IMPACT OF PROJECT BASED LEARNING ON STUDENTS’ INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION and ADAPTATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

NAZENIN RUSO

ABSTRACT

Introduction: In the world of globalization, university is a complex milieu that contains many nationalities, and thus, many cultures and the need for intercultural communication and cultural awareness for students is greater than ever. Carefully designed project experiences impart important cultural knowledge to foreign students interacting in a specific culture.

Objective: The main objective of this paper is to generate awareness of intercultural communication in multi cultural academic settings in higher education and to propose the incorporation of project based learning into the curriculum and into the student experience to be followed by reflection.

Methodology: This study consists of an action research project and it employs case study method as it attempts to explore a unique phenomenon, project based learning, in Eastern Mediterranean University. The desired data was collected using multiple methods through a variety of qualitative techniques including survey, semi-structured interviews and reflective papers. The participants of this study are first year university students from different nationalities such as Turkish, African, Azeri, Kazakh and Iranian and their ages vary between 19-22. The sample is composed of 150 students studying in the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management of Eastern Mediterranean University in North Cyprus.

Findings: Findings indicated that enhanced projects based student experiences are vicarious as they create awareness and understanding of the society students live in and facilitate students’ learning of a different culture and country. Naturally, this results in higher cultural adaptation and country appreciation. In this respect, findings also

Conclusions: The study has revealed that students find it difficult to interact in a specific culture which is different to them and can not be accustomed to socialize with and appreciate others from different backgrounds within their first year unless they are offered a contexts wherein they find the chance to share, care and explore values and perspectives of the country they study. Therefore, the results of this study are noteworthy and clearly reveal that carefully designed projects are enriching experiences which should be a mandatory component of the university curriculum.

Implications: For higher educational programmes, especially in tourism departments, opportunities of international experiences provided to students is vital for student satisfaction as it is anticipated that many of them will find jobs in culturally diverse settings. For this reason, they need help to be able to flourish in a diverse environment.

Target audience: This study is designed for the instructors of tourism teaching in a multi cultural classroom in a university and interested in investigating ways to improve intercultural communication in their classrooms.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication, Project based Instruction, Reflection, Curriculum, Differences.
Project-based instruction leads to learning activities that are interdisciplinary, long term, and student centered, instead of short, isolated lessons. The teacher at the end of every lesson and in her office spends time with the students and checks their weekly progresses.

The main purpose of this paper is to answer the question of “how teachers can improve intercultural communication of their students and how they can make their international students adapt to the new society they live due to educational purpose”. This paper generates awareness of cultural problems of foreign students studying in a new culture, advocates the significance of incorporating projects possessing the potential to enhance their intercultural communication as a result of the new experiences and reflects upon the development of community service projects at Eastern Mediterranean University.

METHOD

Research Design

This research employs case study method as it attempts to explore a unique phenomenon (raising more skilled and responsible tourism students, with the help of time and assigned activity of community based service-learning project) in Eastern Mediterranean University, School of Tourism and Hospitality Management. The study consists of the descriptive records of the research participants and statistical data. Tellis (1997) stresses the increasing usage of case studies in education which involves a system of action on a selected group of individuals. Actually, this case study is an exploratory one as it makes use of interviews and documents. As it is known, the major benefits of case studies are identified as the improvement of case and broadening of the students’ horizons.

Subjects

The students of this study are from different nationalities such as Turkish, Turkish Cypriot, African, Azeri, Kazakh and Iranian and their ages vary between 19-22. There are 70 students involved in the first step of this study and 80 students were involved in this project studying in the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management of Eastern Mediterranean University in Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). The sampling method used in this study was convenience
sampling. As its name implies convenience sampling refers to the collection of information from members of the population who are conveniently available to provide it.

Data Collection

In this case study, multiple methods of data collection is used. Data was collected using a variety of qualitative techniques including survey, semi-structured interviews and reflective papers. Different data collection methods possess different strengths and weaknesses; therefore upon using multiple methods, the probability of creating a better picture out of the data is much higher (Daymon & Halloway, 2003; Bryman, 2004; Mason, 2002; Smith & Thorpe & Lowe, 1991).

Procedure

Step I: In order to correctly explore and adequately reflect the actual opinions of first year international students living in TRNC, to analyze the relationship between international and national, a survey is distributed to 70 students. The main objective of this survey was to investigate students’ satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their new life in TRNC in terms of meeting with new cultures. The survey aimed to provide knowledge on this matter and then lead to the next step.

After the identifications of the difficulties of students’ staying in a foreign country within the context of a university or academic setting, the next question to be addressed in terms of education concerned the solutions for a better intercultural competence among students. In other words, the problem statement is identified after analyzing students’ answers to the survey questions. Student encounters revealed dissatisfaction with the new life and the new culture. The research question then aroused as how teachers can improve intercultural communication of their students and how they can make their international students adapt to the new society they live due to educational purpose.

Step II: The second step was to present project based instruction to students and to guide them to work on the projects until the end of the semester to find out their effect on the intercultural communication of the participant students.

Nature of the CBSL Projects Assigned: Community based project instructions create opportunities for students to use their gifts and talents as resources as they work with group members and aim to help disadvantaged people to improve the quality of their local life. There are several examples to such projects. These range from donating flower packs to community parks, creating a public library and contributing materials to the disadvantaged personages.

The particular focus of this research is the projects; which is organizing New Year parties for people living in the retirement house and homeless children living in SOS house in North Cyprus. Students are supposed to plan, implement and evaluate the organizations from the beginning to the end. The researcher’s role is only a guide. Some students visited almost all the hotels and restaurants on the island to interview several people from tourism sector to find an appropriate location with reasonable price for their event whereas the others started to prepare recreational activities such as dance, theatre, games, competitions and animation shows to entertain their guests. Each student was a member of different committees such as sponsorship, gift, animation, food and beverage, transportation and everyone contributed to the organization in different ways.

In this paper, the primary concern is with the contribution of community service projects on its participants through being exposed to issues, situations and unfamiliar environments otherwise which they would not have opportunity to experience firsthand. While investing their out-of-class energy and time for community focused activity, actually, students developed several desirable engagement in international experiences across a broad spectrum of disciplines.

Step III: Upon the completion of the projects, reflective essays are written and semi-structured interviews are conducted at the end of the semester with all 80 students.

Data Collection Methods

Survey Questions: include some demographics, questions focusing on the differences between the students’ country of origin and TRNC in several aspects like communication, social life trying to figure out
students’ expectations and satisfactions with the life in TRNC. The survey consists of 17 open ended questions.

Reflective Method: Asking students to write reflective essays was important to find out the ideas which the experiences have stimulated and focus on them. Several students’ similar expressions on the same idea signifyed ideas’ generability and therefore gave way to potentially wider acceptability. Reflective papers were assigned to elicit responses to open ended reflection questions indicating what they learned as well as how they thought, felt and processed their experiences during the project. Reflective thinking is seen as a crucial skill which in turn enhances skills such as critical thinking (Kizilkaya and Aşkar, 2009). Students were asked to write answers to the given question sheet (including questions like their responsibilities during project, their feelings, difficulties, favorite part, the role of technology in collaboration and social interaction) in private at their homes to express their thoughts about the project. In this way representative excerpts were reported to signify what students drew from their service experiences. Students were given 2 weeks time to answer the questions on the question sheet and to submit it to their teacher.

Semi-structured Interviews: To take further views on the similar issues, interviews are also carried out to allow students elaborate on more ideas during the dynamics of interviewing. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the end of the course and individually with the students and was be designed to provide an additional means of reflection for the student participants and to allow for more in-depth discussion about the personal outcomes for each participant. Conducting the interviews permitted the students to think more about the experience. The interviews were held in the researcher’s office one by one on appointment. Each interview lasted 10-15 minutes and all were recorded.

Data Analyses

Concerning the research, the qualitative analysis process of this study (the survey, the reflective essays and semi-structured interview) includes three sections; preparation for data analysis, familiarization and coding. Initial data analysis consists of coding and categorizing. Without coding, it was unlikely to organize mass of collected data. Each survey, reflective essay and the semi-structured interview involve coding procedures in order to generate concepts from the collected data. With the help of coding, the data was transformed and reduced to build categories (Daymon and Holloway, 2003 and Moghaddam, 2006). Open coding, axial coding and selective coding were employed one after the other. Throughout the coding process, the researcher reviewed the data too many times for searching and re-searching emerging codes.

Validity

Before using survey questions, there were several steps applied to it. The survey instrument was originally developed in English and firstly it was back-translated to be employed in Turkish culture as well (Aulakh and Kotabe, 1993). This was necessary as many of the respondents would be Turkish (Turkish students were given Turkish version of the questionnaire and the foreign students were distributed the English version of it). After that, the study instrument was translated into the Turkish language by experts fluent in both English and Turkish. The verbal equivalence between the Turkish and English versions was checked through a back translation with other bilingual translators (Brislin and Pederson, 1976).

The newly developed survey was administered to a pilot sample of 25 tourism students in a similar group. After the survey was completed, students had an opportunity to give verbal and written feedback on the survey instrument. Their input included a few ambiguities and suggestions for word changes. In other words, there were a few compelling reasons to make some changes in the survey. Therefore students’ feedback was incorporated into the final version of the survey. This survey was referenced in the thesis named “Communication between Cultures: West meets East” by Skucaite (2012). The survey’s wording and the face validity of the questions were examined by three supervisors in the field of education and to form a consensus on some vocabulary or expressions, more researchers’ ideas have been asked. As a result, some adjustments were made for the final version of the study instrument.
Findings

Findings of the Survey

Representative excerpts signify that majority of the students could not get adapted with their new lives.

Inactive Life

Students complained about having a monotonous life in TRNC. Majority expressed that TRNC is a good place for rest after years of working, therefore resting in here is awesome, but in their countries, they have more things to feel that they are living. Moreover, they stated that visiting same people, doing same things made them inactive, they used to be so energetic before they start university, they added that life in TRNC is very boring.

Cultural Problems

Students indicated several cultural differences between their countries and TRNC. Some said they use only verbal language in their countries but Turkish use too much non verbal language and gestures. Some foreign students observed that people in TRNC are shouting all the time while talking and they think this is very normal for them. African students all found the weather as very harsh. Some students believed that people here is less friendly than in their countries. For some students there is racism in TRNC as they could not find jobs outside to support their studies. According to students’ statements, when they applied for a job, the shop owners sent them back saying “You don’t know Turkish, so I can not work with you”.

Some students defined TRNC as an advanced village, adding that their country is really developed stating problems such as “No night busses”, “expensive life”, “lack of good shopping centers”, “taxi drivers cheating students” and “landlords being unfriendly”.

Lack of friends

Students said that foreigners are not welcomed; some of them said they are lonely as they know only one or two students from the cafeteria. They add that life is boring for them as there is no one to interact with. Some complained being always at school and not knowing anybody here to take them for a tour.

Student suggestions: The most often recurring theme was lack of presentations about country and no activities to combine people and lack of activities, projects in which both international and Turkish students participate. Some added that the school projects are helpful when done in multi cultural groups.

Findings of the Reflective Papers and Semi-structured Interviews

Intercultural Communication

Findings indicated that offering a context wherein students find the chance to share, care and explore values and perspectives different than their own had profound potential on students’ appreciation of different cultures (Lovat and Clement, 2008; Carrington and Selva, 2010; Batchelder and Root 1994; Eyler and Giles, 1999; Mundy and Eyler, 2002). Therefore, students became alert to recognize different groups living in our world.

Universities bring together individuals who have a wide range of identities and backgrounds and provide a rich setting for increased levels of interaction and intercultural communication. There is no doubt that we live in a changing global environment, and accordingly we are increasingly responsible for our impact on the environment and our interactions with others from different cultures. Rhoads (1997) argued that interacting with diverse cultural contexts strongly influence the participants’ self. The results of the analysis revealed that on being assigned a project like this, young people from diverse backgrounds worked together for a common good. As Eyler and Giles (1999) claimed, these kind of project “affords the opportunity to see differences constructively” (p.203). Greater appreciation of other cultures was one of the most significant outcomes that many students felt they learned as a result of communicating with people from different backgrounds. Here is an example reflection:

“There were 12 different country students in this project. I saw their traditional customs and their traditional dance”
Participants’ responses reflected their views on how these projects engage learners in the construction of knowledge while sharing information about their unique experiences, cultures, backgrounds, and perceptions in relation to the real worlds in which they live. Moreover, projects exposed students to share and live experiences of students from different cultural encounters, which in turn, affected their intellectuality. Here are two of the typical student responses:

“I learned new things. Going out is good. You mix with Turkish People, they teach what you do not know. “

“We shared knowledge, they asked me about my country, which language we use there, what we eat etc. I asked them questions “

Another point is that, analysis of the data revealed that intergroup contact was inherent during these projects. The differences were not only between the cultures, such as Turkish-Nigerian but there were different varieties of the same cultures within this study (Ghana-Cameroon). Therefore, this interdisciplinary project infused the classroom, with various cultures and prepares students to be more receptive to comparative perspectives and work in a uniform way. Pritchard and Whitehead (2004) and Carrington and Selva (2010) observed that students respectfully interact with each other in these kind of multicultural arenas and learn from diversity. Even the countries of the same continent such as Africa, had different tribe music and dance styles and after sharing own styles, created a common style. Some indications provided were as follows:

“We were to do an African dance of which we were students from different African countries with different dances but we did our best to adapt and to create uniformity. At the end we were just but one family.”

“Action speaks louder than voice. Even if we did not understand each other, we get the message”

Furthermore, some project participants predicted that through service participation, they acquired life skills such as knowledge and acceptance of different races and cultures, a better understanding of problems facing the community, country, world and interpersonal abilities. Students learned to appreciate each other’s culture in a warm environment. Therefore, they developed an understanding of diversity and questioned their assumptions about people and difference (Carrington and Selva, 2010). In other words, their participation in community service led to a greater tolerance and acceptance of different racial or cultural groups. As Eyler and Giles (1999) stated, students in service projects value appreciation of other cultures. They developed an appreciation for people from diverse backgrounds and cultivated skills which enabled them to relate personally to others. One student for example commented:

“At the end of the whole activities I have added up the list of friends and have learnt to appreciate others too. Whether being white or black we were all left with a sense of togetherness and cooperation so as to achieve our goals”

A student from Nigeria thanked to the project provider as follows:

“I was overwhelmed with joy and happiness for the opportunity giving to me through my English teacher and my department in taking part of this kind of intercultural annual festive party for the first time in TRNC, most especially the opportunity giving to us the African students to crate awareness of African traditional way of dancing to the SOS youth, children, old people and other guest of honors and participant even to the public viewers”.

In conclusion, both social and cultural learning was fostered which helped to build relationships, promote respectful connections, consider multiple perspectives, appreciate diversity and develop healthy intercultural communication. Projects made participants encounter and spend time with people whose cultures were different than theirs and this facilitated greater cultural understanding. Moreover, it is significant to state at this point that “power lies at the center of how culture contributes to notions of identity and the self” (Rhoads, 1997, p. 95). Finally, it should be added that one of the growing ethical culture is intercultural and this refers to a person’s vision of global responsibility which means not for the individual but for everyone (Ozturk, 2010).
Managing New Skills

Several remarkable quotes provided evidence that project experiences provided mastery of a model or skill procedures. Students developed certain behaviors while being involved in the requirements of the project such as selling, cooperating, singing etc. Moreover, it was believed that experiences brought about curiosity for students which in turn reinforced willingness to live about that experience further.

“I learned how to do something together in harmony with international friends form other countries”.

Some indications were in terms of improving language skills. For example:

“I learned Turkish as I mixed with Turkish and Cypriot people. I talked mixed English and Turkish”.

“I learned how to sing in Turkish”

Learning About the Island, TRNC

Responses of the students were indicators for an increase in their knowledge of the island. Especially foreign students’ statements as well as Turkish students from Turkey, enrolled in these projects which were all organized as outdoors, were highly suggestive of an increase in students’ general knowledge of the country they are studying. Students’ reflections on island included statements like following:

“Before this organization I did not know about Çamlık Köşk Retirement House but now I know about these people”

“I have the opportunity of knowing more about Cyprus”

“I did not even know there was a place called Girne, I only know Magusa and Nicosia. Girne is gorgeous”

Building Better Communication

Significant but not surprising result was that students’ build better communication with other groups but it was interesting that projects also helped foreign students to build better relationships also with each other besides Turkish people. Here is a quote expressed by a foreign student:

“Actually I witnessed some changes in my life since after the event, at least my social means of communication with foreign people has improved, I feel more free and relaxed with foreign students on like before, I talk to them freely without any odd feelings, some times we walk together for lunch, we share ideas together.”

To sum up, projects encouraged students to develop meaningful ties to people out of the campus and these human connections made students’ school experience rich and fulfilling (NCSL, 2009). Students normally meet with people from family, neighborhood or school. However; these projects opened the door of the students to more amazing people they would not met otherwise. Consequently, students tried to communicate well with these new encounters and in turn this enhanced their communication abilities necessary for success.

With the help of project experiences, communication skills of students’ also increased as they communicated with new encounters which in turn they had to improve their communication abilities in order to succeed their tasks. Within this communication balloon, there are people from different cultures. This makes students learn and consider multiple perspectives and appreciate diversity and all these reinforce better cultural understanding.

The Most Favorable and the least favorable Outcomes of the Projects

The favorite part of the community service projects for the majority was to see others, disadvantaged people happy and to communicate with new people. Students felt great as they helped people and they were happy to see that what they have done worth as their efforts was associated with causing happiness for many disadvantaged people who do not always find the chance to attend organizations like the ones in these projects.
Although, there were certain things students found easy such as passing good time with friends, sharing a common direction, there were least favorable outcomes of the projects expressed by the students. These are the difficulties for the students which they stated as emotional affection on seeing the disadvantaged people for the first time, trying to find sponsors for the events, working after school hours and at the weekends and the risk of making a mistake as the tasks were real, on the stage. For example, when the project is a written one, students can erase their mistakes and correct themselves. However, in a real life project like these, students are dealing with human beings and they can easily hurt each other upon uttering a wrong statement which would be extremely difficult to recover. Similarly, some of the students’ roles were on the stage and if they made a mistake during their performances, it would be impossible for them to stop and tell the crowd “sorry”, or “let’s start again”.

Implications for Practise

As evident throughout the study, the findings have the potential to further the project efforts in providing direction and program ideas for future endeavors. The results can be shared with many instructors to encourage them incorporating community service projects into their course curriculum. Implications from this study reveal that service to others is kind of a gateway asset for the School Success and Healthy Development as proposed by G2G, Growing to Greatness (2004). Through projects, students gain insights about not just the different cultures around them but also about their own selves. To enhance intercultural communication, teacher education programmes in colleges and universities need to embrace the responsibility of growing teachers who value multicultural efforts (Melnick & Zeichner, 1988); Hidalgo, 1993; Burstein & Cabello, 1989; Chisholm, 1994; Grant, 1994; Dana & Floyd, 1993).

Another implication derived from this research is the significance of reflection. It is pertinent that real world issues need to be incorporated into written or oral reflection. Through reflection, students stop and think about what they are experiencing. Especially, “college students are at a time in their lives when a multitude of forces influence their sense of self; thus they often are in the midst of a period of heightened self-discovery and identity confusion” (Rhoads, 1997, p. 95). Through guided reflection, students discover a meaning out of their experiences. Moreover, NSLC (2009) state that service learning increases retention rates of students. Students’ appreciation of difference and awareness of structural inequality improves. Given these findings teachers need to show effort to create meaningful and reflective experiences. Besides these, this study implies the significance of using reflection tools within education. Unfortunately, Eyler (2002) contends that there is not much research in the service learning literature that specifically addresses the techniques of reflection. The teachers who will be implementing community service type of projects need to be trained for carrying out a variety of reflective practices.

Finally, it should be repeated that community work connects to a larger vision students have of the world and their place in that world. Schools become a place of exploration, where people can learn from each other and use education as a means to challenge their concerns in a holistic manner (Thyer-Bacon, 2004). For all these reasons, students should be involved in some kind of community service under appropriate supervision in every stage of their education because applying project based instruction to students have the potential to provide a foundation for life-long learning.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study was not without limitations. Firstly, longitudinal data was required to record the lasting effects of service-learning experiences. A longitudinal study could determine if these positive short-term effects presented in this research, would have more long-lasting effect on the lives of participants who served.

Secondly, there may be other internal or external factors which might have affected the outcomes of the study. As Morris (2001) states, “...it is not known whether any other factors, other than the course, influenced the change in participants’ motivation and attitudes” (p.252). Moreover, some students may feel pressure to give what they perceived to be desirable answers to the questions. To assess the degree of positive change is quiet difficult (Gutheil et al., 2006). Moreover, the
study was also limited by the sample size although large compared with some recent qualitative studies.

Lastly, it is generally said that there is always room for methodological improvements especially in social sciences. In this respect, it should be added that it would also be incredibly valuable if there was a control group without taking any kind of treatment which means without being exposed to any kind of community projects to compare and contrast the result
Conclusions

In conclusion, the need for intercultural communication and cultural awareness is greater than ever. Students experience several problems while studying in a new culture and if they are not guided, this may result with bigger problems in the future as well when they start their careers. As Butts (2007) points out, “Most higher education programmes are sending their graduates out to a working environment where it is anticipated that most will be working in culturally diverse settings in terms of colleagues and populations, and providing them with nothing to help them flourish in a diverse environment”. For this reason, as Miller (1997) claims, teachers and administrators should no longer remain silent on issues of culture and its role in education.

University is a significant setting which impacts students’ intercultural experience. If there is no contact or interaction between the different cultures, there is no space to an attempt to understand each other and communicate. Therefore, this paper is a good source in terms of outlining the necessity for intercultural communication within higher education and investigating the process of the creation of projects designed to provide enhancement. This study strongly recommends community project as an enriching experience which should be a mandatory component of the curriculum.

After all these investigations regarding this study, a major conclusion was deduced. Community projects had profound potential on students’ appreciation of different cultures. Moreover, students’ appreciation of other cultures improved in parallel with the level of engagement in international interactions. Therefore, opportunities of international experiences provided to students is vital. Finally, it should be noted that through the efforts of their teachers and project based instruction, students can acquire the competence of functioning effectively, productively and most important of all, sensitively in culturally pluralistic societies.

References


