had taken part in the CLI felt that they had more of a responsibility to their community. Six months after the program, it was found that the CLI students showed more recognition of social, political and community issues (Lee et al, 2007).

Overall, the CLI program was, “Designed to educate students about complex social issues, help participants develop a long-term commitment to participate in civic affairs, and inspire students to continue to educate themselves and to take action on issues that their own communities face” (Lee et al, 2007, p. 187). All of these aspects the CLI aimed to give, or improve in students are those which would require critical thinking skills.

In her paper concerning experience through field trips, Jakubowski (2003) explores the effects that service learning have on participants, as well as facilitators. She states that critical reflection during one of these programs not only highlights how course content can influence how we see the community, but that this also works in reverse – a community will affect how students view and think about our course content.

The question is, then, how do me make the learning experiences meaningful, and thereby foster critical thinking skills? Jakubowski asserts that the use of reflective journaling and discussion are both needed – as a method for students to be ‘critically responsive’ (2003). Whether a trip is local or international, it can still offer critical thinking skills due to the fact that instead of attempting to bring the community to the classroom, the classroom is brought to the community.

In taking a group of students to Cuba to directly engage in service, Jakubowski found that as students continued with their journaling and structured discussion, their critical thinking skills showed development. She states, “They began to recognize the privilege in their lives, and were thereby able to work at breaking down barriers. By becoming conscious of their own privilege, the students could begin to learn and work effectively from within those positions.”

One of the most important aspects of learning in high school is having the critical thinking abilities to make connections between subject areas. In the IBO curriculum, cross-curricular units are promoted and valued.
According to the IBO they, “Extend disciplinary understanding in ways that are: Integrative – bringing together concepts, methods, or models of communication from two or more subject groups, disciplines, or established areas of expertise to develop new perspectives. Cross-curricular units also connect disciplines to solve real world problems, create products or address complex issues in ways that would have been unlikely through a single approach” (IBO, 2014). The curriculum requires that students take part in at least one interdisciplinary unit each year.

Service learning helps to foster the critical thinking skills that are gained in this matter, as the goal of a service learning unit is to identify an issue and work to create a solution to solve actual real-life problems (Berger-Kaye, 2010).

In their study of service learning and interdisciplinary opportunities, Rooks and Winkler (2011) look at the benefits this has on post-secondary students, which can be assumed for secondary students as well. Rooks and Winkler state that some of the key advantages to students who participate in service learning are that they learn that knowledge cannot be pigeon-holed, but must be transferable and cumulative, as it is in the world outside school walls. They also note that service learning allows students to explore different ways of learning, especially as it focused on a collaborative approach to attain a final goal.

Their study examined the effect that interdisciplinary methods have on the outcome of service learning, and found that it has effects on instructors as well as students, as differences in academic approaches and ideas of what is to be learned are challenges that instructors must overcome. For example, the social workers and sociologists in this study who were planning the interdisciplinary program had much tension and debate during the process of deciding on learning objectives and the expected learning outcomes.

Students in this study (interdisciplinary unit) worked with persons afflicted with homelessness and poverty, and it was found that in the first few weeks, the reflective journals focused more on their own thoughts, assumptions and impressions. As the weeks passed, though, this interdisciplinary approach allowed students to begin to develop a stronger understanding of the community they were interacting with. Rook and Winkler state that, “Their understanding about the lived experience of homelessness grew as well. For example, many students became increasingly aware of the stigma experiences by people in poverty, how it affects them, and how they cope with it.”
As mentioned, much stress went into planning the learning objectives for this course, as social workers and sociologists have different ways of ‘thinking’. However, Rooks and Winkler found that the interdisciplinary feature of this course promoted the aforementioned fact that while there are many different perspectives about what knowledge is, or how it is gained – it remains transferable. They noted that the program, while stressful to create, would not have been possible without each of the two disciplines contributing their strengths.

**Summary**

While service learning is not a new idea, there is obviously still much research to be done in this area to determine its benefits and weaknesses. Hammersley (2013) does an excellent job of pointing out that while service learning focuses on gaining knowledge and understanding in return for service, it still presents a danger of being ‘colonialist’ in nature. It is important that proper methods are followed to avoid this, as well as future research continuing into the development of service learning programs. Zaff and Lerner (2010), on the other hand, focus more on the positive aspects of service learning, the benefits it holds for students and communities. However, they too offer caution that it must be student driven, and that the age of students when considering voluntary or required service learning be taken into careful consideration.

Where critical thinking skills are concerned, the literature studied offers several methods to observe the effects service learning can have on students. The most practical, being Sedlack et al. (2003) in their measurement of critical thinking improvement against an already structured ‘idea’ of the dimensions of critical thinking. Using a model of critical thinking dimensions allowed the researchers to measure the narratives of participants on elements, abilities and traits of reasoning. While Mobley’s (2007) study was able to measure the improvement of critical thinking in the participants through use of survey questions, Sedlack and fellow authors (2003) are able to support their findings with an already accepted structure.

It is clear from the lack of research and studies with high school students and service learning, that more research is needed.
References


The Centre for Inspiring Minds
ACS International Schools
West Lodge
Portsmouth Road
Cobham, Surrey
KT11 1BL

On-line at https://cim.acs-schools.com
On Twitter @acscim