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Live, Serve, Learn: A Critical Reflection on a Journey of an International Service-Learning Programme of a Residential College in Macau, China (0124)

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Abstract: Service-learning and residential-learning are two integrated educational practices increasingly recognised by higher education institutions in East Asia, including the case university in Macau. Placing service-learning within the residential college (RC) setting is one of the university's strategies to weave liberal education and civic engagement into the core educational experiences of students. With the methodology of action research and through a critical reflection on the implementation of a recent international service-learning trip to Laos, this research paper aims to identify approaches to effective service-learning for RC students. Based on multiple sources of data, such as interviews, activity records and student reflective work, a number of issues critical to RC service-learning programming are examined, for example, the needs to develop stronger links between student formal learning and service experience, to reinforce student ownership in different stages of the programme, and to provide professional development programmes for faculty as programme leaders and facilitators.

Background

In an age of global movements of people, capital, information and commodities, people from different cultures and ethnicities interact with each other in embedded social, political and economic relationships. All these shifts bring about changing needs of knowledge, skills and values that are needed for civic engagement and global citizenship. Service-learning and residential-learning are two educational practices for integrated education which helps students to synthesise what they learn in different courses and to connect in- and out-of-classroom experiences. These two approaches have been adopted by an increasing number of higher education institutions in East Asia, for example, those in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau and Singapore, beyond the Western countries as their origin.

A residential college (RC) system serves 'as a means to integrate students' in-class and out-of-class experiences by providing a community that fosters greater faculty and peer interaction, increased opportunities for coordinated learning activities, and an academically and socially supportive living environment' (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003, p. 335). Prior research, particularly based on findings from American institutions, showed many positive effects of living-learning programs on a wide range of student outcomes, for example, significantly higher levels of involvement in campus activities, interaction with faculty and peers, integration with the institutional environment, and gains in intellectual and personal development (Pike, 1999; Stassen, 2003; Inkelas et al., 2006).

Service-learning is a carefully monitored educational experience in which students participate in an organised service activity that meets identified community needs, and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999). With equal emphasis on service and learning, any service-learning programmes must provide benefits to both the recipients and providers of the service (Furco, 1996). Recognising it as a key to enhancing students' sense of empathy and civic engagement and contributing to a global civil society, more universities have included service-learning as part of their strategic plan. More than just doing service, an academic capture of knowledge is required through written reflection, small group discussions, class presentations, multimedia projects or other forms that express what the student has learned (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Jay, 2008).

As the University of Macau is attempting to weave liberal education and civic engagement into the core educational experiences of students, its RC system also acts an important part in this transformation. In 2010, two pilot residential colleges were established and have gradually taken shape in terms of management approaches and student development programmes. Envisioning the importance of global citizenship to university education, service-learning programmes have started to be incorporated into the RC programming, both in-house and off-campus. Towards the end of 2012, the idea of organising a service-learning trip to Laos was first raised by the College Master of one of the RCs after establishment of connections with an international research institute which has a range of on-going development projects in Southeast Asia. After a few months of planning, including a series of coordination, student recruitment, logistical arrangements and pre-departure preparation, the weeklong trip was conducted in May 2013. The final student projects which

encompass written reflection, videos, a photo exhibition and sharing sessions will be completed by September 2013.

Placing service-learning within the RC setting also has an objective in addition to the respective goals of service-learning and residential learning. The students were expected to develop a stronger sense of collegiality and belonging to the RC community through the program. By living a social life in an unfamiliar environment but still working together with their peers towards shared goals, this would be a great opportunity for the participants to engage in dialogue that leads to understanding, cooperation and accommodation, and that can therefore sustain differences within a broader compact of toleration and respect (Jay, 2008).

As some service-learning programmes are to be incorporated into and implemented via the RC system, which is a less-researched area of educational research, we are not yet certain what the best way is to do so to fully accomplish the goals of both service-learning and residential-learning. Facing this practical issue, we ask: *How can we do better for effective service-learning for residential college students?* This research therefore aims to explore possible ways to improve the service-learning in a RC setting through critically reflecting on the experience in organising an international service-learning trip to Laos for RC students.

Figure 1: The incorporation of service-learning into the residential college system to enhance students' sense of civic responsibility and global citizenship.

Methods

As a quest for knowledge about how to improve educational programming, this research project adopts the approach of action research. Reflective discussions with various stakeholders, including the student participants, the RC academic staff and the personnel of the supporting organisations, particularly over the course of organising the service-learning trip, have been and are being conducted. Multiple sources of data are collected and to be interpreted, including, but not limited to, interviews, activity records, briefing and debriefing group discussions, videotapes, photos and students' reflective work. The data are analysed and compared with open and axial coding, and themes are to be developed and interpreted.

Preliminary Results and Discussion

Based on the recruitment interviews, the feedback of the students and trip leaders, the students' preliminary reflection during the trip and the debriefing discussions, as

well as the field observation, a number of issues need more thorough attention and could be improved in the future service-learning programming in the RC, especially with regard to intensive international service-learning programs. These involve the processes of planning, coordination, implementation and reflection. For example, although the current service-learning programs conducted in the RC are not offered for credit and the participation in any of these is entirely voluntary, the learning for participants must still be intentional, structured and evaluated. Therefore, more comprehensive plans are needed to introduce students the necessary understanding of the service agency (such as its mission, assumptions, structure and governance), the conditions of the lives of the service target groups in the community, and the relationship between the two groups. More efforts are required to link the formal learning of students to the service-learning programme through analysing their service experience as a source of information and ideas, along with the classroom, library, laboratory and the internet. In-field and post-service reflection with more structured guidelines and formats would enhance students' learning experience, while students also need to clearly comprehend our expectations of them to fulfil this. For teachers to serve as good advisors and facilitators of the project, professional development programs for them about service learning and support from related agencies would be much beneficial. Other key issues identified for improvement of future RC service-learning programmes include: the need to foster student ownership in different stages of the project, awareness of better engagement with the local community, and the need of comprehensive pre-service preparation through coordination and involvement of all relevant parties, including students, trip leaders and coordinators, as well as negotiation among them.

This study will serve not only to motivate to improve the current service-learning programme of the RC system through critical reflection on the case of implementing an international service-learning trip, but more broadly to shed lights onto the under-researched area of service-learning and residential-learning in higher education in East Asia.

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