

# AN EXPLORATION OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF A DISTANCE SERVICE-LEARNING COURSE IN FOUR AFRICAN COUNTRIES

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the experiences of students who participated in a distance service-learning programme. The students from Lesotho, Kenya, Malawi and Zimbabwe had completed a service-learning project in their communities. Using telephone interviews, this study attempted to ascertain the benefits and challenges of doing service-learning via distance learning, and in addition to establish whether the experience had been meaningful to the students from an Afrocentric perspective. Interviews of 11 students revealed that the challenges they had experienced were those commonly experienced by African students enrolled in distance learning. Service-learning added challenges in terms of additional costs, and the difficulties of establishing relationships of trust in communities. The students also reported having a sense of responsibility and empathy towards others which made their service-learning endeavours meaningful to them. Issues of social justice and learning from the communities in which they were placed did not feature in the interviews. This highlights the importance of foregrounding these matters in the materials developed for these courses.

**Keywords:** Service-learning; distance learning; Africa; Afrocentric



## BACKGROUND

Killian (2012) describes the development of a distance learning programme for community caregivers. She describes the model of situated-supported-distance-learning (SSDL) that was designed to provide optimal support and contextualization for the students. The current article develops this description by taking a critical look at the challenges and benefits of students who participated in the programme, particularly their experiences with the service-learning module. In addition, the article focuses on the Afrocentric perspectives that students brought to bear on their experiences.

Currently in its fifth cycle, the Community Based Work with Children and Youth (CBWCY) certificate (pre-university) course was originally offered to 553 students in eight African countries: Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The pilot phase was completed in 2010 with 495 students graduating and receiving their certificates. The CBWCY certificate programme offers a distance learning approach which includes contact sessions with a mentor and mentor groups. Students are sent paper-based materials, which are couriered to each country. Likewise, submissions from students are couriered back to South Africa for assessment. During the mentor sessions, students discuss the materials they have been sent, and are prompted to draw on their previous knowledge and experience in order to scaffold curriculum content (Killian 2012). Mentors (who are usually working in the field) are considered the main source of support to their respective groups of 12 to 20 students as they have awareness and knowledge about the local communities as well as other wider issues (Killian 2012).

In order to obtain the certificate, students had to complete six modules over a period of 18 months:

Module 1: Personal and Professional Development

Module 2: Human Rights and Child Protection

Module 3: Child and Youth Development

Module 4: Care and Support of Children at Risk

Module 5: Community Development

Module 6: Service-learning Project

This study focused on the sixth module: the service-learning project. For this module, students were required to negotiate a forty-hour placement in a local organization over the course of five weeks. The students were encouraged to spread their experience over five weeks to enable reflection and insight, as well as opportunities to share and learn during their contact sessions with their mentors and groups. Students were required to submit a plan for their service-learning project and a reflective report on their experience at the end. In addition they presented their reflection to their local

mentor group. The participants in the current study completed their service-learning in 2010.

There is very little research on service-learning offered via distance programmes, and that which exists is mainly from developed countries where technology and infrastructure are accessible. Thus the published literature reports on online or blended approaches to service-learning. This is, however, not the case in most African contexts. There is also very little research about service-learning in the African context, particularly with reference to African collectivist values. The current study wants to address this gap in the literature.

## THEORIES AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

### Service-learning

Drawing on Dewey's notions of an educative experience, service-learning is a pedagogy which places students in community-based settings as part of their curriculum. Students are expected to engage critically with the theory to which they have been exposed in order to make sense of their actual experiences. Different forms of service-learning, mainly from the USA, are used globally. Different terms describe the pedagogy, for example, community-based learning and academic service-learning. Le Grange (2007) argues from a Derridian perspective that service-learning has been "re-territorialised" (Le Grange 2007) to ensure a better fit with the context, particularly in South Africa. Whether this has happened in other African countries, too, is not clear.

The activities in which service-learning students engage are meant to be mutually beneficial, i.e. they enable student learning beyond the "classroom", while being useful to the host community. Service-learning aims to challenge the traditional roles of students by requiring them to be co-producers of knowledge (Felten and Clayton 2011). Service-learning on the whole aims to promote the transformation of student perspectives and practices (Felten and Clayton 2011). This transformation is considered as taking place as the actual experiences challenge students' pre-conceptions, and reflection activities assist them in developing new understandings. Many publications have documented the benefits of service-learning for students. These are mostly organised along the domains of academic outcomes, personal outcomes, social outcomes and citizenship outcomes (Conway, Amel and Gerwien 2009). Although purported to be mutually beneficial, there is very little research on community perspectives of hosting service-learning students (Stoecker 2016).

Service-learning initiatives can be conceptualised as existing along a continuum with "charity"-based approaches (Morton 1995) at the one end and more critical, social justice approaches at the other. Different models of service-learning may be positioned at various points along this continuum (Mitchell and Humphries 2007).

A charitable approach tends to focus on short-term inputs, where students give of themselves with little expectation of long-term impact. Charity further involves the provision of services or resources to those who are considered “in need”, but with the control remaining with those who are doing the giving (Morton 1995). Whilst this kind of approach may provide some kind of immediate relief to the communities involved, it can also perpetuate social inequities, and place the student in the position of “an other” who is able to give and then walk away.

A critical service-learning (CSL) approach requires students to move beyond reflection to take action by exposing power imbalances and social inequities (Rhoads 1997). A critical service-learning approach requires students to use academic inputs and apply these to their service in a larger context. Critical reflection (through dialogue and written submissions) is vital to ensure that students are encouraged to consider the structural causes that compel their service (Mitchell 2008). In critical service-learning students are required to critically examine the systems of oppression that have created the social problems they encounter (Megivern 2010).

Most of the literature on service-learning emanates from the West, and as such African perspectives are not accounted for. Other authors in this journal have foregrounded the issue of *Ubuntu* (du Toit-Brits, Potgieter and Hongwane, 2012; Higgs, van Niekerk, and van Wyk 2010), thus a brief synopsis of *Ubuntu* as an Afrocentric perspective is presented below, before relating this framework to service-learning.

## An Afrocentric perspective

Mkabela (2005) explained that the “collective ethic” of the Afrocentric perspective acknowledges that survival is strongly tied to group harmony and all actions are carried out with the aim of sustaining the harmony and balance of the system (Mkabela 2005). Humanness is central to this system which is portrayed by generosity, love, maturity, hospitality, politeness, understanding and humility (Mkabela 2005). The African philosophy, *Ubuntu*, relies heavily on the social ties a human being has and their interconnectedness and dependence on other human beings. Therefore, the well-being of one individual is not possible without the well-being of the rest of the community. This is suggested by the isiZulu saying: “*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*”- one exists because of others in a web of relationships (Dolamo 2013).

## Service-learning and *Ubuntu*

As stated above, there is a dearth of literature on service-learning in Africa, there is thus very little published literature on service-learning and *Ubuntu*. In an effort to understand how community service (more broadly) might relate to *Ubuntu* we consulted studies of volunteerism in Africa. In their study Carpara, Mati, Obadare and Perold (2013) found that informal volunteerism is more popular in Southern

African communities, mainly due to *Ubuntu*. They also concluded that in Southern Africa, informal volunteerism is characterized by the fact that the volunteers and recipients share the same socio-economic backgrounds, i.e. “the poor serve the poor” (Carpara et al. 2013, 5).

Perold, Caraphina and Mohamed (2006) also posited that cultural and/or religious values often drive volunteerism that endorses the concept of the public good, which goes beyond the immediate family to the African family (the local community). They also indicated that the notion of *Letsema* is located within the concept of community ownership and is nurtured from the African philosophy, *Ubuntu*. *Vukuzenzele* is “to lend a hand in building a better life for all” (Perold et al. 2006, 12). While *Letsema* advocates African togetherness, *Vukuzenzele* tends to lean towards African personhood in the sense that individuals take initiative to make things happen for themselves with the aim that others will follow the trend (Perold et al. 2006).

## Distance learning in an African context

In order to understand how a distance service-learning programme may be experienced in an African context, it is useful to take a brief look at distance learning itself, which is not a recent phenomenon in Africa (Breetzke 2007). In 1946, the University of South Africa (UNISA) started a distance learning programme. In Botswana, Kenya, Malawi and Zambia, distance education initiatives have been used for teacher training since the 1960s (Breetzke 2007). An increase in demand for access to educational opportunities and a simultaneous decrease in budgets for educational provision has led to a rising interest in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) regarding the prospects of distance education (Mays 2005).

In order to understand what learning means to a distance learner, the sociocultural frameworks which are likely to influence the individual's attitudes regarding learning and education, must be considered. Makoe (2006) found that most African students who were enrolled in distance education institutions were socialised and brought up in environments that are extensively different from those which are predominant in institutions of higher learning. The majority of African students come into higher education expecting a similar setting to their past schooling, which involves having a teacher control and direct learning (Makoe 2006). Hence, when they enter the distance learning environment and have to work independently, feelings of loneliness, insecurity and alienation tend to arise (Makoe 2006). Makoe (2006) argued that not only does distance education encourage student independence but it also requires and assumes it. Makoe (2006) found that the culture behind independent learning is problematic for most students who believe that learning is an interactive social process.

Various authors have recorded the various barriers that students encounter in distance education. These include feelings of insecurity about their progress, and a perceived lack of feedback or contact with instructors which may result in self-evaluation problems (Galusha 1997). Nyerere, Gravenir and Mse (2012) highlighted the challenges of distance-learning in Africa, including a lack of infrastructure and connectivity beyond major cities, and a lack of adequately trained professionals. The lack of technological infrastructure was emphasized by Basaza, Milman and Wright (2010), who also cautioned that the need to rely on printed materials may counter oral traditions to which students are accustomed. Geduld (2013) added personal stress, time management and a lack of proficiency in English as further barriers for students engaging in open and distance learning.

## Service-learning and distance learning

Service-learning through distance learning appears in the main to be offered in developed countries through online courses. There are multiple articles about the possibilities that technology affords for offering service-learning and developing online communities for service-learning students. There is, however, little published research on service-learning via a distance approach in other parts of the world, particularly when technology is not available. No published research could be found which explores the current model of offering service-learning that is the focus of this paper.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given the limited research on service-learning via distance learning, with particular emphasis on the African context, this study sought to answer the following questions:

- What are the benefits and challenges of a distance service-learning programme in an African context?
- What did participants learn from the service-learning and how did they apply this learning to service?

## METHOD AND RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative interpretive approach was adopted to investigate the nature of this distance service-learning programme in an African context (Babbie and Mouton 2005). An interpretive approach was appropriate as students' experiences were foregrounded. This approach allowed participants' perspectives to be considered as valid and useful data (Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Kelly 2006). Data collection occurred via telephone interviews which were recorded.

The sample was selected using purposive and volunteer sampling. The volunteer sample was made up of those willing to participate in 30-minute telephone interviews. Since participants were from different countries and geographically dispersed, telephone interviews were appropriate, given resource constraints. The participants lacked internet and/or computer access which meant online interviews were not possible. The prevalence of cellular/mobile phones enabled the use of telephone interviews to collect data.

## Recruitment of participants

In this study, the target population was made up of the students from the African countries that enrolled for the CBCWY certificate programme in 2010. The researcher collected data from participants in four African countries (Lesotho, Kenya, Malawi and Zimbabwe) via telephone interviews. These four countries were selected as the certificate was delivered in English in these countries, which prevented language barriers during data collection. (Mozambique was excluded from the sample as most of the students there completed the certificate in Portuguese.) The sample of participants was taken from a list of students who were part of the programme in each of the four countries. A volunteer sampling approach was used, based on accessibility of participants. The following criteria were used in selecting the sample: they were contactable by telephone; they were comfortable conversing in English and they were willing to provide the contact details of their community organisations.

## Sampling of participants

A list of students who were enrolled for the certificate was provided by REPSSI. Students who had cellular/mobile phone numbers were contacted via telephone calls and text messages. The final sample was chosen from those who were willing to participate and who met the inclusion criteria. The final sample consisted of 11 participants, three participants each from Kenya, Lesotho and Malawi and two participants from Zimbabwe. The sample size was largely determined by logistical issues, including time and resource limitations.

## Ethical considerations

The information sheet was read to participants, as it lucidly explained what the research was about, what their participation entailed as well as how the data obtained would be used. If the student gave consent, the telephone interview proceeded. The confidentiality of all participants was maintained. Pseudonyms were used when reporting findings. Likewise, it was relevant to note whether students had previously been involved in working at their placement organisation and their past experience in communities. Where these details were required, care was taken not to link them to

any identifying information so that confidentiality was ensured. There was no direct benefit to the students through their participation and as they had already completed their studies, there was no risk of their suffering negative academic consequences because of the research. The Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at UKZN gave ethical clearance for the research. (Protocol reference number HSS/0326/013M).

## Data collection

Data collection was carried out via individual telephone interviews which lasted between 20 – 30 minutes. Telephone interviews were chosen due to the complexities involved in gaining ethical clearance to travel to countries to collect data in situ, and the geographic dispersion of the participants mentioned above. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. One of the main difficulties experienced with the use of telephone interviews was blurred connections and network problems. This resulted in numerous calls having to be made to each participant, firstly to inform the participants of the research and to gain informed consent, and subsequent calls to the participants at the agreed upon times for the actual interview. During the calls, the poor quality of the connections sometimes necessitated stopping the interview and calling again when the participant had better reception. The questions asked during the interview concerned the students' basic demographic information, the kind of service-learning project they chose and their experiences (positive and negative) of the programme. In addition they were specifically asked about being African and doing service-learning.

## Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview transcripts in order to find “repeated patterns of meaning” (Braun and Clark 2006, 15). Following immersion in the data, themes and sub-themes were developed and named. The themes were developed around the interview questions, which asked directly about the challenges and benefits of the experience for the students. For example, under the theme of “challenges of distance service-learning”, a sub-theme of “lack of academic resources” developed which had its own sub-themes of “lack of face-to-face interaction” and “lack of academic infrastructure”. In the final report these were integrated into a narrative account.

## Reliability, validity and rigour

In this study, dependability and confirmability were ensured by using clear and thorough data collection techniques and methods and by providing clear descriptions of the data analysis and methods used. Trustworthiness (Babbie and Mouton 2005)



was enhanced by the researchers' comparing and discussing the themes reported in the data. Both researchers independently reviewed the transcriptions of the telephone interviews and generated some over-arching and sub-themes that were compared and combined.

## Limitations of the design

One of the main limitations of this study was the representativeness of the sample. The certificate was offered in eight African countries but, due to resource constraints data was only collected from four of these countries (Lesotho, Malawi, Zimbabwe and Kenya). The sampling procedure used may have also contributed to the limitations of this study. A volunteer sampling method was used and this resulted in a self-selected sample. Thus participants who made up this sample may have a bias towards volunteering, and respond positively to service-learning. Those who refused to participate may have had a different experience of the service-learning module.

Language may have also been a possible barrier in this study. Interviews were conducted in English, hence English second language speakers may not have been given the proper platform to express their views and ideas. Understanding some of the participants' answers during the telephone interviews was hard and exacerbated probing for further information. Similarly, respondents also struggled to understand the researchers' questions in a few instances. Telephone interviews may not have been the most effective method to obtain the students' perspectives and future research should consider alternative approaches.

Another limitation was the timing of data collection. As explained before, the service-learning module investigated was offered in 2010. Data collection was finalised in 2013, so that a three-year gap developed between the completion of the module and the collection of data. This may have had an influence on the nature of data obtained in the sense that, had data been collected shortly upon the completion of the programme, richer data could have been obtained, as the students may have had the experience foremost in their minds. It is, however, worth noting that three years after the experience the students were able to recall the learning experience clearly and provide feedback.

## RESULTS

### Theme one: Challenges of distance service-learning

#### *Lack of academic resources*

The participants described struggling with a lack of face-to-face interaction and with poor academic infrastructure. Many participants stated that one of the challenges of distance service-learning was the limited interaction with peers and mentors.

Umm I feel that that a lack of interaction with other students and mentors was was one of the main challenges I experienced like I think not having enough interaction with them leads to limited school information and uhh and knowledge sharing. (Female student, Lesotho, Age 34)

Students also struggled with a lack of academic infrastructure, it was often hard for the students to access the internet or to make use of computers for research purposes.

You know uhh it's not like you go to school with computers with big libraries so umm so when you want to research or know something you should must try to find (inaudible) yourself you own way with it. (Female student, Zimbabwe, Age 33)

Participants pointed out that due to a lack of access to information and “no conducive learning environment” (Female student, Lesotho, Age 34) they tended to miss submission deadlines.

Further, participants described feeling isolated and unsupported:

I can tell you it is hard no one to see when you experienced problems like you have to wait for next session then you feel alone and (inaudible) don't know what to do so you do what you think should do. (Male student, Kenya, Age 29)

### Lack of resources

Many of the participants reported facing multiple financial challenges with regard to supporting their academic-related works. Service-learning added further costs to this, especially in the form of the cost of travelling to the community site. Sometimes students had to choose between food and transport. Below are extracts from students from Kenya and Lesotho:

Even for me sometimes I still know it when you don't have money and have to walk so I know. (Male student, Lesotho, Age 41)

And think of how to eat transportation and food sometimes it happens that I had to make choice uhh hmm ya that's it all. (Male student, Kenya, Age 29)

Finding money to do everything that was mostly hard sometimes you know uh uh to travel, to eat, to live to buy school things pens pencils papers uhhh things you know. (Male student, Kenya, Age 40)

The issue of finances was raised by many participants across interviews.

### Competing roles

One of the main issues for all of the participants in this context was dealing with their competing roles.

You know it is not easy to study and work at a same time you come home uhh you feel tired and then have to deal with school works so ya it is a challenge for me. (Female student, Zimbabwe, Age 51)

I can look on the side of time looking like if like you use you focus only on several issues like my (inaudible) voice when there is time to study and at the same time looking at family matters to handle study and family at same time.(Male student, Malawi, Age 30)

Many participants said that they were frequently overwhelmed when they could not handle the pressures of their jobs together with the pressures of being a student. Some found it hard to concentrate on their studies while having to look after their families.

### *Difficulty establishing trusting relationships in communities*

An issue that the participants reported was the difficulty in establishing relationships of trust with their community sites. This is not unique to a distance-learning model, and is often reported in the service-learning literature. These excerpts from the students illustrate this struggle:

But at the same time, when you work for the community, you know it takes time you want to help but people won't talk maybe I think that maybe they think we don't understand. (Male student, Malawi, Age 30)

Uhh. Yes African culture makes me (inaudible) is the thing which is good. But how is that might say not good for that they cannot trust you. (Female student, Lesotho, Age 56)

This student appeared to be arguing that despite sharing a common culture, there may still be issues with trust from the community she was engaging with.

## Theme two: Benefits of distance service-learning

### *Affordability*

Although participants reported being burdened economically, on a daily basis, regardless of whether they were studying or not, distance learning was regarded as a more affordable option. The participants indicated that they enjoyed distance service-learning mainly because they had an opportunity to get an education while not having to spend a lot of money. Most of the participants reported that there were no major study fees involved in getting a distance education. (The programme was sponsored at this time). Also, many participants suggested that it was easier for them to carry on with their daily lives as they could get an education while still living at home and not having to spend more money on food and/or rent.

One of the positive sides is that it is affordable it is cheap and no fees paid also also that there is no extra food or residential costs umm such as rent or live in school residences because you study from home so this was nice ya. (Female student, Lesotho, Age 34)

### Independent learning

Although some students reported feeling isolated, a Malawian participant reported enjoying the independence of this kind of study:

I got to enjoy the part when uhh we get to learn and do work at my own pace you know like I had no teacher pressurizing me in the moment to do this and to do that I make timetables and then I tried my best to uhhh follow them and work at my own pace. (Female student, Malawi, Age 26)

Others reported the freedom they were allowed with managing their own programme:

A married person like me and I am still got the chance to to supervise my kids study help them with their homework and hmm to have family time and to assist in family matters. (Male student, Lesotho, Age 41)

### Research opportunities

Some participants expressed that another benefit of doing a distance service-learning course is that they learnt new ways of understanding and doing research.

Getting the chance of doing research that when you are doing it, you are at the community knowing how to work how to know research how to do research. (Female student, Lesotho, Age 34)

P: On the positive side, it's like you know you get opportunities you know like doing assignments and research and and get educated

R: Okay how

P: Because the because most of the time when doing assignment you get the opportunity of going to the community because you are already there in the community

R: Mmm mmm

P: Getting of the chance of doing the research that when you are doing it you are at the community knowing research. (Male student, Lesotho, Age 41)

This participant highlighted the value of doing research whilst based in the community. He appeared to be arguing for the value of contextualised research, which the service-learning placement offered.

### Opportunity to work in communities

The majority of participants reported that they benefited from the opportunity to work in the community. They expressed how lucky they felt to have had such an interesting and challenging experience.

It was very nice I feel lucky and more confident now to go into the community and to learn you know to understand their feelings their circumstances and to know all their stories. I think I really believe that if you uhh really want to help a community first of all, your first hmm urrm first uhh first step is to know their stories and to and to listen. (Female student, Malawi, Age 26)

P: Yes uhh it's like fun (inaudible) you go you enjoy your work you know sometimes you go and don't feel like it is studying which is uhh is hard you go you play and show things to youngsters yes. (Male student, Kenya, Age 29)

P: Yes, what I notice during my project, uhh I got a reason which like, it has now given me a confidence whenever I am going for a work to the community. (Male student, Malawi, Age 30)

The students reported their service-learning experiences as interesting, engaging and as building their confidence.

### Theme three: Afrocentric perspectives on service-learning

Many students drew on Afrocentric notions to explain their service-learning experience. They reported the African values that guided them throughout their service-learning and substantiated their decisions to enrol in the programme.

#### A philosophical approach

Participants stated that one of the reasons that influenced their decision to enter the programme, and that also kept them motivated throughout the course of their service-learning, was that they deeply felt and strongly believed that it was their duty, as Africans, to help the community.

We fight together and we find solutions to the problems together. (Male student, Malawi, Age 30).

R: And how did you think being an African has influenced your service-learning?

P: This influence us to, to put prejudice away all of us

R: Yes?

P: ...and uh do and keep Ubuntu. (Male student, Lesotho, Age 41)

Whilst not explicitly stated, an Afrocentric perspective appeared to influence participants' service-learning by helping them to empathise with communities' struggles:

Go in go and uhh work and help because we understand being grown up with less little so when we can, we help I think that umm my personal experience in life is what helped umm in my work in community the service-learning. (Male student, Lesotho, Age 41)

As the service-learning module involved community-based work with children and youth in difficult circumstances in Africa, these sometimes resonated with the students. The participants revealed their own experiences with poverty and how these experiences helped prepare them for their service-learning. One participant from Zimbabwe explained how she empathised with participants:

R: So what else can you tell me about being an African and doing the distance learning and uhh service-learning module?

P: Hmm also the sense that we know poverty here we know it for it so if we go work with community, we also know what they know being an African makes me understand sometimes there was no food no clothes even no shoes to walk hmm

R: Yes?

P: So yes we go sometimes illnesses maybe that because there is no finance so I understand as an African woman I feel well uhh yes. (Female student, Zimbabwe, Age 33)

### The importance of the African family

Participants reported that they decided to enter the programme to provide a better life for their families. They explained that having an education will help them to get better employment which will enhance their financial situations which will consequently help them better attend to the needs of their families.

Yeah, because I was the the first-born it is expected of me to win the bread to what I was expecting big support to my family. (Male student, Malawi, Age 30)

Also uhh to be able to make a life take care of my family experience I have but today it is good to get more like you get education you get certificate you get more money sometime then you can take care of you of the family. (Female student, Zimbabwe, Age 51)

Family was constructed differently by different participants, with some referring to their immediate relatives and others using the term more broadly. The participants indicated that because of their African heritage and culture they were more aware and had a better understanding of poverty and injustice, and their family members, especially spouses, were very supportive of their decision to work in the community and consequently help their African family or members of the community.

P: My family is very important

R: Okay hmm may you elaborate on this for me please?

P: Hmm so my family they always here for me they understood why I wanted to learn also also they know they know about all the problems that that the community has we grow in this atmosphere it's...

R: Yes?

P: Uhh we know how poor and sad people are so helping them you know uhh like yours own its (inaudible). (Female student, Lesotho, Age 56)

## Theme four: Learning from service-learning

Very little was elicited from the participants about what they learnt from the service-learning experience. Even after much probing, participants did not reveal that they had learnt specifically from their service-learning in their communities. They acknowledged that learning was important, but did not expand beyond this.

I wanted to study getting an education be recognized to be able to to be able to provide for myself. (Male student, Kenya, Age 29)

It's like you know you get opportunities you know like doing assignments and research and and get educated. (Male student, Malawi, Age 30)

## Reflection

Reflection is an important part of service-learning. In this study, however, few participants mentioned the reflection process. One such instance was from a participant in Lesotho:

P: I have learnt a lot from this course let me mention a few.

R: Yes?

P: It's like I have learnt a few self-reflection being a reflective practitioner because after the completion of the course, my way of dealing with people changed but I still maintain it is not enough I mean furthering. (Female student, Lesotho, Age 34)

In addition a participant from Malawi explained using reflection in his learning:

P: Okay yeah so I have come to understand many things I have learned a lot during the course.

R: Can you please elaborate for me?

P: Yeah when we started, we studied about how to know and to reflect we read so I get to go with the community see and understand uhhh...

R: Yes?

P: Understand the people and community data then I go back and think of it and what it means. (Male student, Malawi, Age 30)

Reflection was otherwise not highlighted by the other participants, possibly indicating a lack of awareness of the importance of this skill for learning from experience.

## Social justice and charity

There was also very little evidence of students moving from a focus on charity to notions of social justice, or a critical service-learning approach. Many participants demonstrated a charity approach regarding their service to communities. For example:

Yes so especially being an African I have been able to know how to help I have the experience of their feelings and situation so yes I manage to handle going to the community and help show them that I know their situation and provide the necessary aids. (Female student, Lesotho, Age 56)

P: Yes I have learned I know much more now of how to listen and understand and help the community they are in such poor circumstances and it is an opportunity to learn to deal with such things to hmm yes.

R: Yeah?

P: To be able to provide assistance through the module. (Female student, Malawi, Age 26)

## DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that although students shared similar experiences across countries, there were nevertheless differences in their reports. The main challenges that students reported encountering related to distance-learning, with some specific to the demands of the service-learning experience.

As is common with other distance learning programmes, students in this programme reported finding a lack of access to academic resources challenging. The participants in this study reported that studying through distance learning did not offer enough interaction with other students (Kleinman and Entin 2002). Whilst the SSDL model of delivery was different to other forms of distance learning, by providing mentors and mentor groups, participants reported that they were not given enough time with their mentors to discuss all their thoughts and issues with regard to their academic work (cf. Galusha 1997). The lack of student support and services expressed by the participants is consistent with the findings of other authors (Galusha 1997; Makoe 2006). Consistent with Makoe's (2006) study, findings in the current study also reveal that the participants were raised and socialised in environments which involved a fair amount of teacher control and direct learning. Hence, when introduced to distance learning, they reported feeling isolated and lost.

A lack of financial resources was also reported by the respondents as a challenge of distance learning. Although the current participants were drawn to distance learning because of its cost-effective nature (Mays 2005) the students discussed their financial struggles, and reported that they could not afford the expenses that came with being a distance learner. In some cases, the demands of the service-learning



programme (travelling to another site, costs associated with service) increased the financial strain on those who were already struggling.

The participants reported that distance service-learning remained their best option as they had the opportunity to get an education without having to exhaust their already limited financial resources (cf: Makoe 2006). In this instance it was likely because their participation in the certificate had been sponsored and the students were not required to pay student fees. A withdrawal of this sponsorship would likely impact on the affordability of the programme.

Whilst the majority of participants in this study enjoyed the opportunity to work in communities (Killian 2004), they did not report on learning from their communities in their interviews. There were no reports of learning from and valuing local knowledge. Some also reported difficulties in establishing relationships of trust with their community sites. Despite evidence in the literature regarding the usefulness of service-learning to all those involved, such as students, communities and universities, the current study did not reveal many of these benefits, especially in terms of student learning, other than some students who reported gaining research skills.

## Students' learning: Application of learning to serve

In the current sample of participants, service-learning appeared to remain at the level of a charitable activity (Mitchell and Humphries 2007), and there was little evidence of students moving from the aspect of charity to social justice. In the main, a charity orientation was evident in the way in which students discussed their helping communities, without mentioning the need to challenge the existing oppressive structures that allowed these unacceptable circumstances to prevail. Students therefore did not appear to see a role for themselves beyond providing immediate relief and services. They did not mention broader social and political factors and the potential for intervening in these systems. The reasons for this were not explored in the interview, as the trend in their reporting only became apparent upon analysis.

Mitchell (2008) warns that many service-learning students fail to shift from charity to social justice. The participants in this study appeared to relate easily to the philosophy of service-learning in that it resonated with Afrocentric beliefs about the connectivity of people and mutual responsibility for well-being. Students reported little or no learning at all from the service-learning experience or from the communities in which they were placed.

In future programmes social justice aims therefore need to be foregrounded whilst preparing students for their engagement with communities, and critical reflection must be emphasised to assist students to identify and extract what they are gaining and learning from the communities in which they are placed.

## Distance learning, service-learning and African values

Mkabela (2005) highlights the notion of African togetherness and humanness. The participants in this study were motivated to participate in the CBCWY certificate programme and the service-learning by their sense of duty, as Africans, to go and “help” the community. They emphasised the importance of being empathic, and indicated that growing up in underprivileged circumstances could result in determination and motivation to enter communities to provide assistance. The service-learning module involved community-based work with children and youth in difficult circumstances in Africa. Many of these children were from orphanages, rescue centres and special schools, and were from financially disadvantaged environments. The participants felt their own experiences with poverty helped prepare them for their service-learning. As Perold and colleagues' volunteerism research revealed, in Africa the poor are often serving the poor (Carpara et al. 2013; Perold et al. 2006).

African notions of family (as extending beyond immediate relatives) also influenced their service-learning experiences. Family was a motivating factor in aspiring for a better future through gaining an educational qualification; as well as the fact that their families supported their work in the extended family of the community. Afrocentric perspectives advocate serving others and respecting their well-being. Participants explained that extending assistance to others was key to their service-learning (Mkabela, 2005). They further stated that as Africans, it is their personal duty to contribute to better communities to whom they feel a sense of responsibility and belonging. Although many of the students reported their own difficult circumstances (particularly, economic instability), they still insisted that they should be actively involved in communities. This study is therefore different from other published research in developed contexts where the authors referred to students who are privileged serving the underprivileged (Bruce and Brown, 2010; Megivern, 2010), and highlights some of the issues which emerge from asking students in difficult circumstances to work alongside and assist children in difficult circumstances.

Other authors have highlighted how volunteerism is a concept that is readily accepted and executed in the African context. The results of the current study reveal how many students claimed that it is their own struggle to sustain themselves that drives their determination to assist in communities. Thus, while this study highlights the fact that collectivist values make service-learning a congruent experience for students, it is not clear how these values influence or interact with the service-learning experience. The participants' emphasis on helping others over-shadowed any mention of the need for social justice. It is not clear how an emphasis on collective well-being interacts with social justice aims in the service-learning context.

## CONCLUSION

The service-learning experience for these distance learners appears to have been both challenging and rewarding. The challenges they described are not unique to service learning, but are common to distance learning more generally. The service-learning experience itself seems to have been meaningful to the students as it was congruent with their African value system. It is, however, not clear from these results what students learnt from their communities or whether the service-learning endeavour succeeded in achieving any of the social justice aims to which it aspires.

This research has indicated that a situated supported distance learning model seems to be viable for service-learning. Students were able to plan and implement service-learning projects in their own communities despite a lack of infrastructure and support. Future programs should consider ways in which to foreground the importance of valuing local knowledge and the process of learning in and from communities. They should explore students' understandings of social justice and whether and how this kind of action is possible in their contexts. Students' need to be encouraged to see the value of their existing Afrocentric worldviews for service-learning practice.

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