

## **Embracing Service-learning Opportunities: Student Perceptions of Service-learning as an Aid to Effectively Learn Course Material**

**Jenna L. Currie-Mueller**  
North Dakota State University  
Jenna.Currie@ndsu.edu

**Robert S. Littlefield**  
University of Central Florida

*Abstract: Educators are aware of the benefits of service-learning such as retention or application of course concepts. Students enrolled in courses with a service-learning assignment may not be aware of the benefits or may not view the assignment as beneficiary. This study examined student perceptions of service-learning to determine if students' perceptions matched educator perceptions in the literature. Overall, students make the connection between the assignment and course material. Results and themes are discussed.*

*Keywords: Service-learning, experiential learning, learning outcomes, communication*

Service-learning provides students with a unique opportunity to learn outside of the traditional classroom by engaging with an organization or the community. Several studies have examined service-learning and discovered that service-learning enriches students' academic experience and learning (e.g. Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009; Eppler, Ironsmith, Dingle, & Errickson, 2011; Flynn & Carter, 2016). For example, service-learning contributes to students meeting general education outcomes (Littlefield, Rick, & Currie-Mueller, 2016), applying and understanding course concepts to real world contexts (Britt, 2012; Whitney & Clayton, 2011), increasing students' multicultural skills (Bliethe, 2016; Warren, 2012), and civic engagement (Ash & Carpenter, 2004; Brownell & Swaner, 2010), amongst other benefits. While researchers and educators are aware of the benefits of incorporating service-learning into the classroom, less is known whether students perceive service-learning as aiding in learning classroom material and course concepts.

Exploring student perceptions of service-learning provides educators and administrators with a holistic view of the benefits of service-learning. Each institution typically defines service-learning differently according to its needs (Brownell & Swaner, 2010); for the purposes of this study, Duncan and Kopperud's (2008) definition is used. Duncan and Kopperud defined service-learning as, "a learning method that upholds a commitment to appreciating the assets of and serving the needs of a community partner while enhancing student learning and academic rigor through the practice of intentional reflective thinking and responsible civic action" (p. 4).

The present study examined how students perceive service-learning, exploring whether students perceive service-learning to assist in the learning of course materials. The study explored student perceptions through self-reported reflections of undergraduates participating in an intercultural communication course at a mid-sized Midwestern university.

### *Service-learning*

In its most basic definition, service-learning incorporates learning while an individual is serving others. Most scholars place John Dewey (1938) as the founder of the service-learning movement. His ideas and writings on learning via experience were influential in the development of service-learning and provide its theoretical foundation (Katula & Threnhauser, 1999; Meaney, Housman, Cavazos, and Wilcox, 2012).

Dewey's (1938) scholarship promoted experiential learning as imperative in a student's education and essential in contributing to democracy. For Dewey, the community served as an essential component of the education process because whatever a student learned in school should extend beyond the school walls to enrich the student's educational experience and improve the community (Waterman, 2013). Therefore in Dewey's view, learning by experience was indispensable to democratic society.

Dewey advocated for students to be active learners via experience. Because young students lacked the collection of experiences needed to understand the abstract ideas taught in the classroom, Dewey was concerned students were being taught without anything for the students to connect the ideas to (Caulfield & Woods, 2013; Katula & Threnhauser, 1999). Dewey (1938) feared students were moving through the education system as passive learners, where educators dictated information and knowledge to their students. Dewey (1938) argued for "cooperative enterprise, not dictation" (p. 72) and viewed the role of educator as facilitator where the educator helped shape a student's understanding of their experience while connecting it to learning. However, Dewey focused on younger students in elementary education and training citizens for American democracy, he was not concerned with other stages of the education system.

Kolb (1984) extended Dewey's work within higher education (Caulfield & Woods, 2013; Katula & Threnhauser, 1999). Credited with bringing experiential learning and service-learning to the forefront of education's attention (Caulfield & Woods, 2013; Meaney et al, 2012), Kolb's scholarship was rooted in his concern of the changing higher education landscape. For Kolb, the growing diversity of the population of higher education meant students were entering the higher education system without having the necessary experiences to prepare them for "traditional textbook approaches to learning" (Katula & Threnhauser, 1999, p. 242). Further, Kolb was troubled with the growing gap that existed between instruction and required job skills – a gap that could only be reduced by experience.

Whereas Dewey believed experience reinforced learning, Kolb (1984) argued learning begins with experience with knowledge being created via "transformation of experience" (p. 38). Kolb argued the combination of having the experience and transforming the experience is what contributes to learning. This transformation occurs via reflecting on the experience, conceptualizing it, and later testing the experience out by applying what was learned to similar experiences in the future (Katula & Threnhauser, 1999). For Kolb, service-learning allowed students to link experience to classroom concepts while enabling a community of knowledge to be developed.

### *Communication and Service-learning*

Service-learning and communication courses are complementary to each other. Communication classes teach concepts that are applicable to students' lives outside of the classroom (Ahlfedt, 2009). Kahl (2010) argued in order for students to use communication effectively and to make a difference, service-learning must be included to provide students an opportunity to "engage in communication scholarship beyond the classroom" (p. 299). Communication courses that do incorporate service-learning provide students with a richer understanding of communication (Applegate & Morreale, 2006).

The benefits of incorporating service-learning into the communication classroom are plenty. Throughout the communication discipline, these benefits are well known and widely accepted (Oster-Aaland, Sellnow, Nelson, & Pearson, 2004); for example, students are able to link communication theory and concepts with practice (Ahlfedt, 2009; Soukup, 2006; Whitney & Clayton, 2011), become actively responsible for their learning (Brown, 2011; Hashemipour, 2006), or build community connections (Novek, 2009).

Studies reveal service-learning assists in students achieving the desired outcomes of a particular class (Ash & Carpenter, 2004; Lahman, 2012; Motely & Sturgill, 2013). For example, Littlefield et al. (2016) examined how service-learning contributed to students meeting general education outcomes in a communication general education course. The researchers discovered service-learning was related to increased student cognitive, behavioral, and communication competence – all components of general education outcomes – as put forth by the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative.

Furthermore, meta-analyses reinforce the benefits of service-learning. In Novak, Markey, and Allen's (2007) meta-analysis of service-learning and cognitive outcomes, the findings across nine studies revealed service-learning maintained a positive relationship with student learning outcomes. Similarly, Warren (2012)'s conducted a follow up meta-analysis to Novak et al.'s study with twelve additional published and non-published studies. Warren's meta-analysis confirmed Novak et al.'s findings and revealed that service-learning did indeed contribute to a student's learning outcome.

The benefits of service-learning are not limited to the communication course. Service-learning benefits extend across disciplines and include benefits beyond the classroom, such as personal growth. For example, studies reveal that service-learning enhances a student's sense of social responsibility and civic engagement (Ash & Carpenter, 2004; Gleason & Violette, 2012; Oster-Aaland et al., 2004), learning (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Hashemipour, 2006; Warren, 2012), and intercultural skills and multicultural awareness (Blithe, 2016; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Simons & Cleary, 2006). In addition, Yorio and Ye (2012) determined service-learning to provide students with an increased positive understanding of social insights and more nuanced personal insights.

Service-learning has become a powerful tool for educators to promote student engagement in the classroom and in the community. While promoting this engagement, service-learning acts in a two-fold manner; in that, it can help students understand course materials more effectively by translating theoretical concepts into actual practice (Darby, Longmire-Avital, Chenault, & Haglund, 2013). Service-learning attempts to bridge the gap between the academic and non-academic world by encouraging students to use their knowledge and class concepts to solve real issues (Motley & Sturgill, 2013; Steimel, 2013; Quintanilla & Wahl, 2005). Though the benefits of service-learning are well known to educators and researchers, what remains

unknown is students' awareness of learning throughout a service-learning opportunity. Students may be unaware of their learning experience and may perceive their experience as contributing to or not contributing to their learning experience.

### *Diversity and Service-learning*

Currently, the United States is experiencing an increase in diversity and a shift in cultural representation within the population. The education system is directly impacted by the growth of diversity with students experiencing different classroom climates and exposure to new cultural experiences. With this shift in population, service-learning grows even more salient in the college student's experience, as students interact with other individuals from cultures that are unlike their own during and after college. Furthermore, exposure to diverse scenarios aides in the learning and overall experiences of students (Loes, Pascarella, & Umbach, 2012). Students need to develop the skills that will allow them to navigate successfully across cultures (Blithe, 2016; Karakos et al., 2016). Service-learning encourages and provides an opportunity for students to develop needed skills, embrace diversity, and enhance their own personal development (Gullicks, 2006; Simons & Cleary, 2006; Simonds, Lippert, Hunt, Angell, & Moore, 2008).

Service-learning has been demonstrated to assist in multicultural awareness and enhancing a student's intercultural skills (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Oster-Aaland et al., 2004; Warren, 2012). Utilizing service-learning in an intercultural communication course can be beneficial because students are able to apply service-learning intercultural course materials in real-world contexts involving people from diverse backgrounds. Service-learning provides a venue for students to practice and demonstrate skills that are taught via traditional classroom methods, such as lecture or textbook readings.

That service-learning helps in the retention of course material, achievement of learning outcomes, and the realization of multitudes of other benefits to students is unchallenged. However, further understanding of student perceptions of service-learning is warranted, therefore the following research question is proposed:

RQ: Do students perceive through reflective observations that service-learning assists in their understanding of course content?

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Participants were drawn from an undergraduate intercultural communication class. Of the total population of 393 undergraduate students enrolled in three sections of the course, 382 participant responses were used for analysis, as 11 students did not complete the assignment. The same instructor taught all three sections of the course over a four-year period. Of the original 393 participants, 61% (241) were female and 39% (153) were male. The sample included 15.2% (60) freshman, 49.1% (193) sophomores, 23.6% (93) juniors, and 11.9% (48) seniors representing 46 academic majors. Majors included finance, animal range sciences, marketing, sociology, pre-

Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Vol. 18, No. 1, January 2018.  
josotl.indiana.edu

pharmacy, Spanish, natural resource management, electrical engineering, dietetics, communication majors and others. The research received IRB exempt status.

### *Service-learning Activity*

Participants were assigned an experiential service-learning activity as a requirement of the course. The assignment required each student to provide 10 hours of service to a local community organization throughout the duration of the semester. Students were instructed to select organizations that they would be able to interact with other individuals from different cultural groups than their own. A cultural group in this assignment was defined broadly to include economic status, social status, ethnicity, education level, age, sex, sexual orientation or other identifying factors. Students having trouble in selecting an organization were given assistance in finding an organization.

The assignment required students to practice their intercultural communication skills while servicing the needs of their chosen community organization. To receive full credit for the assignment, students submitted a contract identifying a point person at the student's chosen organization and detailing scheduled hours that the student would work with the organization, a report during the middle of the semester, and a final service report once the assignment was completed. Students were required to schedule at least four sessions with their organization to establish a relationship with the organization.

### *Instrument*

The instrument used in this study was developed as part of a larger project designed to measure student perceptions of a service-learning activity at a mid-sized university located in the Upper Plains. The instrument was a combination of a series of questions and student reflections. Students completed the instrument after finishing the service-learning assignment. The specific question used to provide data in the present study was: "*How did this service experience help you to better understand ideas or subjects we studied in class?*" The responses were usually one or more sentences in length.

### *Data Collection*

Students turned in their final service report at the end of the semester for grading by the instructor. Prior to the beginning of the semester, students were informed that their responses would be retained as a part of ongoing assessment being completed for the institution. All names and identifiers were removed from the data and responses were numbered from 001 to 382. The authors identified the participants' numbers as the source of each sentence. A total of 1125 sentences were recorded in the data. Seven sentences were excluded from the data because of their illegibility or incongruity, bringing the total number of usable sentences to 1118. Similar to the broader project, respondents' sentence(s) were typed into a spreadsheet with one sentence per line entry. The participants' numbers (e.g., 001, 002 . . . 382) were used to identify each sentence, allowing participants to provide more than one sentence in the data set.

## Coding

The authors created the initial codebook using an open-coding process (Saldaña, 2013) whereby the data were read several times to identify the nature of the responses provided. Four broad categories emerged: Perceptions about cognitive understanding; perceptions about behavior; perceptions about content matter and/or context for service-learning experience; and other perceptions. Within each of these categories, subcategories became identifiable: new perceptions about the general category topic, changed perceptions about the general category topic, and improved perceptions about the general category topic. A preliminary review of the data suggested to the researchers that these categories would provide for the coding of the data in such a way that the research question could be answered.

In consultation, the two authors determined the data could be coded initially to place the unit of analysis into one of the four general categories (e.g., 0 = no answer; 1 = cognitive understanding; 2 = behavioral understanding; 3 = content/context specific understanding; and 4 = other). Then, units of analysis would be coded for those who responded to determine the nature of the perception (e.g., 1 = new perception; 2 = changed perception; 3 = improved perception; 4 = other perception).

Two independent coders were trained using the codebook to conduct a preliminary coding of 38 randomly identified units of analysis, to establish inter-coder reliability. A Cohen's *kappa* was used as Cohen's *kappa* "prevents the inflation of reliability scores by correcting for chance agreement" (Hruschka et al., 2004). The initial coding produced results that were insufficient to establish inter-coder reliability, so authors and the coders reviewed the codebook and discussed areas where disagreement occurred. An additional 38 randomly identified units of analysis were isolated for a second round of testing. While the results improved, they were still insufficient to establish inter-coder reliability.

When inter-coder reliability is deemed unacceptable by the researchers, the codebook is discussed and modified. Coders then repeat the coding process with new data until acceptable inter-coder agreement is reached (MacQueen, McLelland, Kay, & Milstein, 1998; Miles, & Huberman, 1994). The authors reviewed and discussed the codebook, identifying two flaws: First, considering units of analysis separately (particularly when there may be more than one sentence from a participant) did not provide sufficient context to discern the meaning of the individual unit of analysis; and second, asking coders to determine levels of learning based upon the unit of analysis required too much interpretation. To address the first limitation, the unit of analysis changed from each individual sentence to all of the sentences provided by each individual participant. This enabled the coders to have a more complete understanding of the intent of the participant when responding to the question.

To address the second flaw, a new codebook was formulated. First, the unit of analysis was coded for content (e.g., 0 = no answer; 1 = cognitive outcome; 2 = behavioral outcome; 3 = both cognitive and behavioral outcomes; 4 = cannot determine outcome). If the content was coded as reflecting a cognitive outcome (1), the coders determined the valence of the comment (e.g., 0 = no answer; 1 = positive; 2 = negative; 3 = cannot determine valence). If the content was coded as reflecting a behavioral outcome (2), the coders determined the valence of the comment similarly to that which was described for coding the cognitive outcome. If the content was coded as reflecting both cognitive and behavioral outcomes (3), the coders determined the separate

Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Vol. 18, No. 1, January 2018.

josotl.indiana.edu

valences of the comments for cognitive and behavioral outcomes (e.g., 0 = no answer; 1 = positive; 2 = negative; 3 = cannot determine valence of content). In addition, the authors added a category to determine if and where the “epiphany moment” of learning occurred for the participant (e.g., 0 = no answer, 1 = in the classroom; 2 = in the service-learning situation; 3 = cannot determine if or where epiphany moment occurred).

Using the revised codebook, the coders were given an additional 38 randomly identified units of analysis for a third round of testing. The authors used Landis and Koch’s (1977) criteria and Neuendorf’s (2002) criteria to judge for *kappa*. Landis and Koch note *kappa* above 0.70 is substantial and *kappa* above 0.81 is almost perfect. Similarly, Neuendorf notes *kappa* of 0.75 and above reflects excellent agreement beyond chance. The authors were satisfied with the results of Cohen’s *kappa*, as provided in Table 1.

**Table 1. New Code Book and Drift Test Cohen’s Kappa**

Category	New Code Book	Test for Drift
Identification of content	$k=.72$	$k=.75$
Valence of cognitive content	$k=.88$	$k=.83$
Valence of behavioral content	$k=.74$	$k=.73$
Context for epiphany moment	$k=.88$	$k=.83$

An additional 38 randomly identified units of analysis were isolated for a final comparison to test for drift. The complete data set was then divided between the two coders and all 374 revised units of analysis were coded. The test for drift produced satisfactory inter-coder reliability as noted in Table 1.

### *Data Analysis*

Once the data were coded, each unit of analysis was grouped into one of the four categories (no answer, cognitive, behavioral, both cognitive and behavioral, cannot determine) and responses associated with each were analyzed. While the number of units of analysis was 382 participants, the authors removed an additional eight participant units of analysis who did not provide an answer for the question on the larger survey from which this study was a part, bringing the total participant units of analysis for this study to 374. The authors then reviewed the participants’ responses and identified common themes to determine the nature of the perceptions identified.

## **Results**

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Table 2 provides the categorical breakdown of units of analysis into cognitive, behavioral, both cognitive and behavioral, and other. The results suggest that overwhelmingly, over 95% of the students recognized learning outcomes associated with the service-learning assignment. Table 2 also shows the valence associated with cognitive, behavioral, and both cognitive and behavioral

outcomes identified by the students. The data suggest students' recognition of cognitive outcomes is more positive than their recognition of behavioral outcomes.

**Table 2. Categorical Placement and Valence of Data**

Outcome	(+) Units	%	(-) Units	%	Valence Undeterminable	%	Total Units	%
Cognitive	210	.97	5	.02	.01	.01	216	.58
Both Cognitive and Behavioral							106	.28
Cognitive	102	.96	4	.04	-	-		
Behavioral	94	.89	6	.05	6	.05		
Behavioral	31	.86	4	.11	1	.03	36	.10
Undeterminable	-	-	-	-	-	-	16	.04
							N=374	100

Table 3 reports the location of the epiphany moment of learning. As expected, the service-learning context proved to be at the center of the service-learning experience for the vast majority of the participants.

**Table 3. Context for Epiphany Moment of Learning (N=374)**

Context	Units	%
Service-learning context	319	.85
Cannot determine location	41	.11
Classroom environment	14	.04

### *Emergent Themes*

After the units of analysis were coded to identify the primary outcome, valence, and epiphany moment of learning, the data were sorted by groups of responses to gather exemplars to illustrate the nature of the comments provided by the participants. The following themes are grouped by primary outcome and valence. The original syntax of the respondents is used for authenticity and all participants have been given pseudonyms in this paper.

### *Positive Cognitive Themes*

Participants provided comments suggesting what they learned and how they applied concepts presented in class to their service experiences. John referenced the overarching theoretical approach used in the course to familiarize students with different ways of studying and interacting with other cultures:



*“I was able to look at my experience and learn from it through social science, interpretive, and critical perspectives.”*

Peter identified specific terminology and concepts from class that helped to guide his communication at the service-learning site:

*“I feel that it was a good way to apply the concepts that I learned in class and apply them to the way I was interacting with the people at [my site]. For example the men had low uncertainty avoidance... Their use of language was different than my usual situation... Facework was very important to the people at [my site].”*

Angela similarly recalled a specific topic from class that guided her role as a volunteer:

*“Another concept that stuck out was the worldview concept. These residents within [my setting] had a completely different outlook on the world than I did. Here I am a privileged student trying to fit into this different type of culture.”*

As these comments suggest, students identified positive cognitive outcomes serving as reference points that helped them navigate the service experience.

#### *Positive Behavioral Themes*

From a behavioral perspective, students provided examples of affected personal behaviors resulting from their service-learning experience. Alisha explained how she became more open to other people:

*“Usually, I confine myself to campus. I do not adventure around very much and therefore do not meet any different people. Because of this class, I was able to meet a lot of interesting people from other countries. Also, I met with people of lower economic status than me. This gave me the perception of how different people from other countries and other status groups are. It also taught me that we are very similar as well.”*

Tim found his particular communication with an elderly person helped him understand that his behavioral approach had an impact:

*“I liked using the dialogical approach ideas. I worked a lot in the Alzheimer’s unit and depending on the dialogue I used, the clients may or may not remember you. I worked with one gentleman who was an absolutely hilarious person to talk with and after spending an entire afternoon with him, I came back the next day and he remembered who I was. I felt like I had actually made an impact.”*

These examples are reflective of the comments made by students who acknowledged behavioral outcomes stemming from the service-learning experience.

### *Negative Cognitive Themes*

While the vast majority of the comments were positive, there were students who shared that the experience had not increased their level of understanding. Typically, comments indicating that little was learned were without warrants. For example, Tom remarked:

*“[The service experience] didn’t really help me better understand anything from class”;*

and Emily added:

*“I don’t think [the service experience] helped in a specific way to understand a theoretical concept. But it did help me to understand about cultural communication.”*

### *Negative Behavioral Themes*

Similarly, the few comments suggesting a negative effect on behavioral outcomes were focused more on the experience itself. For example, one agency did not have the student volunteer working directly with clients, prompting Rob to remark:

*“Since I did not have opportunities to communicate with people, I could not learn through experience which was disappointing since that is what I was hoping to do. I could imagine how they were going through minority development or how their words, actions, implications, and gestures may be different from mine but I never had a chance to test it.”*

A few other students who were placed into experiences that were unfamiliar to them also experienced some discomfort, as Jill confessed:

*“Well for me power was hard to adjust to. The people I was working with were all older than me. I never really had any grandparents so it was hard for me to talk with them. I had the power while volunteering and I never thought I would. It was a little uncomfortable at times.”*

With regard to cognitive and behavioral outcomes, both positive and negative comments were identified. However, the vast majority (see Table 2) of the students acknowledged either cognitive or behavioral (or both) positive outcomes suggesting that the service experience enhanced their classroom learning. Jane explained:

*“Since this class allowed us to get out and actually interact with other cultures instead of just learning about it from a book, it really gave light to what goes on. Because you can sit in a classroom all day and learn about power, the contact theory, marginalized people, and so forth. But if you don’t get out there in the world and put yourself into these positions, you wouldn’t be putting what you learned to use and wouldn’t be helping other people realize that getting to know another culture really isn’t as hard as it may seem.”*

Tony echoed this positive assessment:

*“This experience helped me better understand ideas in class because it actually put me in the shoes of what the concept pertains to. For instance, a person can just sit in class and listen to a lecture about communication topics, but if field experience is also added, professors are bringing the classroom to an actual setting and making their concepts come alive. Many concepts were understood better, especially the saying I have said before: ‘Communication patterns and skills depend on the context.’”*

### *Context for Epiphany Moment*

To further clarify the role of the service-learning experience, students revealed the context of their epiphany moment of learning. While some of the students acknowledged the classroom as the place where they best understood the course concepts, most of the students identified the service-learning context as the place where they actually learned the course material (see Table 3).

### *Classroom Setting*

Just over 10% of the students pointed to the classroom as the place where their understanding of the course material occurred. For example, Janelle offered:

*“I don’t think I will ever forget the talk we had about certain people holding power for reasons that we really don’t control. It’s helpful and I will think back to that discussion many times in the future I believe.”*

David noted what perhaps may have been an experiential classroom experience as the source of his understanding:

*“I feel like the guest speaker recently who talked of his struggles in moving here to America as a refugee really gave me more insight to some of the situations the clients at the shelter have. He was a very powerful and wealthy man in Africa but when he came to America he just had a small apartment with little to fill it. It made me think about how some of the clients probably had higher degrees in school than I do and just fell upon hard times. This made me feel like I could relate to them better.”*

Sally perhaps summarized those who acknowledged the classroom as the context for their epiphany moment:

*“Most of the ideas became clear in class.”*

### *Service-learning Setting*

The greater percentage of students recognized how the context of their service experience was instrumental in helping them to understand. Judy was straightforward in her comment:

*“This experience taught me how important it is to interact with people from other cultures. Obviously this is stressed in our text, but I still was not able to grasp the concept until I stepped out of my comfort zone and participated in this service-learning activity.”*

Mark was specific about his application of course concepts in the service setting and how that helped him to understand:

*“Working at [my site] helped me to take concepts that we were studying in class and use them in real-life setting. Being able to use things we learned in the classroom and apply them in a work-type of setting was very satisfying. For example, we talked a lot about the importance of non-verbal communication in class and how it can differ across cultural groups. I never realized the significance of this until I worked at [my site] because I tried to express friendly facial expressions towards other cultural groups, but these individuals came across as very rude to me at first. Eventually, I remembered that even though this type of behavior seemed rude to me, it is probably a very common cultural norm for people of that ethnicity and that they don’t mean anything bad by it.”*

Some students even recognized and applied the critical perspective gained in their service context, as Kelly revealed:

*“If anything, I recognized my place in the dominant culture just by the fact that I was able to offer volunteer hours to an organization that offers its services to people who are, in some cases, desperately in need of help . . . [T]his experience helped me to see my privileged position in our culture. In this sense I was more deeply able to appreciate the privilege-disadvantage dialectic that we studied throughout the text.”*

## **Discussion**

This study provided some insight into whether students perceive service-learning to be beneficial in understanding course content. Using both a descriptive and interpretive lens, this study identified that the vast majority of students in the sample recognize both cognitive and behavioral outcomes associated with positive evaluations of their experiences. These results are encouraging to educators and the findings provide further reinforcement in support of work suggesting that service-learning helps students apply course concepts to contexts (e.g. Britt, 2012; Darby et al., 2013; Whitney & Clayton, 2011).

However, perhaps most pertinent to the classroom environment was the role the service context played in the creation of the epiphany moments of learning. Student reflections provide support for where Kolb (1984) identified learning to begin. Based upon student reflections, it was in the service context where most students found that they experienced real learning. Phrases reflecting this attribution were repeated throughout the data. Students wrote that the service-

learning experience . . . “helped me learn,” “reinforced everything that was learned in class,” “helped me experience first-hand,” “helped me realize,” and “helped me better understand.”

These reflections reveal when students are able to determine and recognize moments of learning, students are able to apply the concepts taught in a traditional setting via the service-learning experience. In a traditional setting, students may find it difficult to connect a topic or subject to a non-classroom scenario. Students that reflected epiphany moments, recognized exact moments of learning or acknowledged the context in which their learning occurred through applied knowledge. These students may be able to retain knowledge in the long-term because of application and identifying their epiphany moments.

While our hunch was strong that students do make connections between the service-learning experience and the course content, the data provided a more robust identification of the nature of those perceptions as being positive. The responses included in the data set provided insight to the value of experiential learning for students. Service-learning can be a powerful tool for communication educators to employ during a course when the experience aligns with course content, and objectives (see Ahlfedt, 2009; Britt, 2012). This study suggested students are on the same page with educators in recognizing the benefit of service-learning. However, the presence of a few comments suggesting that the setting was not conducive to positive interaction underscores the need for communication educators to make sure that the service-learning contexts will provide for meaningful communication between the student volunteer and the people who are served.

## Conclusion

This study explored the intersection of service-learning in communication courses and student perceptions of experiential learning. While we know that service-learning enhances the overall university experience for many students, being able to identify more specifically how students reflect upon the experience adds insight into future academic planning and course development. Perhaps Patricia put it best when she reflected:

*“The service experience helped me better comprehend ideas we studied in class because I actually got to practice what we learned. In most classes, students sit in lectures and are given exams on certain strategies, techniques, and more, but never get to practice what they have learned. By backing up the lectures and classroom activities with real life experiences, the lessons were brought to life.”*

The limitations of the present study provide opportunity for future research. Initially, while the data revealed that students overwhelmingly agree that service-learning experiences help them to better understand the course materials, discerning their level of learning proved problematic. For example, did the experience teach something new to the student or did the experience reinforce something that the student already knew. Future research could reveal how the experience contributed to learning, providing useful information for future educators as they develop their course materials and exercises.

Another aspect of understanding course materials is the acquisition of vocabulary and terminology associated with the service-learning experience. This is especially the case in the

*Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, Vol. 18, No. 1, January 2018.  
josotl.indiana.edu

area of intercultural communication where students are presented with specific, cultural terms to help them understand and analyze their own cultural communication practices. One related aspect of the larger study was to determine the use of specific terminology from the course in the student responses to the questions on the survey. There was some indication that a large number of the students responded to the question probe using course-specific terminology. Future research could more specifically explore the acquisition and usage of course terminology as a demonstration of applied learning in the service context. This could be accomplished by first examining language and terminology used in the mid-semester reports versus the final reports. Our hypothesis would be that reports would reflect more specific terms following the introduction of specific terms following the formal introduction of vocabulary when presenting intercultural theories and principles.

Overall, this study provided further support for Littlefield et al.'s (2016) earlier work, suggesting that service-learning meets general education outcomes. As our findings suggest, students do perceive the service experience as an enhancement to their understanding of course material. Thus, incorporating service-learning into our communication courses should provide additional ways to reach students and contribute to their overall education.

### Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the contributions of Amy Duchsherer and Jade Monroe, graduate students in the Department of Communication at North Dakota State University, who coded the data for this study.

### References

- Ahlfeldt, S. L. (2009). Thoughtful and informed citizens: An approach to service-learning for the communication classroom. *Communication Teacher*, 23(1), 1-6. doi: 10.1080/17404620802581851
- Applegate, J. L., & Morreals, S. P. (2006). Preface. In D. Droge & B. Murphy (Eds.), *Voices of a strong democracy: Concepts & models for service-learning in communication studies* (IX-XIV). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Ash, S. L., & Carpenter, P. H. (2004). The articulated learning: An approach to guided reflection and assessment. *Innovative Higher Education*, 29, 136-156.
- Blithe, S. J. (2016). Teaching intercultural communication through service-learning. *Communication Teacher*, 30(3), 165-171.

Brown, N. (2011). A 360-degree view of international service learning. In R. Bringle, J. Hatcher, & S. Jones (Eds.), *International service learning: Conceptual frameworks and research* (57-68). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Brownell, J. E., & Swaner, L. E. (2010). *Five high-impact practices: Research on learning outcomes, completion, and quality*. Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges and Universities.

Caulfield, J., & Woods, T. (2013). Experiential learning: Exploring its long-term impact on socially responsible behavior. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 13(2), 31-48.

Conway, J. M., Amel, E. L., & Gerwien, D. P. (2009). Teaching and learning in the social context: A meta-analysis of service learning's effects on academic, personal, social, and citizenship outcomes. *Teaching of Psychology*, 36(4), 233-245.

Darby, A., Longmire-Avital, B., Chenault, J., & Haglund, M. (2013) Students' motivation in academic service-learning over the course of the semester. *College Student Journal* 185-191.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Duncan, D. & Kopperud, J. (2008). *Service-learning companion*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co.

Einfeld, A., & Collins, D. (2008). The relationships between service-learning, social justice, multicultural competence, and civic engagement. *Journal of College Student Development*, 49(2), 95-109.

Eppler, M. A., Ironsmith, M., Dingle, S. H., & Errickson, M. A. (2011). Benefits of service learning for freshman college students and elementary school children. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 11(4), 102-115.

Flynn, M. A., & Carter, E. (2016). Curriculum of the social norms approach: Information only vs. service learning. *Communication Education*, 65(3), 322-337.

Gleason, J. P., & Violette, J. L. (2012). Integrating service-learning into public relations coursework: Applications, implications, challenges, and rewards. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 24(2), 280-285.

Gullicks, K. A. (2006). What's service go to do with it? Investigating student sense-making of required service in the basic communication course. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Dissertations & Theses: Full Text database (Publication No. AAT 3264681).

Hashemipour, P. (2006). Learning language, culture, and community. In D. Droge & B. Murphy *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, Vol. 18, No. 1, January 2018. josotl.indiana.edu

(Eds.), *Voices of strong democracy: Concepts and models for service-learning in communication studies* (61-76). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Hruschka, D. J., Schwartz, D., Cobb St. John, D., Picone-Decaro, E., Jenkins, R. A., & Carey, J. W. (2004). Reliability in coding open-ended data: Lessons learned from HIV behavioral research. *Field Methods*, 16(3), 307-331. doi: 10.1177/1525822X04266540

Kahl, D. H. (2010). Making a difference: (Re)connecting communication scholarship with pedagogy. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 38(3), 298-302. doi: 10.1080/00909882.2010.490845

Katula, R. A., & Threnhauser, E. (1999). Experiential education in the undergraduate curriculum. *Communication Education*, 48(3), 238-255. doi:10.1080/03634529909379172

Karakos, H. L., Fisher, B. W., Geller, J., Lunn, L., Palmer, N. A. Perkins, D. D., ... Shields, S. (2016). The field school in intercultural education as a model for international service-learning and collaborative action-research training. In S. L. Barnes, L. Brinkley-Rubinstein, B. Doykos, N. C. Martin & A. McGuire (Eds.), *Academics in Action! A model for community-engaged research, teaching, and service* (167-190). New York: Fordham University Press.

Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: PTR Prentice Hall.

Landis, J. R., & Koch, G. G. (1977). The measurement of observer agreement for categorical data. *Biometrics*, 33, 159-174.

Lahman, M. (2012). Appreciative inquiry: Guided reflection to generate change in service-learning courses. *Communication Teacher*, 26(1), 1-4. doi: 10.1080/17404622.2011.625362

Littlefield, R. S., Rick, J. M., & Currie-Mueller, J. L. (2016). Connecting intercultural communication service learning with general education: Issues, outcomes, and assessment. *Journal of General Education*, 65(1), 66-84. doi: 10.5325/jgeneeduc.65.1.0066

Loes, C., Pascarella, E., & Umbach, P. (2012). Effects of diversity experiences on critical thinking skills: who benefits? *The Journal of Higher Education*, 83(1), 1-25.

MacQueen, K. M., McLelland, E., Kay, K., & Milstein, B. (1998). Codebook development for team-based qualitative analysis. *Cultural Anthropology Methods*, 10(2), 31-36.

Meaney, K. S., Housman, J., Cavazos, A., & Wilcox, M. L. (2012). Examining service-learning in a graduate physical education teacher education course. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 12(3), 108-124.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.  
Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Vol. 18, No. 1, January 2018.  
josotl.indiana.edu



Motley, P. & Sturgill, A. (2013). Assessing the merits of international service-learning in developing professionalism in mass communication. *Communication Teacher*, 27(3), 172-189. doi: 10.1080/17404622.2013.775470

Neuendorf, K. A. (2002). *The content analysis guidebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Novak, J. M., Markey, V., & Allen, M. (2007). Evaluating cognitive outcomes of service learning in higher education: A meta-analysis. *Communication Research Reports*, 24(2), 149-157.

Novek, E. M. (2009). Service-learning in communication education. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justices*, 4(3), 179-194. doi: 10.1177/1746197909340876

Oster-Aaland, L. K., Sellnow, T. K., Nelson, P. E., & Pearson, J. C. (2004). The status of service-learning in departments of communication: A follow-up study. *Communication Education*, 53, 348-356.

Quintanilla, K. M., & Wahl, S. T. (2005). Incorporating service learning into communication courses: Benefits, guidelines, and challenges. *Texas Speech Communication Journal*, 30(1), 67-71.

Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Sage

Simons, L., & Cleary, B. (2006). The influence of service learning on students' personal and social development. *College Teaching*, 54(4), 307-319.

Simonds, B. K., Lippert, L. R., Hunt, S. K., Angell, M. E., & Moore, M. K. (2008). Communication and diversity: Innovations in teacher education. *Communication Teacher*, 22(2), 56-65.

Soukup, P. (2006). Service-learning in communication: Why? In D. Droge & B. Murphy (Eds.), *Voices of a strong democracy: Concepts & models for service-learning in communication studies* (7-12). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Steimel, S. J. (2013). Community partners' assessment of service-learning in an interpersonal and small group communication course. *Communication Teacher*, 27(4), 241-255. doi: 10.1080/1740462.2013.798017

Yorio, P., & Ye, F. (2012). A meta-analysis on the effects of service-learning on the social, personal, and cognitive outcomes of learning. *Academy of Management, Learning & Education*, 11, 9-27.

Warren, J. L. (2012). Does service-learning increase student learning?: A meta-analysis. *Michigan Journal of Community Service-learning*, 56-61.

Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Vol. 18, No. 1, January 2018.  
josotl.indiana.edu

Waterman, A. S. (2013). An overview of service-learning and the role of research and evaluation in service-learning programs. In A. S. Waterman's (Ed.), *Service-learning: Applications from the research* (1-12). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Whitney, B., & Clayton, P. (2011). Research on and through reflection in international service learning. In R. Bringle, J. Hatcher, & S. Jones' (Eds.), *International service learning: Conceptual frameworks and research* (145-187). Sterling, VA: Stylus.