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IMPACT OF SERVICE-LEARNING AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT:

Several studies have highlighted the need for the active involvement of university students in the paradigm shift from the conventional rote mode of learning to active learning. Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that allows students to impart their knowledge and skills to solve problems in the community. Although it has been implemented in some Nigerian universities, service-learning is relatively new to the educational system in Nigeria. Therefore, this exploratory study aims to identify the impact of service-learning on the students who have actively participated in such programs. Data were collected through interview and subsequently analysed using the Nvivo software. The findings showed that the service-learning programs are educationally valuable and impactful on the students. Therefore, the incorporation of service-learning into the Nigerian university curriculum is recommended.

INTRODUCTION

The need for a paradigm shift from the conventional method of teaching and learning to more pragmatic and actively involved forms of learning in educational systems have been promoted in the past (Giles Jr & Eyler, 1994; Miettinen, 2000b). According to the American philosopher John Dewey, education can only be effective and valuable when it is pragmatic. As such, it must involve practical learning that is purposely based on the real-world application of lesson conducted through a phenomenon termed experiential learning that is simply based on learning by doing (Kolb, 1984; Saltmarsh, 1996). The different ways students can engage in experiential learning has been categorized as; internship,

community service, field trip volunteerism and service-learning (Bridgeland, DiIulio Jr, & Wulsin, 2008; Furco, 1996). Various studies show shown that many countries worldwide have long adopted the use of experiential especially service-learning. (Lin, Wu, Wu, Pan, & Liao, 2014; Olagoke-Oladokun, Hassan, & Atan, 2018; Said, Ahmad, Hassan, & Awang, 2015).

Although without a definition, service-learning is simply a form of experiential education whereby students are engaged in activities that simultaneously address both human and community needs. Likewise, such events provide structured opportunities that are purposely planned to promote both student learning and development (McKinnon, Toms Smedley, & Evert, 2016; Olagoke-Oladokun et al., 2018). In contrast to the concept of education proposed by John Dewey, the educational system in Nigeria has majorly operated on the traditional form of teaching and learning characterized by rote learning. This approach involves memorization, oral recitations, and direct imposition along with the transmission of skills and facts by teachers. Typically, the students are expected to passively receive and believe the fixed answers presented by the teachers often without understanding why and how such conclusions were reached (S. Dugguh, 2013; Schwerdt & Wuppermann, 2011).

After years of practising the traditional methods of teaching in educational institutions, teachers in Nigeria have realised the need to correct the anomalies of the obsolete training of students. This approach will effectively prepare students to cope with the challenges of 21st-century jobs. Studies show the solutions require the adoption of a form of pedagogy and to train students to think critically and effectively solve societal challenges such as hunger, poverty, redundancy among others (S. I. Dugguh, 2018; Gbadamosi, 2018). To this effect, service-learning as an experiential study is gradually taking its roots in the tertiary education system of Nigeria for the effective development of students who can handle next-generation challenges (Deba, Jabor, Buntat, & Musta'mal, 2014).

Therefore, this paper presents an exploratory study to identify the significant impacts of service-learning on students who have participated in service-learning implementation in higher institutions in Nigeria. The study will therefore recommend service-learning as an approach to elevate the level of teaching and learning in the higher education system of Nigeria.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The inclusion of service-learning in higher education has challenged and placed a demand on the educational system. The objective is to encourage an active form of learning, which is the order of the day in most institutions of learning, rather than passive (Butin, 2010). Service-learning has become the best alternative to passive learning adopted by most institutions. This is because it enables students to practise what is learned in school within the community; thereby taking learning and education beyond the classroom (Dewey, 1986; Miettinen, 2000b). Different studies have demonstrated the impacts of service-learning is multifarious because its impact cuts across every phase and stages of all participants especially the students (Olagoke-Oladokun et al., 2018; Schelbe, Petracchi, & Weaver, 2014). Linking course content to real-life experiences, which is the main idea of service-learning, enhances students' ability to creatively think about how to solve practical societal problems. According to sociologists, service-learning bridges abstract and theory such that so many concepts that are

discussed theoretically can be related to day to day experiences (Knapp, Fisher, & Levesque-Bristol, 2010; Weiss, Hajjar, Giordano, & Joseph, 2016).

Furthermore, studies have shown that during service-learning implementation, students learn and serve the community by practising what is learned in the classroom and find relevance in previously taught course contents (Rama, 1998; Robinson, Lloyd Sherwood, & DePaolo, 2010). Miettinen (2000a), states that service-learning is an educational alternative tool and medium of transforming culture in educational institutions in the United States (US). The restructuring that occurred in the curriculum of the US higher education established the concept of connecting thoughts into actions and theory into practice. This theory is termed “connected institution”, which means institutions of learning are developed to address community needs (Kimball & Orrill, 1995; Saltmarsh, 1996). Service-learning is also described as “the accomplishment of tasks that meet genuine human needs in combination with conscious educational growth” (Cruz & Giles, 2000; R. Shumer, 2017). This reveals the basic important pillars of service-learning such as its benefits to the participants, students and the community. It also involves students gaining experience during the service-learning program (Schelbe et al., 2014). Among all experiential studies, service-learning has the most practical and significant effect on all participants including community, service recipients, students (service-providers), faculty (lecturers) and the institution (Kalles & Ryan, 2015; Knapp et al., 2010). The study by Said, Ahmad, Awang, and Hassan (2015) similarly observed that service-learning positively affects the entire participants but particularly the students who actively and consciously participate in the reflection and implementations processes.

Due to the observable effects of service-learning on the participants, it has been adopted over the traditional methods of teaching in most institutions of learning across countries (Olagoke-Oladokun et al., 2018). The association for higher education in the US has long adopted service-learning in all academic disciplinary areas of study. This is due to its immense benefit on the students who are engaged in service-learning. The improved attitude of students towards independent learning and the increased disposition toward civic attitudes were observed in such participants (Conard, 2008; Duplantis, 2013). Another study in Beijing (China) showed students who participated in a service-learning programme for a semester had increased ability to solve problems. The approach also deepened the students’ conceptual understanding, and ability to construct integrated and applicable knowledge, as well as transfer and apply gained knowledge in class to social practice. Lastly, the study showed that the students were also able to solve ill-structured problems better (Guo, Yao, Wang, Yan, & Zong, 2016). Likewise, Phelps (2012) showed that leadership and communication were observable skills developed by the students who participated in service-learning. The students also showed improved commitment to the public interest, community service, and self-efficiency attitudes.

A quantitative study on service-learning implementation as pre-service coursework for student teachers was conducted by Hildenbrand and Schultz (2015). The findings showed 96% of the college students agreed or strongly agreed that service-learning experiences contributed to improved classroom studies. This is because what was done on the field could be related to the course content. Furthermore, a total of 91% of the students ascribed the improvement to their ability to work with other groups of students. One of the students cited working within a group enhanced flexibility to others views on situations, which

enhanced problem-solving and collaboration skills. This finding shows that service-learning also enables the students' collegiality skill. Similarly, 93% of the students agreed the service-learning experience helped to gain skills and reinforce knowledge required to understand concepts and relate authentic experiences or "apply them to everyday learning." The study by Saltmarsh (2005) reported that about 80% of students confirmed service-learning increased civic awareness and appreciation of economic, cultural, and language diversity. Hence, the ability to link course content to real-life experiences, which is the main idea of service-learning, enhances students' creative thinking skills and solving practical societal problems (Arvidson, Heuss, & Urban, 2017).

According to sociologists, service-learning bridges the realm of generalization and theory such that so many concepts discussed in theory can be connected to day to day experiences (Arvidson et al., 2017; Giles Jr & Eyler, 1994). Service-learning makes students consider the community service environment as a field site for making analytical findings. Service projects to the communities also allow students to have direct interaction with socio-economically disadvantaged community members and address the needs of the society. This statement from Ostrow, Hesser, and Enos (1999), depicts Bertomeu, Gonzalez, and Latorre (2013) who states that service-learning brings student in direct contact with community members due to their services. The students' interaction enhances awareness of the needs of the people of the community and exposes students to real-life experiences. Besides contact with real-life experiences to solve societal challenges, implementing service-learning at higher educational institutions of learning enhances student's involvement in sociological theory. Consequently, this acts as a foundation to build students towards a committed lifestyle of social and civic engagement.

Students who participate in service-learning are also known to develop a lasting dedication towards building a better community by voluntarily sharing acquired knowledge, skills and values (Ostrow et al., 1999). According to Lascell (2014), students who participate in service-learning can exchange knowledge and experience diverse cultures, races, religions, genders, values, and social status. This experience is possible due to the social interactions and construction of the roles, which forms the basis of reflection during service-learning. Furthermore, the study proved that students who engage in service-learning experience constitute the administrative structure of their class as it exposes students to the foretaste of working in an organization. This is attributed to the idea that students who work as a group of individuals play key roles in constructing the content and organizational structure of the class (Mitchell & Rost-Banik, 2019). Such experiences by the students have ignited a curiosity towards understanding organizational structure. Hence, the process prepares and avails students with service projects towards community development. This forms the basis of how service-learning can instil commendable character in students (Robert Shumer, Lam, & Laabs, 2012).

The inclusion of service-learning in higher institutions of learning also creates an avenue for mutual connection between the university and the host community. Hence, the apparent gap or seclusion of the "ivory tower" (or higher educational institutions) from the surroundings is reduced. The study also proved that engaging in the service-learning related form of education enhances both academic and professional relevance (Marrall, 2014). Beyond its contribution to community development, Atler and Gavin (2010) opined that it can influence a

passion for research-based service to enable students to contribute and bring more understanding to the academic world. Eyler and Giles Jr (1999) stated service-learning enhances personal connection. Personally, connected individuals are known to be lifelong learners who are driven with a passion for what they do. This passion can propel such individuals to make a difference through passionate engagements (Coletta, Kamran, Khan, Dej, & Pritchard, 2019). Furthermore, the diverse benefits of service-learning accrue to all participants and undeniably proves that it is an influential instructional method adopted by learning institutions to develop desired learning outcomes in students (Lovat & Clement, 2016; Schelbe et al., 2014). Therefore, the main objective of this study is to examine the impact of service-learning on students in higher educational institutions in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach and exploratory design. The selection was due to the critical need to examine the experiences of students in Nigeria who have participated in service-learning. During the exploratory study, the data gathered from the participants showed service-learning could inspire skills required for human capital development. Hence, a total of 25 undergraduate students from two universities were purposely sampled for this study. The selection was based on students who have actively participated in service-learning implementation. Hence, this criterion ensured the researcher's respondents had enough experience and accurate information to yield the required data collected for the study in the one-on-one interviews using open-ended questions. However, a total of 18 students were interviewed as the data became saturated on the 18th participant (Creswell, 2012, 2013). The data gathered was subsequently transcribed before using the member checking technique for validation (Tesch, 2013). The transcribed data were read severally to generate representative codes and themes using the NVivo software. The generated codes from the transcripts were then used to identify each theme. Each themed statement was treated as a separate quote and could be assigned as many codes as possible. The data was analysed by interpreting the coded quotes from the most occurring themes using an inductive-deductive approach (Heerman et al., 2019).

RESULTS

Based on the inductive-deductive approach, the themes were generated while analysing the collected data. This included several studies that proven service-learning implementation positively impacts the participants. During the investigative process on the effect of service-learning implementation on undergraduate students in Nigeria, the following themes were gathered from the data. The method makes courses relevant and enhances the ability to apply and retain knowledge along with increased exposure to societal challenges, insights to career development and multiple opportunities to learn. The themes generated were therefore discussed thus;

1. **Makes course relevant:** Results obtained showed students who participated in service-learning appreciated the usefulness and the relevance of the course in meeting the needs of the community with the acquired knowledge. This is contrary to what is obtainable with other forms of conventional methods of teaching and learning where learning is abstract art.

“Yes it improves my learning because it no more about the cognitive aspect of learning, it takes us to the practical aspect even beyond leaving the four corners

of the classroom entirely we already have a taste of what my course to society issue or societal issue (Arin)”

“Okay it has been of benefit to me because I got to meet people and relate with people I got to know how I could use my field of study to be of help and to the community...yes (Joy)”

2. **Ability to apply knowledge:** The educational system in Nigeria is often referred to as the ivory tower of academia, as students have no opportunity to learn from experience. Hence, the form of education practised by higher institutions in Nigeria is mainly content-specific. Service-learning, on the other hand, enables students to employ knowledge gained in the school environment to community development. This process enables the students to help form a link by connecting the university to the community. This process helps to establish that learning occurs due to a series of interactions between individuals and the environment i.e. learning is a process of creating knowledge through experiences.

“It helps in learning because Economics is the study of human behaviour and Economics is every single thing around us, what we do...you know in the likes it is “apparently Economics,so I have been able to relate it to things am doing around my environment. It helps me learn that way because I don’t... I try to remember in exams how to apply this how to apply the practical examples the practical ways I have been able to relate to my school work to answering the exam questions...yes practically” (Cy)

“...so it made me hardworking and seriously it helped my grades. Do you know why I said that? More of what we are taught n the class is the application of all these things that I did without not knowing okay it is related to it and all that we have this course vocational rehabilitation it is a course under learning disability and you know when we were doing it and all that though our lecturer talked it in class and she expects us to write that in class but it is more of an inbuilt knowledge that is just coming from within that I added on to it. Let me tell you this my first-semester score I had 89 I have never had that before (Dammy)”

3. **Knowledge retention:** Service-learning as a form of experiential learning enables students to retain knowledge. Typically, when active participation occurs during learning activities, the students remember, know, enjoy and appreciate more the relevance of the lesson taught compared to others who passively participated in similar classes.

“So I think it is not something to start in higher institutions even to as primary schools I believe that SL should also be implemented because even children love work where they have to be involved in their friends they have to interact, they have to play when they do that they will be able to remember (Cy)”

“How it has been of benefit to me is that I was able to apply what I gained in class, I was able to exercise it, I was able to practice it, so and to make me remember this is what we did (Dorcas)”

4. **Exposure to societal challenges:** The fourth theme emerging from the data showed that the interactions exposed the students to the challenges members of the community and the public encounter. As such, the students became aware of the societal challenges and gained insights on how to solve the problems using

the skills acquired in the classroom. This study also showed that such exposure enables students to develop empathy towards fellow human beings and to achieve one of the aims of education, which is for universities to form reciprocal relationships with communities.

“SL is it increase the attitude of an individual because when somebody that participated in an SL, can reach the external world (Mumin)”

“I went to the school I was about to present the SL to and before that I tried to look at the environment the necessary things needed in the society and when I got there I looked around I discovered the somethings they needed in the society in that school so I presented it to the school, it was welcomed and I gathered the materials that will be needed for the exercise (Malik.)”

“They tend to more exposed to what is going on in society, they will be well informed. They will get prepared for the future because most learners they don’t, they just believed in going to school and coming back home is the best way to learn no. learning shouldn’t just be within the four walls of the classroom alone it is something... It should be something they should be doing every day of their life, we keep on learning from the day we were given birth till the day we are going to our grave. So learning should be a continuous (Abdul)”

5. **Insights into career development:** The perceived benefits of service-learning by respondents presented an opportunity for insights or exposure to selected professions or courses of study in the respective higher institutions. Students stated that service-learning implementation allowed for hands-on experience, which enhanced understanding and the importance of specific concepts in the selected fields of study.

“Okay it has been of benefit to me because I got to meet people and relate with people I got to know how I could use my field of study to be of help and to the community.. yes (Ejo)”

“It has helped to increase my confidence in teaching, it has also helped me to see myself as erm.. let me say a semi-professional (laughs) I looked somehow I more like professional already because seeing myself teaching cooperate, teachers, a method of teaching like teaching people that are already into teaching another method of teaching let them know this is the method and at the end of the day they were even coming to me that like how they can execute or use that method of teaching and how often they should use it. And also it has helped me to be a good teacher (Vic)

“It gives me a form of ... form of joy. Like some of them are.. some of them are older than me but they are still in child clinic and I see them as learners that are not just over for that is what special education teaches that they are people that can do so many things, it changes my orientation about them. It made me feel that I.. I.. have this duty I feel like I am responsible to them. It makes me have this sense of responsibility that I am responsible for these learners. So it made me hardworking and seriously it helped my grades (Damo)”

6. **Multiple opportunities to learn:** Service-learning as an empirical mode of learning that affords participants with different opportunities to learn. This is because the process of learning usually occurs in stages or inter-dependent stages

in a cycle. For example, learning occurs in the different stages involved in the implementation of service-learning, as depicted by the Kolb's learning cycle (McLeod, 2013). The Kolb's Learning Style Model includes four learning styles, namely;

- a) Concrete Experience (CE),
- b) Reflective Observation (RO),
- c) Abstract Conceptualization (AC),
- d) Active Experimentation (AE).

“So while I was trying to impact to them I was learning alongside the kids and 3rdly before any class I was always trying to gather my materials both the micro and macroeconomics as I was doing that I never knew I was trying to prepare for that semester during that process so as I was taking them, I was learning too (Lala)”

“Exactly!!.. it is not just the passive way of the teacher to students ermm or students to students ..in SL everybody is involved everybody is learning so everybody just acquires the learning from his or her preferable way means of learning because SI encompasses different means (Vicks)

“Yes, exactly different learning styles, different learning styles. In SL the teacher will display differently, in fact, there are some teaching... You know, during SL the teacher will display one or more teaching method... Like more teaching methods incorporated in SL because while I noticed while doing SL the teacher will display lecture method the teacher will display discussion method, there are different section in SL that each student will have the opportunity to be exposed to his learning styles so no student will go without learning something (Vico)”.

DISCUSSION

The implementation of service-learning as a form of pedagogy in higher institutions in Nigerian is nascent, as limited individuals or institutions knowabout its existence. Therefore, the literature is limited to the benefits of service-learning on students in other countries except in Nigeria. This study, therefore, contributes to the literature by presenting an overview of the impact that service-learning implementation has on participants. Analyses were conducted to explore the perceived impacts of service-learning on students from selected universities in Nigeria where service-learning is been implemented. The findings of this study reiteratethe results obtained from participants in other countries. However, one theme not discussed in previous literature butwas identified during analysis was that service-learning presents multiple learning opportunities. This has an important implication because the major aim of being a student is to learn. Therefore,this implies that adopting service-learning as a form of pedagogy will enhance prompt learning and understanding of the course content possible for all students and simultaneously easethe dependence on the intellectual capability of the students concerned. This is potentially achievable due to the varied learning styles of specific students, as specified by Kolb.

The Concrete Experience approach depicts an individual who feels more than they think. Students that belong to this mode are intuitive decision-makers and typicallyexcel at relating with others. The Reflective Observation method describes individuals who prefer to watch and observe others rather than be active participants. Individuals in this mode tend to appreciate the exposure to differing

points of view. The Abstract Conceptualization mode describes students who are more of thinkers than they feel. This group of individuals have scientific approaches to problem-solving, as opposed to the artistic approach. In conclusion, the Active Experimentation method describes individuals who take an active role in influencing others as well as situations. These individuals prefer practical methods of solving problems to reflective understanding as well as actively participating by observation.

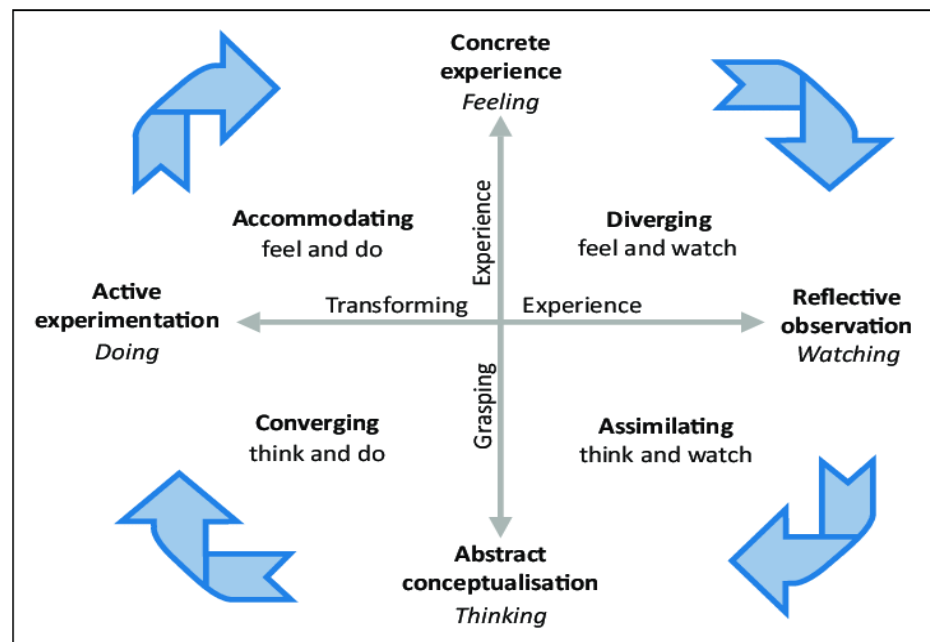


Figure 1. Kolb's learning style (McLeod, 2013).

Furthermore, service-learning exposed the students to various challenges and the difficulties community members encounter. This is usually possible either through observation or through the interview process of members during the investigation process of service-learning implementation. Service-learning ensures students practise the knowledge acquired theoretically in the class to real-life experiences for the development of the communities. During the process, some other skills are developed such as interpersonal skills, while their expertise in a related field of practice is also enhanced. Often the average graduates in Nigeria do not have the opportunity to gain work experience before final graduation. Hence, graduates must learn on the job, if employed in the future. However, service-learning implementation avails graduates with opportunities to apply classroom knowledge in solving societal challenges. Consequently, this enhances the proficiency of students in the chosen profession even before graduation. In conclusion, the hands-on experience of these students showed that learning during service-learning programmes was retained in the memory longer. This is because the active experimentation process is a moment of ingenuity when compared to the conventional teaching process, which is usually a passive moment. Hence, the students are usually exhausted with the information the teacher or instructor deems fit.

Conclusions

The main purpose of education is spur change in its recipient. Service-learning is a fast-rising form of pedagogy widely adopted by institutions of learning around the globe due to its diverse benefits on the participants. Evidently, when service-

learning is implemented, student beneficiaries are better equipped than their counterparts who learn through the conventional methods adopted by higher institutions in Nigeria. Hence, service-learning has proven to be more beneficial to participants due to the processes involved with its implementation. It has been proven to fulfil the major objective of education as the entire participants are usually impacted. Therefore, the higher education system in Nigeria needs to develop courses that are relevant to students, enhance extended knowledge retention, and develop graduates capable of applying knowledge. Furthermore, the institutions must train professionally efficient individuals committed to identifying and solving rising societal challenges through the skills gained during the service-learning form of pedagogy. In conclusion, the adoption of service-learning pedagogy presents potential means of multiple opportunities to learn. This means no students will be left unlearned or unskilled in one area or the other when this method is adopted in the higher education system of Nigeria.

Limitations of the Study

The service-learning form of pedagogy is considered a new field of research for academics in Nigeria, which requires significant investigation. Due to the time constraint, only a single objective, its impact, was considered in this study. Therefore, future research is suggested in examining how service-learning enhances academic performance and the possible challenges involved in its implementation in the educational system of Nigeria.

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