

The Student as Emerging Global Citizen: mapping the journey from informal international student volunteering experience to service learning curricular initiative (0341)

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Abstract

Across Irish higher education, volunteering and service learning opportunities are gaining momentum through an endorsement within the *National Strategy for Higher Education* (Eire, 2011). Students may fulfil this requirement through volunteering or service learning, a curricular intervention linking student learning to real-life experiences (Eyler, 2011). This research focuses on a case study based in an Irish university where an informal, international student volunteering initiative was enhanced by the addition of a formal, service learning curricular opportunity. Mapping this unique journey demonstrates how the initial volunteering experience presented the impetus for creating this service learning intervention for healthcare students who wish to volunteer in the Global South. This service learning module shifted the emphasis of the volunteering experience from honing healthcare-related skills to a social justice-led preparation that includes development education, intercultural awareness and adaptability as a foundation to create a meaningful international experience that actively promoted global citizenship.

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intervention linking student learning to real-life experiences (Eyler, 2011). This research focuses on a case study based in an Irish university where an informal, international student volunteering initiative was enhanced by the addition of a formal, service learning curricular opportunity. Mapping this unique journey demonstrates how the initial volunteering experience presented the impetus for creating this service learning intervention for healthcare students who wish to volunteer in the Global South. This service learning module shifted the emphasis of the volunteering experience from honing healthcare-related skills to a social justice-led preparation that includes development education, intercultural awareness and adaptability as a foundation to create a meaningful international experience that actively promoted global citizenship.

This intrinsic case study is a snapshot in time of a transformation of a volunteering abroad programme with two distinct parts. First, the case examines a well-established volunteering programme for healthcare students organised by a volunteer student society, to enable students to gain experience volunteering in healthcare settings in the Global South. Second, the case investigates the factors that led to applying the formalised volunteering structures at the university to use this volunteering opportunity to enable students to enhance their social justice knowledge and intercultural awareness as part of the placement. The case maps this journey from established programme to new intervention: a service learning module open to students prior to this placement abroad. By building a service learning component to the programme, healthcare students are given knowledge and tools to reflect on their volunteering experience, become reflexive practitioners and build their own understanding of development education.

This Irish higher education strategy prioritises the relationship between the university and its communities and accompanied funding through the Higher Education Authority enables universities to fulfil the objective of connecting student learning to wider social concerns (McIlrath, Lyons, & Munck, 2012). There is a tension for Irish universities between their traditional liberal education role with civic responsibilities, on the one hand, and the demand to respond to external and socio-economic pressures, particularly workforce preparation, on the other (Skilbeck, 2001). As result of the neoliberal agenda in higher education student volunteering is often constructed as an individualised, skill-building opportunity. Reporting on this unique case study in an Irish university demonstrates the potential to move beyond the instrumentality of placements to enable students to consider reflective elements of the experience.

The empirical data was gathered through interviews with former student participants and society members, observation at student society recruitment and preparation events and documentary evidence from the volunteer student society, such as the society Web site that promotes student testimonials from their experience volunteering abroad. While this student society notes its mission as “bringing healthcare aid to the developing world,” Khoo’s (2011) comparative exploration concluded that “critical consideration should be given to emergent and increasingly popular forms of volunteering, international service learning and voluntourism” (350). The purpose of the case study is to critically challenge the processes that led to developing a new innovative service learning solution to enhance the core purpose of volunteering abroad by Irish students.

The candid nature of the testimonials on the student society Web site show a lack of preparation indicates hegemonic and ethnocentric views of the world. Students indicated a freedom and opportunity they had to perform healthcare practices as a positive educational experience: “We then spent a portion of each day doing various procedures that needed doing...” and “...our

afternoons were spent carrying out jobs and procedures on the wards and seeing patients in various clinics.” These students are training in the Global South and yet frame their experience as a gift to the community, rather than as a learner. Moreover, students describe the countries in which they volunteered as lacking, failing to take into account the institutional systemic structures creating systems of poverty and simply points at a malfunction to provide resources according to their own definition of standards, consistent with Okafor and Agbakwa (2001).

To improve the volunteering initiative, a relationship was formed between the student society and the university’s volunteering programme to identify the need and to design a preparatory service learning module for students in advance of going abroad. The module documentation, including academic literature to underpin the justification for the module, were also employed to create the full case study analysis. The module draws on literature such as Rizvi (2008), rethinking student learning in cultural settings as “reflexive individuals are able to challenge their own taken for granted assumptions.” (19). In addition, Kelly (2000) notes the responsibility tertiary education has in building students’ intercultural adaptability and the role of internationalisation agendas to address this need. International volunteering as conceptualised by Baillie Smith & Laurie (2011) balances the neoliberal ideas of individual autonomy, improvement and responsibility and at the same time notions of collective global citizenship, solidarity, development and activism. This is mirrored in the discussions on the role of higher education, to espouse both neoliberal internationalisation agendas as well as social civic and moral roles, as society’s servant and critic (Shapiro, 2005).

It is through this rigour of wider social justice discussions that the service learning module can enable student to prepare and reflect on their role and impact as a volunteer in the Global South. The core question underpinning the module is: How can we re-imagine international volunteering for global citizenship? Research suggests that students do not see themselves as advocates and activists after engaging in international service learning (Cermak et al 2011). This service learning module aims to instil in students the link between international volunteering as a political act that is activism and is global development work. International student volunteering is not simply benevolent and free or separate from historical colonialism and is a form of modern colonialism. By presenting this case study demonstrates that volunteering can enable more than a utilitarian, skills-based purpose for individual students, to one of the education of a global citizen.

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