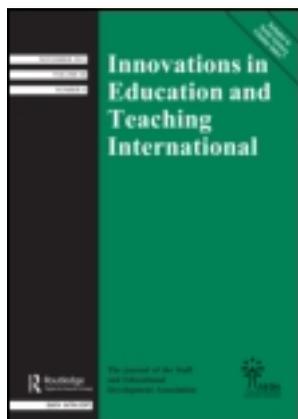


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Integrating service learning in Jordanian higher education

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The main aim of this exploratory study is to test ‘Service Learning’ as a teaching and learning strategy in Jordanian universities by integrating service learning into a counselling course at the Hashemite University. After providing a 12-h service at 10 service locations, a 16-item questionnaire was administered to 60 senior counselling students to assess their perceptions about the service experience. Administrators of the service locations also completed a questionnaire about their level of satisfaction regarding the service provided. Qualitative data were also collected from groups’ portfolios, and reflection papers based on students involvement in service learning. The findings of the study revealed that service learning promotes students’ learning of the course content, students’ sense of connection to their classmates and university, their sense of social responsibility and professional development. Administrators were satisfied with the service and looked forward to future cooperation with the university.

Keywords: service learning; community service; counselling children and adolescents; play therapy; Jordanian higher education

Introduction

Service learning is a form of active, experiential learning that utilises the experience of working with and serving the community (Murphy, 2010; Verjee, 2010). Theoretically, practising professional skills in authentic settings provides students with rich examples of professional life, and hence helps them acquire professional skills and develops their intellectual capacities (Verjee, 2010). When students participate in service activities that meet identified community needs, they not only gain further understanding of course contents and valuable experience related to their future career, but they also enhance their sense of responsibility towards their community (Dumas, 2002; Fink, 2003).

The effect of utilising service learning as a pedagogical tool on students’ outcomes has been intensively investigated in higher education contexts. Research supports the contention that service learning has a positive impact on students’ academic outcomes including their academic achievement, cognitive development, problem solving and critical thinking skills (Caccavo, 2008; Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009; Dumas, 2002; Flannery & Pragman, 2007; Scott, 2008; Stavianopoulos, 2008; Strage, 2004). Moreover, research shows that service learning has a positive impact on students’ personal outcomes including their sense of personal identity, spiritual

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growth, moral development and personal values (Conway et al., 2009; Jones & Abes, 2004; Verjee, 2010). Furthermore, service learning was found to have a positive effect on students' social outcomes including interacting with others, facilitating cultural understanding and appreciation of diversity (Conway et al., 2009; Murphy, 2010; Verjee, 2010). In addition, research supports that service learning promotes students' citizenship outcomes including awareness of their community needs, active involvement in community improvement and commitment to volunteering (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005; Conway et al., 2009; Levesque-Bristol, Knapp & Fisher, 2010; Murphy, 2010). These benefits have been demonstrated in a number of diverse settings across various ages and using different methodological approaches.

Service learning, nowadays, is gaining a considerable popularity in the light of the social and economic changes that have led higher education institutions to rethink their roles and responsibilities relating to their surrounding communities (Iles, 2007). Specifically, higher education institutions are facing several complications including: (a) the increase in the number and diversity of students enrolling in colleges and universities, (b) the changes in skills and abilities required in the workplace and (c) the political pressures on higher education for greater accountability (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003).

The above theoretical, empirical and pragmatic support for service learning has encouraged institutions of higher education to consider service learning as a powerful pedagogical tool and integrate it in teaching subjects in many disciplines such as business and management education (Dumas, 2002; Robinson, Sherwood, DePaolo, & Concetta, 2010; Scott, 2008; Steiner & Watson, 2006; Wittmer, 2004), science and environmental education (Aronson, 2006; Eisenhut & Flannery, 2005; Handa et al., 2008) and teacher education (Carrington & Saggars, 2008; Hale, 2008; James, 2010, Lake & Jones, 2008). Consequently, funds have been generously rewarded for service learning projects and centres that pair undergraduates with civic institutions. Such centres are currently active on hundreds of campuses around the world.

Despite the high level of advocacy of service learning as a powerful pedagogical tool, it has been overlooked as a teaching strategy at Jordanian universities. Although some forms of experiential learning can be found in specific professional programmes, the main objectives of these learning activities are typically extending students' professional skills and not serving their community. Students enrolled in such programmes are required to engage in off-campus practical courses, usually at the end of their study period. However, in their first interaction with the community as professional individuals, students are challenged with putting all what they have learnt into practice, as well as touching upon and fulfilling the needs of the community. Universities could help students eliminate these challenges, by transforming their mission into educating students to be responsible citizens, rather than educating them solely for their future career. Service learning could play a crucial role in such a transformation by connecting theory with practice in a variety of university courses.

The main aim of this exploratory study is to test 'Service Learning' as a teaching and learning strategy in Jordanian universities by integrating service learning into a school counselling course at the Hashemite University. Further, this study explores students' perceptions about the service experience in relation to their sense of connection to their group and university, their sense of responsibility towards their service learning, and their sense of personal and professional growth. Furthermore, the current study investigates how administrators of the civic institutions

perceive the service experience. Specifically, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

- (1) To what degree did students who participated in the service learning activities perceive that the experience fostered their sense of connection to their group and university, their sense of responsibility towards their community and their sense of professional growth?
- (2) What is the level of satisfaction showed by the administrators of the civic institutions regarding the service provided?
- (3) To what extent did students who participated in the service learning activities learn to enact primary assessment of the institution's needs, plan and set clear goals, and employ group guidance using play strategy?
- (4) How did students reflect on the service they provided?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 60 senior counselling students (55 females and 5 males) aged 21–23 years. All participants enrolled in a school counselling course entitled 'Counselling children and adolescents'.

2.2. Integrating service learning into the course

Service learning was integrated into a counselling course entitled 'Counselling children and adolescents' based on Howard's (1998) model of service learning. His model emphasises the integration of both experiential and academic learning where each one of them works to strengthen the other. According to this model, 'the community service experiences must be relevant to the academic course of study' (Howard, 1998, p. 22).

The purpose of the 'Counselling children and adolescents' course is to understand children and adolescent from a developmental, sociological and psychological dimension with special emphasis on counselling strategies and therapeutic techniques appropriate to these critical stages of life.

Among course requirements, students were required to participate in a play therapy and guidance service learning project. Students were required to complete a minimum of 12-h service at one of 10 service locations. Service locations were either governmental or private civic centres working with and giving support to children, adolescents and families. The university contacted these 10 centres to facilitate the project enactment. Table 1 shows the distribution of the 10 groups of students on the target institution centres.

As shown in the Table 1, students served a variety of civic institutions and centres: three family centres, four orphanages, two centres for children with special needs and a pre-school. In all institutions, university students had the opportunity to spend time and communicate with children and adolescents.

All aspects of this project were designed to achieve certain goals. Specifically: (1) Students were responsible for learning techniques and theoretical approaches to play therapy and guidance, designing the play activities and applying them in centres for children/adolescents or teach them to mothers who have difficulties dealing with their children. These activities aimed at building self-confidence, gaining

Table 1. The distribution of students on the civic service centres.

Group	Group size (students)	Institution type	Target
1	6	Family centre	Children of age 7–11 years and mothers
2	6	Orphanage	Children and adolescences of age 5–14 years
3	6	Orphanage	Girls of age 7–17 years
4	7	Pre-school	Pre-schoolers of age 3–5 years and mothers
5	6	Family centre	Children of age 6–12 years
6	7	Orphanage	Boys of age 6–18 years
7	5	Centre for children with special needs	Children with special needs of age 7–13 years
8	7	Orphanage	Children of age 6–9 years
9	5	Family centre	Children of age 4–12 years and mothers
10	5	Centre for children with special needs	Children and adolescences with special needs of age 6–16 years

independency and ensuring accountability. (2) Students were required to serve the institution in groups of 4–7. This aimed at acquiring team work skills, developing leadership skills, enhancing communication skills at an individual and at the group level. (3) Students were required to serve at children's, adolescents' or family's centres. This aimed at applying theory to real-life situations, gaining experience related to their future career and serving their community.

2.3. Instruments

Three instruments were utilised to collect data in this study: first, a 16-item questionnaire with 5 Likert scale (with '5' indicating strongly agree, '1' indicating strongly disagree and '3' being neutral) was developed based on the review of measures in service learning studies (Flannery & Pragman, 2007; Stavianopoulos, 2008; Weber, Weber, Sleeper, & Schneider, 2004). The questionnaire developed to assess students' perceptions about the service experience. The questionnaire items were presented to three experts in the field of education for face validity, and to classify them into subscales to assess students' perception of the effect of the service experience in developing their: (a) sense of connection to group members and to their university (5 items, examples: 'I feel that things I learn at the university are useful in my life', and 'I developed strong relationships with my classmates/group members during the service'), (b) perception of their social responsibility (6 items, for example: 'I feel responsible for children/adolescences issues in my community') and (c) sense of professional development (5 items, for example: 'I believe I have a clear picture about my future career'). Cronbach's alpha was computed to test the reliability of the scale and the three subscales. Cronbach's alpha is a measure of how well each individual item in a scale correlates with the sum of the remaining items. It measures the consistency among individual items in a scale (George & Mallery, 2003). Alpha values are for the entire scale .85, and for subscales: sense of connection .70, social responsibility .71 and professional development .71. All alpha values are acceptable.

Second, a 15-item questionnaire with 3 Likert scale (with '3' indicating strongly degree and '1' weakly degree) was developed to assess the administrators' degree

of satisfaction regarding the service students provided to the institution. The questionnaire was presented to three experts in the field of education for face validity, and items altered according to their comments. Cronbach's alpha was computed to test its reliability. Alpha value of the scale (.89) is acceptable. The questionnaire was completed by the administrator of the 10 service locations and sent in sealed envelopes to the instructor. Example of items: 'Students use the service time efficiently', 'We welcome that other students serve in our institution'.

Third, service portfolios were used to collect students' visits reports and their written reflections on the service experience. Groups were required to write reports every time they served the institution. Group reports included primary assessment of the institution's needs, group's goals and plans and therapeutic methods and strategies enacted during service time. Moreover, all students were required to reflect individually upon the service experience at the end of the service period. Reflection within service learning is important because it allows students to perceive the link between their individual acts of service in the community, their view of the world and their university study (Connor-Greene, 2000; Molee, Henry, Sessa, & McKinney-Prupis, 2010; Murphy, 2010). This is necessary for students as they learn to derive personal knowledge and strategies that will influence future practices. Portfolios were collected from groups at the end of their service period.

3. Results and discussion

Too often, research on service learning depends on either qualitative or quantitative methods of analysis; however, this study blends both methods for a better understanding of this experience.

To answer the first question, 'to what degree did students who participated in the service learning activities perceive that the experience fostered their sense of connection to their group and university, their sense of responsibility towards their community and their sense of professional growth?', SPSS was utilised to perform descriptive analysis of students' responses on the first questionnaire. Prior to the analysis items were grouped into three subgroups to assess students' perceptions in relation to: (a) their sense of connection to their group members and their university, (b) their perceptions of their social responsibility and (c) their professional development. Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of students' responses on the three subscales.

The mean values on all subscales are fairly close and above the average of the Likert scale. All mean values are close to four indicating that students' perceived that the service experience had fostered their development in the three assessed subscales. Specifically, students perceived that the service experience helped them gain an increased sense of connection to their group members and the university, an increased sense of their social responsibility and an increased sense of professional

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of students' responses on the three subscales of students' perceptions about the service experience.

Subscale	Mean	Standard deviation
Sense of connection to group and university	3.94	.58
Sense of social responsibility	3.98	.54
Sense of professional development	3.85	.55

development. These results are consistent with previous studies that have reported benefits for students engaging in service learning activities including personal and interpersonal development and increased civic awareness and engagement (Flannery & Pragman, 2007; Jones & Abes, 2004; Stavianopoulos, 2008; Weber et al., 2004).

To answer the second question, ‘What is the level of satisfaction showed by the administrators of the civic institutions regarding the service provided?’, the degree of satisfaction was computed for each one of the 10 centres. The level of satisfaction may take values from 15 to 45. The levels of satisfaction collected from administrators ranged from 35 to 45 with an average of 39.8 and a standard deviation of .6. This result reflects a high level of satisfaction as reported by the administrators of the civic institutions that have been served. In six institutions, administrators commented positively on the experience of having university students serving their centres, and strongly welcomed future cooperation with the university.

To answer the third question, ‘To what extent did students who participated in the service learning activity learn to enact primary assessment of the institution’s needs, plan and set clear goals, and employ group guidance using play strategy?’, groups’ portfolios were analysed by two counselling professors looking for evidence of the following activities: primary needs assessment, planning and goal setting, and enacting play in counselling children/adolescents. Results from the

Table 3. Summary of groups’ activities during service.

Group	Needs assessment (targeted problem)	Planning/goal setting	Guidance/therapeutic play activity
1–3	Emotional problems	Build positive self-esteem Help children express themselves	Storytelling, role play Role play, drawing clay
3	Social problems Low achievement motivation	Develop social and personal values Help children set goals and build positive self-esteem	Drama, storytelling Storytelling, writing worksheets
4, 5	Aggression and bullying	Teach values Provide children with an anger management treatment	Storytelling, role play and drama Sports
6, 9	Behaviour problems (shyness, nail biting, etc.)	Understand children’s background and their social economic status Build connection with children and provide guidance Teach mothers and caregivers simple behaviour modification techniques to deal with children’s problems	Discussion, drawing drama and role play
7	Lack of activities for kids with special needs	Design and organise activities for the activity day	Dancing, singing and drama
8	Lack of social skills and communication skills Negative attitude towards self and others	Improve social skills and develop communication skills Improve positive attitude towards self and others	Worksheets, stories, clay, drama and role playing
10	Behavioural problems and hyperactivity	Help teachers organise safe environment and play activities	Clay, drawing, dancing and singing

qualitative analysis of students' portfolios indicated that the 10 groups of students successfully enacted all the above counselling activities during their service. Table 3 summarises the target problems assessed by each group; the goals set to deal with the target problem; and the guidance/therapeutic play activities enacted by each group.

The above results supported that the service provided by students contributed positively to students' learning of the course content, as well as to their professional growth. These results are consistent with previous studies testing this approach in teaching different courses in different contexts (Caccavo, 2008; Dumas, 2002; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Flannery & Pragman, 2007; Scott, 2008; Stavianopoulos, 2008; Strage, 2004).

Finally, to answer the fourth research question, students' reflections on the service experience were collected and categorised into themes that characterised how participants valued the service learning experience. Five themes were identified with reference to the objectives of the service learning activities. Themes are described below accompanied with quotes from journal entries.

3.1. Theme 1: service learning project assisted applying theory to real-life situations

A final journal entry explained: 'I think that lectures, tests, etc. are very important, however, a hands-on experience is usually something you do not forget for years. Whereas, you might forget the information you wrote on a test a few months later'. Another student explained: 'It is different to see things rather than just read about them in the textbooks, it was interesting to get to see the adolescent I was guiding exemplifying the concepts we were learning in class'.

3.2. Theme 2: service learning project enhanced professional development

One student articulated: 'this experience made me think about my job in the future, and how to practically manage it, so I really felt that this experience prepared me for the school counselling profession'. Another student wrote: 'It is probably one of the most unique things that a student can add to his or her resume. I will certainly always remember this project'.

3.3. Theme 3: service learning project promoted building self-confidence, gaining independency and ensuring accountability

One student expressed: 'When I saw them happy with the play activities we designed for them, I definitely felt that I can help make a difference in the lives of these children'. Another student reflected: 'I hope they allow me to continue working with the children, I have been a role model for them, and I feel a special bond and responsibility towards them'.

3.4. Theme 4: service learning project facilitated acquiring team work skills and enhancing communication and social skills

In a journal entry written at the end of the project, one student wrote:

This project enabled me to talk with people in class that normally I might not have had any interest in. Group projects force you to work as a team to get a goal accomplished and this will help for your future career.

While another student wrote in her journal, 'I usually hate to ask questions and talk in class, but this class was easy. I made a lot of friends and I would do this again'. Another participant communicated, 'I didn't want to do this at first because I'm so shy. Now I talk to everyone in the class'.

3.5. Theme 5: service learning developed positive perceptions related to community service

One student commented 'If given the chance I would probably perform another act of community service'. Another student commented, 'What is unique about this experience is that it gave me the opportunity to work with children, I really enjoyed that, I realized that despite their hard circumstances, they were very intelligent'. Another student explained: 'This is one experience that I know I will remember because I got such a great feeling knowing that I was doing something good and helping others out. I would like to take another service learning course'.

Altogether, students' reflections articulated that the objectives of play therapy and guidance project have been achieved. Specifically, students who participated in the service learning activities had the chance to apply theory in real-life situations, develop their personal, professional and social skills and increase their social responsibility.

4. Conclusion

This is the first study to test service learning as a pedagogical approach in the context of Jordanian higher education. This study will contribute to filling the existing gap in research literature related to service learning in Jordan and in the region, and will provide a basis for comparative studies on the integration of service learning as a pedagogy internationally.

Service learning has been integrated into the undergraduate course 'Counselling Children and Adolescents' through 'a play therapy and guidance project'. It has been argued that integrating academic content and community service would bring students a sense of connection between classroom learning and their personal lives and the lives of others within their community. To test this contention, several methods of data collection have been administered, including questionnaires for students and administrators of the served centres and students' portfolios and reflections. Altogether, analysis of the collected qualitative and quantitative data indicated the benefits of the service experiences in reinforcing the links between theory and practice and reinforcing learning about guidance and therapeutic play activities. Moreover, our results supported that the service experience promoted students' sense of connection to their classmates and university, their sense of social responsibility and professional development. Furthermore, administrators of the served centres valued the provided service, and looked forward to future cooperation with the university.

Overall, service learning supported the university in its mission to produce graduates who are well-rounded citizens capable of working in and with the broader

community. Therefore, service learning as pedagogy, if implemented, would support Jordanian universities in fulfilling their responsibilities towards developing the civic and moral characteristics of students.

The above results are encouraging; yet, service learning needs to be tested in other courses, other disciplines and at other Jordanian universities. At this point, there is an urgent need for researchers to continue gathering and analysing qualitative and quantitative data, and use those results to contribute to best practices in implementing this pedagogical approach in the context of Jordanian higher education. Furthermore, to ensure that this pedagogical approach is grounded in a solid base, researchers need to develop appropriate evaluation tools to rigorously assess the impact of service learning on all stakeholders (i.e. community, faculty, university and students).

It must be mentioned that integrating service learning into courses involves several trade-offs for the instructor and the university. For example, establishment of the service learning part of the course was time consuming. However, such challenges can be overcome once a database of community organisations who are interested in partnering with universities in implementing service learning is compiled.

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