

# International community-based service learning: Two comparative case studies of benefits and tensions

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*The drives to internationalise the UK curriculum and psychology students' desires to work in communities are brought together in this paper. International community-based learning (ICBL) links with many psychology students' motivations to make contributions to others; with the potential to enhance students' learning and cultural sensitivities. The recently-developed literature on international service learning highlights multiple benefits for students (and sometimes community hosts), as well as the potential tensions that need to be negotiated. With the intentions of creating global citizens interested in social justice, community-based engagement can sometimes reinforce preconceived notions. In addition, benefits to the host communities may only be short-term or questionable, with less research on community partners' perspectives than on those of the students.*

*This paper describes work with UK psychology students who undertook CBL in four different international settings (2008–2015); illustrating the complexities of setting up, facilitating and supporting students' CBL. It will then focus on two African settings (South Africa and Tanzania), with data drawn from group discussions with students, post-experience reflections, observations by the accompanying tutor and feedback from community partners. The findings show the richness of students' learning through CBL in both settings, including deeper insight into applications of psychological theory, the skills they enhanced and the emotional impacts of the work. Students reported changed perspectives, including greater awareness of social issues that impacted on their attitudes. The findings are explored and compared, using tools from Activity Theory, to illustrate points of confluence and tensions in such initiatives, when students, community partners and academic staff members interact. The discussion will reflect on what might guide the integration and optimising of ICBL to benefit both students and community partners.*

**Keywords:** *Internationalising curriculum; international community-based learning; service-learning; HE case studies; UK students abroad.*

## Introduction

IN THE UK, following wide consultation, discussions about the future of undergraduate psychology and its relevance to the 21st century (Trapp et al., 2011) emphasised the need to apply psychology to 'real life' situations, the value of placements and the need to enhance psychological literacy. In addition, psychology students are encouraged to understand the relevance of their studies to societal and global issues in this increasingly interconnected world (e.g. Trapp & Akhurst, 2011); Crowder (2014) describes developing students' global citizenship both to meet demands for international connectivity and

to enhance students' learning; and there is recent literature on the promotion of psychological literacy and citizenship (see Cranney & Dunn, 2011). In the past decade, there has been an increase in the literature on International Community-Based Learning (ICBL, termed 'international service learning' in the US), developments that are a potential means to respond to these calls for curriculum adjustments.

One of the potential career directions for Psychology students is the 'third sector' (e.g. non-governmental organisations, charities and social enterprises). The motivations

of many Psychology students are based on desires to help others (Bromnick & Horowitz, 2013; Goedeke & Gibson, 2011), and many students are already involved in voluntary community-based work, prompted by their desires to contribute to social justice. Whilst not as evident as in some of the US literature, there have been discussions about the promotion of social and civic responsibility of students (e.g. Annette, 2005). Community-based learning may thus be appealing to students and promote such engagement.

Drawing from US-based programmes, Bringle, Hatcher and Jones (2011) explore the unique pedagogy of international service learning, describing the value of intercultural learning along with the applications of disciplinary knowledge in the context of a community setting. Crabtree (2013) notes the 'coming of age' of this subfield of international education, where the benefits to students' learning have been identified and successful collaborations are informed by participatory development practices. He recommends attending deeply to partnerships, the preparation of participants, the need to plan for a time of cross-cultural adaptation, the value of structured reflection to enhance learning, and to consider outcomes for all parties.

Bringing together the findings from a number of studies, Sharp (2012) highlights the resultant 'positive impact on academic, civic, personal, social ethical and vocational development' (p.179) as effects of service learning. Nickols et al., (2013) draw on US students' work with communities in Tanzania, discussing the benefits to students of various forms of skill development including self- and group management, increased global awareness, personal development (for example self-confidence and competence) and the 'ability to analyse and appreciate local customs and cultural contexts' (p.99). They go further to emphasise the need to pay careful attention to building reciprocity with community participants through interactive and iterative processes. The term ICBL (rather than 'service learning') is preferred

in the context of this article, because it foregrounds the community-based partnerships that form the basis of the work, rather than keeping the focus only on what students provide or gain.

Perry and Katula (2001) note how experiential learning, particularly when it is based in the community, may be a powerful means to develop students' awareness of their responsibilities as citizens. A 'real world' placement context raises students' awareness of issues (social, political, economic, and historical) that they may otherwise choose to avoid or manage to ignore. Crowder (2014) takes this further by applying the concepts of 'transformational learning' (Mezirow, 2003) to ICBL. The lived reality of the community members with whom they interact leads to students needing to make sense of their experiences through considering the forces at play in that context. CBL often results in students having their ideas challenged, motivating them to find explanations to resolve the disequilibrium they experience (Mitchell & Humphries, 2007). For students to learn from their experiences they require opportunities to reflect on them and their assumptions, using conceptual frames of reference. Reflection is therefore a vital part of this process and has been recognised as a fundamentally important aspect of ICBL (see Pagano & Roselle, 2009). Part of the reflecting process incorporates the linking of psychological theory to experiences, testing its relevance and usefulness.

The above considerations inform the initiative to be described, where the ICBL was integrated into the second year psychology programme in a small UK university. The work evolved from the author's earlier involvement (1999–2002) in a South African programme to promote university community engagement. The Community Higher Education Service Partnership (CHESP) was a 'three-way partnership' (Mouton & Wildschut, 2005) designed to contribute to the 'reconstruction' of South African society through 'socially accountable models for higher education, research, community

service and development' (Joint Education Trust, 1999, p.2). Through CHESP, universities were encouraged to design activities and projects to enable students to work with community partners, through various activities, in order to generate new ideas and research evidence, to engage in knowledge exchange and to influence policy and practice, relevant to societal issues.

### **Developing the international community-based work placements**

During the timespan of the work to be described here, all psychology students at York St John University (YSJU) participated in a three- to four-week work placement at the end of their second year, which was integrated into their 'Psychology of Work' module. In this module, students covered such topics as leadership, teamwork, conflict resolution, motivation, stress and coping, the recruitment process and employee development; all in relation to applications in the workplace. They were then each required to complete a placement; and their assessment task was to illustrate how they experienced one or more of the theoretical models as applied in that 'real life' setting. Students were required to reflect on these experiences in a variety of ways, for example by keeping a learning journal as a formative tool, and in the case of those doing the ICBL, meeting for group reflections periodically. This encouraged them to consider their skill development and increased understanding of the theories they had covered (for example theories related to motivation, social learning, social psychology, developmental practice). An earlier description of this work and the resultant student learning can be found in Akhurst and Mitchell (2012).

Prompted by a visit from a colleague from the US in 2007, the first ICBL placement of YSJU students occurred in 2008, when students accompanied the author on a three-week placement to Southern Mississippi, to work first for 10 days in a centre for children with learning difficulties (whilst they adjusted to the cultural differences of

life in the US) and then for 10 days on a volunteering programme to assist with reconstruction, following the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast. The success of this first ICBL initiative led to students lobbying for placements in Africa as well, and in 2009 the placement in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa (to be described further below) was established. During 2010, it was not possible to travel to South Africa because of changes in school terms, flights and accommodation limitations related to the football World Cup there, thus a further partnership in Tanzania was established. During 2011 and 2012, separate student groups travelled to South Africa and Tanzania. Then in 2014–2015, due to changes in staffing, students travelled to a different setting in South Africa to work with a volunteering organisation (VA32), situated in Cintsu in the Eastern Province. For each trip, a number of preparatory meetings were held with students prior to departure, to prepare them practically and to brief them on expectations and cultural awareness. Except for some funding that subsidised part of the students' travel in 2008 and 2009, students self-funded their travel and subsistence. The two case studies below draw from data collected during the 2009–2012 ICBL experiences of the students.

#### ***The context of case study 1: Partnership with the Sizabantwana teachers' cooperative in KwaZuluNatal, South Africa***

This partnership evolved from earlier contact between the author and the teachers associated with the Sizabantwana ('help our children') cooperative in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa (established in partnership with the University of KwaZulu-Natal, UKZN). This community psychology-based collective endeavour of teachers was formed and evolved to enable them to cope with and address some of the multiple psycho-social and educational challenges of working with children who are impacted by disadvantage, as the direct result of the discriminatory education system of the apartheid era (see

Mitchell & Jonker, 2013 for more details).

Over the course of 2009, 2011 and 2012, a total of 28 students participated in this CBSL placement. We planned for the UK students to work in conjunction with teachers from the collective who represented schools that were interested in hosting the students for a period of time. The briefing to the teachers was that the students were to be an extra 'pair of hands' in the school, to support the respective teachers and assist with a variety of tasks, including supporting learners' gardening (the schools often had feeding schemes to provide one school meal for the learners), decorating of classrooms and corridor walls, reading with small groups, singing and doing drama with learners, tutoring IT skills, helping with sporting activities and outings and spending time chatting to and listening to children's stories. Such activities offered the possibility of learners interacting with the UK students in English, since the teachers identified the importance of developing English literacy (the majority of learners spoke isiZulu as their first language). Before leaving, the UK students were briefed to prepare various games, songs and interactive stories for the schools, as well as to think about simple art and drama/movement activities that might be used.

Each day, the students would be met by a partner educator, taken to the school and needed to be able to respond to the requests for their assistance for the day. On arrival in the schools, they often attended morning assembly, and at times the learners would have planned some sort of welcoming activity or dance. The schools were very hospitable, and though they had been briefed not to treat the students any differently to a regular worker in the school, isiZulu hospitality meant that the students had various heart-warming stories of being provided with food, or participating in cultural activities like bead-work and other crafts.

***The context of case study 2: Partnership with St John's University of Tanzania, Dodoma***

Having launched the Africa placements in 2009, the football World Cup being hosted in South Africa at the same time of year in 2010 was an obstacle to continuing. A unique opportunity arose early in 2010, when YSJU was approached by a partner university in Africa, St John's University of Tanzania (SJUT). This university had been recently formed by the Anglican Church, and lacked many of the basic resources needed to run effectively. A delegation thus came to YSJU to explore matters related to quality assurance and governance. Already, following an earlier memorandum of understanding, YSJU was shipping out functional computers (no longer fast enough for increasing UK broadband speeds) as the basis for developing computer laboratories at SJUT. It was thus fortuitous that the delegation from SJUT were exploring how they might offer something reciprocally, and we enquired about the possibility of hosting our psychology students who were keen to do their CBSL in Africa. The SJUT delegation responded with enthusiasm, offering the students free accommodation on their campus. This led to 16 students visiting Dodoma, the capital city of Tanzania, to undertake their placements over the three years from 2010 to 2012.

Our partners at SJUT arranged for the students to work as teaching assistants in a nearby international school for their mornings, and then requested that they spend the afternoons with various student groups on SJUT campus, to lead discussions in English, which the Tanzanian students heard little of outside of lectures, so were in need of practice in conversational skills. In addition, at the time of our visits, groups of SJUT students were doing standardised English achievement tests, so the YSJU students were able to assist with the marking of these (amounting to hundreds of anonymised scripts being hand-marked by template), giving the students a sense of the ways in which standardised tests are marked and applying the related norms. Opportunities

for inter-cultural exchange were encouraged, so the UK students gained a sense of the circumstances under which the SJUT students lived and studied.

### *The rationale for this research*

Given the well-documented benefits of international service-learning in the US literature, it is interesting to consider whether there are similar findings when UK psychology students undertake ICBL. In addition, there is still a limited evidence base that includes the perspectives of community partners; and in particular this article aims to juxtapose the perspectives of the students with those of the community partners, to highlight the confluences and tensions.

### **Methodology**

This research received ethical approval from the YSJU committee and students agreed to participate in an evaluation of their experiences. In addition, ethical clearance was obtained from the UKZN ethics committee to enable us to collect data from our community partners in that setting.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen to guide data collection and analysis. The findings are drawn from focus group interviews of students during the course of their ICBL as well as emailed responses from students after their return to the UK. The focus of the enquiry was on students' motivations for deciding to do their placements in Africa, their experiences of the adjustments and their encounters whilst away, including their perceptions of the ways in which their experiences impacted on their learning. These data were transcribed and analysed by using thematic analysis and constant comparative methods. The emergent themes were checked with a second reader and then synthesised to provide findings about the benefits and challenges for students, as well as the nature of their learning in both sites.

Following the example of McMillan (2009), observations about the process have then been integrated into an Activity

Theory (AT) framework (Engeström, 1987), to enable consideration of some of the key aspects and dynamics. AT developed from the work of Leont'ev, influenced by his work with Vygotsky (Russell, 2004), who was concerned that dominant modes of psychological investigation focussed on the individual level (e.g. behaviourist notions of stimulus and response). Vygotsky emphasised the origin of activities in culturally constructed interpersonal interactions; and was more interested in the way that people respond to stimuli through the tools they use in activities (Cole, 1996). AT therefore pays attention to 'everyday life events', the ways people interact over time, using 'tools' (Russell, 2004), and enables the exploration of contextual factors. Engeström (1987) proposed the following diagrammatic representation, to enable the analysis of transactions, activities and practice, rather than speculations about intra-individual processes (Engeström, 2005). In the diagram, the object-oriented productive aspect (in the upper sector) is distinguished from the person-oriented communicative aspect. The resultant activity system is shown in Figure 1.

The upper part of the diagram contains the triangle illustrating the 'tool(s)' mediating between subject and object, leading to some kind of 'production'. This is expanded on the right, including the 'outcome' of the activity. Further interconnected triangles in the lower 'communicative' part of the diagram make links between other components in any activity: the 'community' (those sharing a common purpose), the 'rules' (the norms or conventions determining actions), and the 'division of labour' (different activities undertaken by members of the community). This enables an analysis of the interactions between aspects of activities, from different participants' perspectives. Russell (2004) notes that this works like different lenses, allowing 'us to train our gaze in different directions and with different levels of "magnification"...' (p.312). Following the descriptive findings below, AT will be used to illustrate the interactive nature of ICBL (from students', and partners' perspectives).

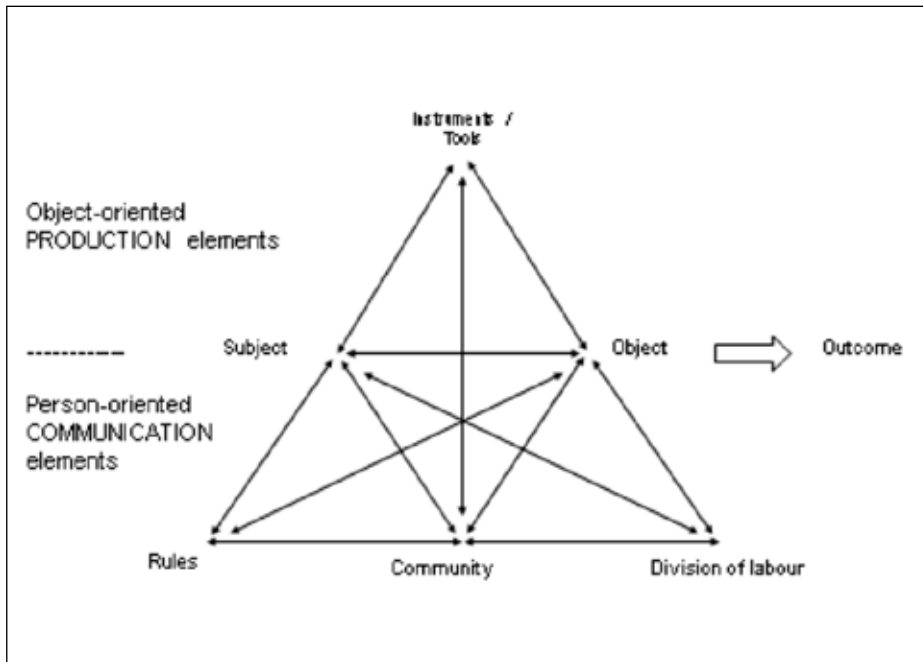


Figure 1: Engeström's (1987) Activity Theory model

## Findings

The findings to be presented first below are selected from the data collected, and focus on students' experiences and learning. Students' verbatim words are in italics, with the relevant placement location noted as (SA) or (TZ) after.

The students reflected on adjusting to the context in Africa:

- ... *the accommodation was an unexpected challenge. I was prepared for basic standards but it's another thing to have to live like that ... but due to the support of the group, we adapted* (TZ).
- *I didn't realise how basic the majority of Tanzanians lived i.e. their houses, the markets. I was expecting the country to be more developed than it is* (TZ).
- *It's one thing to see it on TV but it's another to actually encounter it in person ...* (SA).

In relation to applying themselves to the work, some of their comments were:

- *I made sure that I applied myself 100 per cent to everything that was required of me. In*

*return I learnt such a lot from them in every way possible ...* (SA).

- *I was completely surprised by the children's reaction to us ... always wanting to spend time with us.*
- *... the reality of the HIV and AIDS crisis.*
- *... I learnt a lot about the disease, which before going I did not know about* (SA).
- *... when put in the 'deep end' (in front of a class who understand very little English), I found myself in a state of panic. However I did the best I could and was proud of my efforts ...* (SA).
- *you realise you get more confidence with experience ... like a practical thing rather than just being in a lecture ... it was that kind of thinking on your feet* (TZ).

One of the dominant themes to emerge related to intercultural aspects:

- *With respect to being in another country, where people speak a different language and have a completely different way of life, this was not an issue* (TZ).

- *To be honest I did not know what to expect, but came back completely amazed by the country and its people (SA).*
- *... even adapting to the cultures ... not the most difficult but like that was the biggest change (SA).*
- *... the language barrier provided a huge challenge, which was often frustrating ... sometimes led to misunderstanding. I feel I managed this ... by keeping my English simple and using visual aids if necessary (SA).*
- *... what we weren't aware of is that each area of South Africa has a different tribal group and language ... a couple of weeks ago I just thought, everyone all over South Africa like spoke Zulu (SA).*
- *Nearly everybody I met was so well-mannered and polite. I felt very safe with them and found them to be lovely caring people (TZ).*
- *I was delighted by the friendly nature of everybody I met ... everybody was always happy to help and incredibly kind (SA).*
- *... people are very different in the way they deal with situations ... which can take a lot of patience.*
- *At times it is difficult to work as part of a team ... there are conflicting ideas ... (TZ).*
- *... it is sometimes difficult to get along all the time. However, I think that we did a good job of compromising and supporting each other (SA).*

Each of the students also gave examples of learning about themselves:

- *My confidence also grew as a result ... the only way I was going to get the best ... was to live the experience wholly and fully, which meant changing some parts of me and just embracing it (SA).*
- *I learnt I can overcome my fears to some extent ... this proved I can overcome other obstacles in my life if I just persevere and keep telling myself I can do it (TZ).*
- *... every situation's the way you act in them ... you think 'oh! I can actually deal with that' (SA).*
- *It is difficult for me to understand just how appreciative everybody was for our efforts ... I feel the skills and sense of self that I gained ... is something that I cannot express the importance of (TZ).*
- *... I was observing, the teacher gave a lesson on sexual abuse and although she did it in a tactful and respectful way, the conversations she had with the children again highlighted how it can be a problem (SA).*
- *... no matter how much you prepare it's still a shock when you get here and you see it um, in real life (SA).*
- *... how do you function in such a tiny house? Like some of the stuff is still quite shocking (TZ).*
- *The divide between the rich and the poor is much greater than I imagined, and likewise the divide between the whites and the blacks is still evident... I felt distressed seeing the poverty that some people still have to live in ... it is very difficult to make the difference that you want to (SA).*
- *I found myself distressed about leaving both the school and the new friends I had made ... (TZ).*

Because they lived together in closer proximity (e.g. sharing rooms) and for a more extended time than in the UK, they needed to find ways to manage the group dynamics:

Many reported the emotional impacts of some of their experiences:

- *... just knowing what to say without like letting them down (mmm), feeling as if no one can help them and ... it's to be able to listen to offer, some sort of hope but-and not to feel as if you are you can't really offer anything (SA).*

Two of the students reflected on their renewed respect for the capacities of the teachers they encountered:

- *you think wow, how are you coping with that knowledge, you just get on with your everyday life so they obviously have, a lot of strength and a lot of coping skills, determination; but they don't see it, but they don't recognise it (SA).*

Finally, when asked for enduring thoughts, some examples were:

- *You definitely appreciate what you have ... like massively (TZ).*
- *... just be open and willing to adapt to the lifestyle and the community and you will not be disappointed (TZ).*
- *... embrace the experience, forget about any preconceived ideas you may have, make it your own personal, unique experience and you will receive so much in return (SA).*

Drawing from both the students' reflections and the community partners' feedback for case study 1, the following diagram (Figure 2) juxtaposes some of the key aspects of students' experiences with those of the community partner shown in italics, in order to both condense the findings from the students' reflections and to compare the different perspectives.

One of the particular challenges for students working with some of the less-experienced teachers in the Sizabantwana collective was that the teachers expected that the students would have greater knowledge of psychological problems and potential solutions for these. Although teachers had been briefed that these students were still undergraduates, some might have ascribed them with more expertise than was the reality, leading the students to feel unable to offer assistance. Thus, the diagram indicates where there were tensions at times, between students' preparation and expectations of what they would do – i.e. the 'tools' – they expected to assist, but were at times asked to lead activities, and even teach classes when a teacher was absent. This led to challenges both in the 'rules of engagement' (in the lower left of the diagram) and in the 'division of labour' (lower right). However, in final debriefing discussions with

the Sizabantwana teachers, they realised that they perhaps were asking too much of the students in some of the schools. An additional unexpected learning for us from those debriefings was that the teachers gained status in their schools and communities as an outcome of having successfully recruited white students from the UK to visit and to spend time with learners: this illustrates the power differentials and issues of privileging of 'white' knowledge in these still disadvantaged communities.

For case study 2 (Figure 3), the differences in the position of the SJUT host partners becomes evident, perhaps since they invited us to visit and had more agency in planning the overall nature of the UK students' activities. There was no evidence of the tensions found in the South African case study, maybe also reflecting the very different context and more open-ended exploratory position of our partners.

In the Tanzanian context then, there was a better 'meshing' of expectations and delivery of 'service' by the students. For the students, therefore the biggest challenges related to adjusting to and coping with living at a much more 'basic' level than they were familiar with and working in much less well-resourced settings. This led to students expressing both respect for their hosts' coping abilities as well as becoming far more aware of the constraints of a developing world context.

## Discussion

ICBL supports students' desires to become involved in applications of their psychology, and their aspirations to make some sort of 'difference' through their engagement. There is no doubt that their intercultural learnings are foregrounded in the students' accounts. Mitchell and Humphries (2007) note the potential for both students and community members to benefit in many diverse ways from their partnerships. The students were able to further develop their communication and relational skills through their ICBL placements.



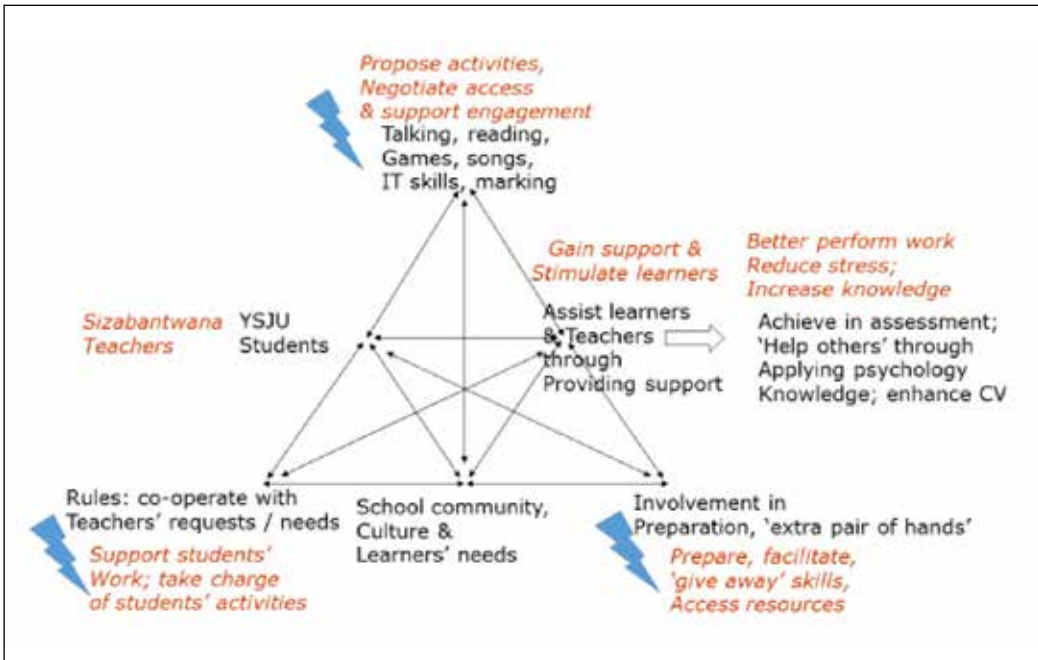


Figure 2: Key aspects of activities of students and Sizabantwana teachers; case study 1

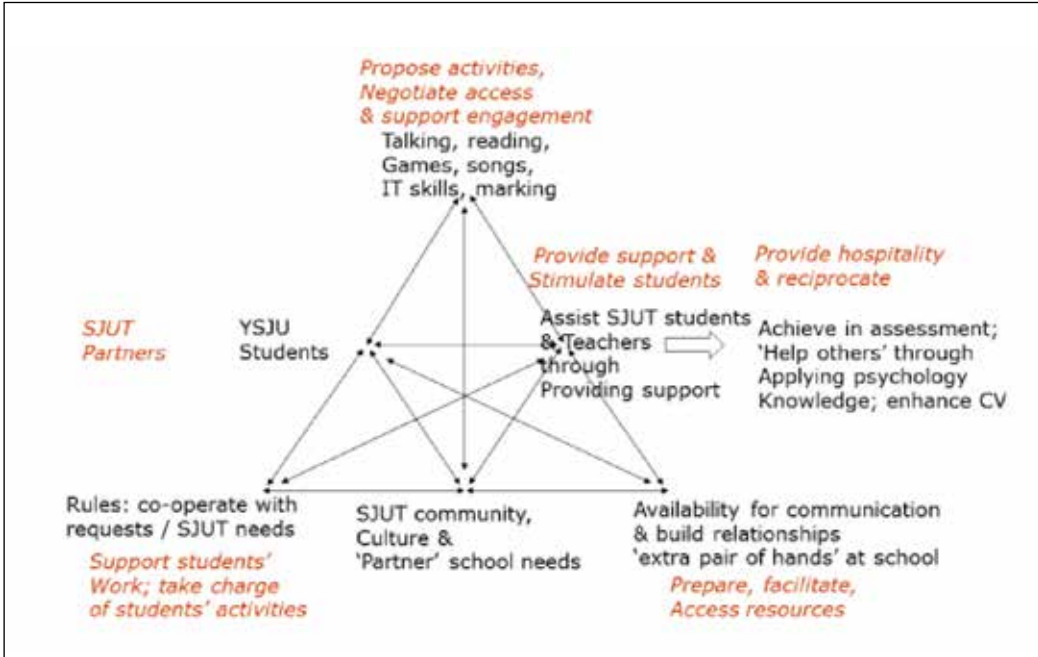


Figure 3: Key aspects of activities of students and SJUT partners; case study 2

Although the theoretical applications of psychology are not immediately evident in the accounts above, students returned to the UK feeling very motivated to try and make a difference and to find further psychological solutions to what they had encountered. This was clearly appropriate, since they would be entering their third year of study being able to draw from their placements. Some felt that they had needed more 'psychological literacy' (Trapp & Akhurst, 2011) in the setting and that their skills in translating their learning into practical applications needed further development.

The findings demonstrate that ICBL may have impacts on students well beyond those hoped for from a workplace experience. Since this research did not incorporate the material generated in the students' written assignments, the students' responses reported here were more focused on the overall impacts of the phenomena. It would appear that extending the UK evidence-base and understanding of the impact of these activities through longer term studies is now required, to gain a richer sense of the effects on students' career planning, career-related thinking and employability.

The potential emotional impact of their exposure to people's difficult life circumstances must also be noted. This emphasises the need for opportunities for reflection and support: hence the need for carefully structured debriefings with tutors at various stages, to build in the pedagogic benefits and thus to optimise learning. In addition such conversations to raise self- and other-awareness might better 'leverage' the opportunities to highlight issues around social power and privilege, as well as to challenge stereotypes and to promote considerations of social justice (Mitchell, 2008).

Many authors have noted the difficulty of incorporating the 'voices' of the community partners in much more depth (e.g. Crabtree, 2013; Nickols et al., 2013). Mitchell and Rautenbach (2005) caution against programmes that benefit mainly university students, where the community partners are

not accorded the same power as university tutors. This was illustrated in the comparative differences between the two case studies: although we worked carefully in collaboration with both sets of partners, it was clear that some of the teachers in case study 1 did not fully understand the role of the students and accorded them too much expertise. In case study 2, the partners appeared to be more realistic about what the students could do; thus there were fewer tensions around expectations. Designing and implementing CBL programmes requires great sensitivity to and respect for the work of partners, to guard against either cultural voyeurism or the exploitation of the goodwill and hospitality of people.

Nickols et al. (2013) also describe the potential impacts of ICBL on accompanying staff members. Although this has not been discussed in the material above, there are important considerations to bear in mind, including the experience of fatigue and similar anxieties as the students when travelling abroad. Stresses can be ameliorated through the collegial relationships with community partners, so it is important to consider these support systems, especially if there are any emergencies or unexpected situations. Finally, living and working in much closer proximity to students may provide unexpected challenges, very different to campus-based teaching.

To conclude, institutional commitment to this kind of learning is an important consideration. McMillan (2009) notes how this is 'boundary work' at the intersection of higher education and broader societal groups. There can be great benefits to the institution, in illustrating its capacity to enable students to prepare to be global citizens through such programmes and providing unique selling points in today's competitive environment. However, this comes at some conceptual, financial and staff time-related costs that need to be factored in. Students' experiences are optimised when they are well supported, as noted in the discussions of reflective practice as central to deeper learning. Gelmon et al.

(2004) highlight the importance of institutional support and the need for this to be carefully considered to enable programmes to be well designed and carried through, in order that community partners' expectations are met and that they benefit as much as the students do from ICBL.

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