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Where Is the Civic Responsibility in Service Learning? A Process-oriented Empirical Study

Abstract

It is essential to have engaged citizens for a functioning democracy. Consequently, educational processes must foster the active engagement of citizens. This could be enabled by the concept of service learning. Empirical studies on the effects of service learning on civic responsibility are ambiguous, however, a positive trend can be described. Retrospective self-disclosure of students, which is normally used in empirical studies, is impaired by memory effects. For this reason, this study is process-oriented with a weekly reflection in the form of a journal. The claim of the study is to explore key situations in the service learning module, which stimulate the students to think about civic engagement in society. The results show that key situations occur in interacting processes between the partner of the charitable organizations and the fellow students, as well as during the scientific work on the service project. Therefore, the interaction among students also seems relevant for triggering the consideration of civic engagement. This indicates that regarding service learning courses, students can be stimulated to find their own role in a society and position concerning civic engagement, but less so to foster a willingness to be engaged.

Keywords

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1   Introduction

The origin of service learning is linked to the educational concept of Dewey. For him a democratic society's need for engaged citizens is essential. Consequently, the students should be prepared for this by solving real problems in the community (DEWEY, 1915, 44ff.). Students in service learning courses explore academic content that is connected with a real service in a community (BRINGLE & CLAYTON, 2012; DEELEY, 2015). The learning process is anchored in active participation in the community, therefore, from an educational point of view, service learning follows an action-oriented approach (GERHOLZ, LISZT & KLINGSIECK, 2017). Thus, service learning represents a concept, in which similarities with learning approaches such as experiential learning (KOLB & KOLB, 2015), problem-based or project-based learning (DEELEY, 2010) can be found. All in all, the characteristic of service learning is giving the students the opportunity to interact – in an educationally meaningful way – with the local community and civil society respectively. One outcome envisioned is to foster civic responsibility. DEELEY (2015, 24) points out that this refers to an increased civic engagement and future sociopolitical activities in society. There is, however, from a theoretical point of view no clear understanding in the discourse on service learning regarding the construct of 'civic responsibility.' From an empirical point of view, a lack of research concerning the potential of service learning to sensitize students to civic matters can be documented. The empirical results differ. This maybe influenced by different views to civic responsibility and retrospective measurements. Both point of views in mind, the aspiration of the article is to explore key situations in service learning which stimulate the students to think about civic engagement in society. To this end, the article presents results of an explorative and process-oriented empirical study.

2 Theoretical foundations and empirical approaches to civic responsibility in service learning

2.1 Discussion of civic responsibility in the service learning discourse

Improved civic responsibility is one goal of service learning (BRINGLE & HATCHER, 1996; DEELEY, 2015). This demand can be met by regarding the conceptualization by GODFREY et al. (2005). They underline the three elements reality, reciprocity and reflection. The students are confronted with a real problem that is linked to specific needs in the community. Firstly, it is necessary to create an awareness of the importance of civic engagement to stimulate a change in attitude. The reciprocity of the community partner (e.g. a charitable organization) and the students working together concerning the real community problem (element of reality) is important. The students should reflect on these working experiences to use them for themselves in the sense of a change in self-perception. This shows the conceptualization of service learning in the third element: reflection. Nevertheless, it is not primarily about promoting a willingness to be engaged in society, but rather about dealing with civic issues. Consequently, students should also be made aware of the challenges and values of civil society. However, there is still no uniform understanding. Deeley points out that effects of service learning can be an increased sense of citizenship. This understanding includes an improved civic engagement and more sociopolitical activity. The "civic virtues of civility, trust, public spiritedness, active participation and engagement" (DEELEY, 2015, p. 24) are also relevant to the discourse on citizenship. This coincides with the understanding of citizenship by TONCAR, REID, BURNS, ANDERSON, and NGUYEN (2006), which includes social responsibility. By contrast, PRENTICE & ROBINSON (2010) differentiate between social responsibility and citizenship. Finding time for contributing to the community and believing in a positive impact on social problems is indicated here when using the term civic responsibility. The categories

citizenship and global understanding include tolerance for and interaction with different cultures, which is not captured in the understanding of the preceding authors (PRENTICE & ROBINSON, 2010, p. 5).

In addition to the theoretical work, empirical studies investigating this construct and a different range of understanding can also be found. Mabry, for instance, developed a concept of civic attitudes in the service learning discourse which includes terms such as spending time for one's own community, helping to solve social problems and believing that an individual can make a difference in the world (MABRY, 1998, p. 46). She developed a scale to measure civic attitudes that is often used in empirical studies of service learning (see 2.2). CELIO, DURLAK, and DYMNICKI (2011, 170) also include voting behavior and summarize into the construct civic engagement. CONWAY, AMEL, and GERWIEN (2009, p. 234f.) use the term "citizenship understanding" instead and include personal–responsible, participatory and justice-oriented citizenship. YORIO and YE (2012, p. 11f.) do not refer to the desire to engage in the future as civic engagement or citizenship but as understanding of social issues. The willingness to be engaged in society goes beyond that pure consciousness and includes monetary support and the willingness to contribute one's own time and effort for the benefit of charitable organizations or vulnerable people (WEBER & GLYPTIS, 2000, p. 355). This contribution can occur, for example, in an association or a charitable organization. The commitment also includes actions without direct contact to the people in need. This includes participation in fund-raising campaigns for nonprofit organizations (REINDERS & HILDEBRANDT, 2008, p. 12).

2.2   Empirical results of the effects of civic responsibility

Due to the fact that the roots of service learning lie in the US, previous research and results are derived primarily from the American higher education sector (SEIFERT, 2011, p. 34). Numerous studies there have explored the effects of civic responsibility on the learner. The meta-analysis by CELIO et al. (2011) indicates a medium effect size of 0.28 (mean effect size). In this analysis, civic engagement comprises, among other things, altruism, civic responsibility or voting behavior.

CONWAY et al. (2009) revealed an effect in citizenship outcome with a d of .17 in higher education. The third meta-study by YORIO & YE (2012) shows the strongest effect size of 0.34 (Cohen's d), which suggests a deeper understanding of social issues through service learning (YORIO & YE, 2012, p. 23). Therefore, based on the meta-analyses, it can be assumed that service learning has a positive effect on civic responsibility. However, different constructs are measured.

In addition to the meta-analyses, single studies[2] also examined the effects civic responsibility has in service learning courses. Empirical findings not only demonstrated the potential for the development of moral and civic values, but also illustrated a positive contribution to the development of personal skills and learning success (FURCO, 2004, p. 24). Furthermore, service learning studies record positive effects on civic attitudes (ASTIN & SAX, 1998; PRENTICE & ROBINSON, 2010). A study of PRENTICE and ROBINSON (2010) revealed that the service experience fosters a willingness to be engaged in society. Here, students who perceive the service learning experience as beneficial are more likely to engage in the community in the future.

The results of a mixed-methods study in the European area revealed positive time effects on the development of civic attitudes based on the understanding of Mabry's scale. The qualitative data shows three differentiations concerning the construct civic responsibility: insights into charitable fields, development of a position to civic engagement and willingness to be engaged. Mostly the insights into the charitable fields and the development of an individual position are reported here (GERHOLZ et al., 2017). By contrast, REINDERS and WITTEK (2009) cannot verify the expected willingness to be engaged in society in a treatment-control group design. The reason for this different findings might be found in the positive experiences of actions that seem to have persisted for a longer time to be able to affect generalized attitudes (such as willingness to be engaged) (REINDERS & WITTEK, 2009, p. 140f.).

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[2] The selected single studies are not included in the meta-analysis.

The empirical results indicate that a general effect of service learning can be assumed, even if only minor effects are evident (REINDERS, 2016, p. 58) and the results of the studies are mixed. In summary, it can be established that the strongest effects exist within the social outcomes – especially in the meta-analysis of YORIO and YE (2012). Interestingly, the latter subsume the perception and understanding of social issues and the desire for future engagement. This coincides with the descriptions of CELIO et al. (2011) and CONWAY et al. (2009) for civic engagement. Therefore, there is an impact of service learning on this type of outcome. Accordingly, it can be stated that the social and personal responsibility of the participants as well as the understanding of the importance of civic engagement are influenced positively.

These partly contradictory results are due to a variety of different implementation forms and qualities. The capacity of the results at the contextual level is limited as nearly all the studies come from the US, where a more community-oriented education goal is traditionally prevalent (GERHOLZ & HEINEMANN, 2015). In addition, the results of these empirical analyses are limited, particularly regarding the implementation of service learning. The methodological level shows the different operationalization of the constructs examined, which is substantiated in a missing standardized competency model (GERHOLZ & SLEPCEVIC-ZACH, 2015, p. 96). Moreover, the meta-analyses of CELIO et al. (2011) and CONWAY et al. (2009) include not only universities, but also elementary and secondary schools.

2.3 Summary

The discussion of the civic responsibility in service learning shows that there is no uniform understanding of the construct civic responsibility. Some authors differentiate between civic responsibility and citizenship, while others summarize it. Nevertheless, the understanding of the construct is generally quite similar. Civic responsibility includes the belief in a positive impact on social problems, attitudes towards the community and civil society, social and personal responsibility, and the willingness to be engaged in society.

The existing empirical studies differ. Some studies indicate effects of service learning on civic responsibility, but with different understandings of the construct itself. Other studies differentiate and show no or small effects on the willingness to be engaged. This can be partly ascribed to the limitations shown. Furthermore, the empirical studies normally use retrospective self-disclosure of students in a pre-post design, which are impaired by memory effects. Retrospective questionnaire surveys can lead to falsification of results due to memory distortions (KÖGLER, 2012, p. 226ff.). Avoidance of the memory effect can be achieved by surveys that took place closer in time. For this reason, the following study is process-oriented, with a weekly reflection in the form of a journal. Furthermore, the study uses an explorative way to investigate the key situations in the service learning module, which stimulates the students to think about civic engagement in society.

3   Method

3.1   Context of the study

The context of the study was a service learning course in a polyvalent Master program for teacher education and educational management. The students worked in groups to solve a given educational problem at a charitable organization in the community. The academic requirements represented dealing with scientific literature in the field of their given problem and scientific methods (e.g. analyzing the situations of volunteers, conducting an interview). It was a research-oriented design of service learning, in which students' learning integrates into a research process (e.g. KANSANEN, 2006). The students learned and used different scientific contents, techniques and methods in the field of education during the problem-solving process. The students themselves chose an adequate approach to solve the given charitable problem. The following table 1 gives an overview of the projects and their content as well as the used scientific method.

Table 1: Projects of the service learning course

Projects		Content and scientific Method
Project 1: Competence-orientation in continuing education and training	**Project 1.1** Guidelines for consultants	**Content**: Development of guidelines for speakers on the competence-oriented design of seminars in advanced training **Scientific Method**: Document analysis and developmental work.
	Project 1.2 Competence-orientation with consultants	**Content**: Conducting an analysis of the skills of consultants to implement a competence-oriented seminar design. **Scientific Method**: Interviews with consultants from advanced training.
Project 2: Design of work environments – Using the example of volunteering in the in-patient care	**Project 2.1** What keeps me in the volunteer work?	**Content**: Description of the competence experience (motives, attitudes and satisfaction) of the volunteers in the field of in-patient care) **Scientific Method**: Interviews with selected volunteers in the field of in-patient care
	Project 2.2 What do our volunteers like?	**Content**: Description of the perception of full-time actors and what satisfaction volunteers have in in-patient care. **Scientific Method**: Interviews with full-time actors in the field of in-patient care
Project 3: Change and conditions in the world of work – Using the example of student volunteering at the charitable organization	**Project 3.1** Why am I volunteering?	**Content**: Description of the interests and motives of student volunteering at the volunteer centre. **Scientific Method**: Interviews with student volunteers at the charitable organization.
	Project 3.2 When would I start volunteering?	**Content**: Collection and description of conditions (e.g. time, place, fields of application) for students to volunteer in Bamberg. **Scientific Method**: Interviews with students in Bamberg and region.

From an instructional point of view, different patterns were implemented in the service learning course. In the *lecture phases* the students received input about educational concepts and scientific methods. Moreover, *counselling phases* were implemented with the lecturer (e.g. discussing current problems in the problem-solving process) and with both lecturer and the charitable organization (e.g. getting information about the charitable context). The service learning courses started with a *kick-off session* in which the partners from the charitable organization presented the service projects and matched these to the student groups. At the end of the course, in the *final session*, the students presented their results to the charitable organization. Altogether, there were five groups with 28 students (average age 26.58 years, female students 53 %) in the service learning-module. The intention of the study was to examine the key situations in the service learning-module which stimulate the students to think about civic responsibility in society.

3.2   Research design and instruments

A weekly journal based on diary studies was developed to examine the key situations in service learning; and encourage the students to think about civic responsibility. In diary studies the participants are requested to document specific situations, behaviors or judgments at a preestablished point of time. Of course, diary studies are also retrospective measurements but with much less time delay and at points in time very close to each other (Rausch, 2014). Therefore, the diary data possess a greater potential to analyze the process of experiences during the service learning course and situational factors.

A time unit of one week was analyzed in the journal. This is because students usually have a number of modules during a term and, therefore, do not work every day for one module. The weekly journals were paper-based. The students were asked to describe a situation inspired by the service learning module, in which they thought about civic engagement in society and record it at the end of every week. Furthermore, the students were requested to describe the reasons why this situation had encouraged them to think. In addition to these two open questions, six standardized items were requested regarding the characteristics of the situation: (1) intensity of

the experience (not strong, very strong), (2) people who joined the situation (e.g. community partner, peers), (3) atmosphere of the situation (formal, informal), (4) time of the situation (e.g. morning, afternoon), (5) character of the situation (e.g. talk, observation) and (6) place (e.g. university, charitable organization).

The analysis of the documented key situations and the reasons for them was undertaken using a qualitative content analysis (SCHREIER, 2012). The categorization of the qualitative data was chosen in an inductive manner. The service learning course had a duration of 12 weeks. There was a total return of 336 diary forms (28 students and 12 weeks). A total of 127 key situations were documented by the students.

4 Results

4.1 Key situations per week

The frequency distribution of key situations by week of the service learning course is presented in figure 1. The minimum key situations documented is six (week seven) and the maximum is 16 (week one). The instructional patterns of the service learning course are shown in the area below Table 1. From a descriptive point of view, the most key situations described were in the session with the partners from the charitable organization: the kick-off session (16 key situations), the final presentation (13 key situations) and during the counseling sessions with the lecturer and partners of the community (14 and 13 key situations, respectively). There were fewer key situations in the lecture and counselling sessions with the lecturer only. Nevertheless, the students also documented key situations in weeks without an event in the service learning course. The student groups may have had meetings with the partners of the charitable organizations in these weeks.
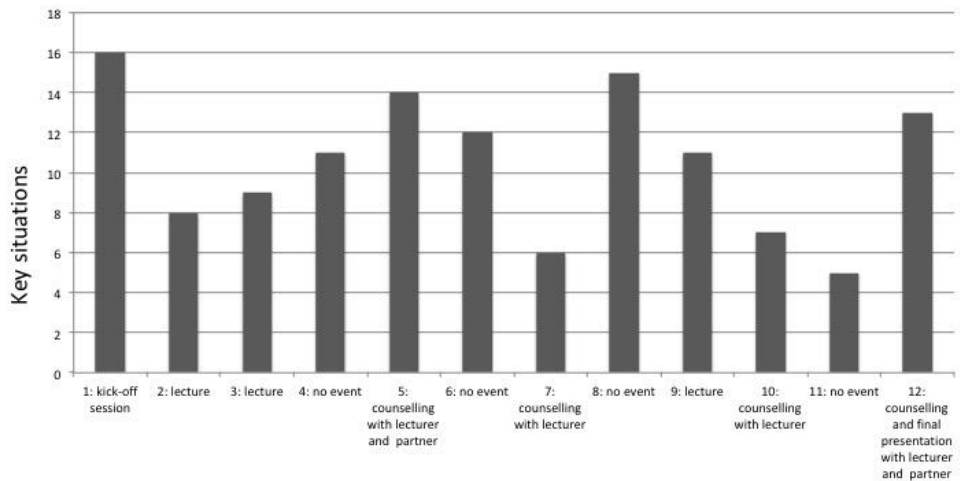
Figure 1: Frequency distribution of key situations by week and instructional patterns

4.2 Categorization of key situations

The following Table 2 gives an overview of the results of the qualitative content analysis of the key situations. Most key situations fall under 'interacting with charitable organization' (26) and 'interacting with fellow students' (23), followed by 'interacting with volunteers' (18). Concerning the scientific work on the service projects, the most triggers to think about civic engagement fall under 'collecting and analyzing data' (19) and 'exploring and working through course content' (15).

Table 2: Frequency distribution of key situations by type of key situation

Type of key situation	Example	Frequency	Percent
Interacting with volunteers	'Interviews with volunteers' amelae2, W9:	18	14.2
Interacting with charitable organization	'Appointment at "Caritas"; conversation with contact person about volunteer engagement.' ocmaue1, W1:	26	20.5
Interacting with fellow students	'Exchange of experience about the interview partner from the "Caritas" with other service learning groups.' uebrnr2, W12:	23	18.1
Interacting in the field	'Conversation with friend about the seminar; why volunteering is decreasing in nursing care and that is really bad. What is the reason?' ocmaue1, w5	4	3.1
Introductory session	Introductory event. 'Representation "Caritas" project.' eugeea8, W1:	1	0.8
Exploring/working through course content	'Literature research about volunteerin.' amelae2, W2:	15	11.8
Collecting/analyzing data	'Transcription of the interviews.' erronü0, W8:	19	15.0
Presenting preliminary/final results	'Poster presentation about the survey design.' orhiel1, W7:	10	7.9
Seminar meeting/feedback session	'During our first feedback conversation, the added value about social engagement emphasized was repeated.' icheni2, W4:	5	3.9
Miscellaneous	…	6	4.7
Sum		127	100.00

To sum up, the results of the typification of key situations show that both the interacting processes and the scientific work on the service project influence the attitude about civic engagement during a service learning course. Based on these results, three master categories for key situations can be described: (1) interacting with the volunteering field, (2) interacting with fellow students and (3) scientific work on the service project.

4.3 Connection between key situations and reasons

The categorization of the reasons for thinking about civic engagement was based on the theoretical foundation of civic engagement in the service learning discourse (see chapter 2). All in all, the reasons are distributed among four categories: (1) change in self-perception (e.g. *"Because I realized the importance of engagement and because of the direct questions, I even got a guilty conscience"*, romuukl1, W6); (2) insights in volunteering and charitable fields (e.g. *"The interview partner tells about their work with CariThek and their motivation. Insight into the everyday life of an volunteer → own reaction"*, icutnl1, W7)*;* (3) development of a position to civic engagement (e.g. *"I realized through the local institution how many people put in time and effort to help other people in need"*, romuuk1, W3); and (4) willingness to be engaged in society (e.g. *"Engagement is important, reflection to build-up the own engagement"*, ocmaue1, W1) (GERHOLZ et al., 2017). Master categories of key situations and reasons are presented in table 3, the contingency table.

Table 3: Frequency distribution of key situations by type

Types of key situations (master categories)	Reasons for thinking about civic responsibility					sum
	Change in self-perception	Insights in volunteering and charita-ble fields	Development of a position to civic en-gagement	Willingness to be en-gaged in the society	Other	**sum**
Experience in the volunteering field	12	18	8	4	2	**44**
Exchange / communication with peers	8	2	10	2	5	**27**
Scientific work on the service project	11	8	23	2	6	**50**
Other	0	0	0	0	6	**6**
sum	**31**	**28**	**41**	**8**	**19**	**127**

The highest number of reasons for thinking about civic engagement is regarding the position of the students to civic engagement in the society (41), followed by a change in the self-concept (31), and getting insights in volunteering and charitable fields (28).

Analysis of contingency reveals significant results concerning the connection between the type of key situation and type of reasons about thinking of civic engagement ($Chi^2_{(df=12)}$ = 55.769; p < .001; coefficient of contingency = .552; p < .001). Two stronger connections become apparent: There is a connection between experience in the volunteering field and getting insight in the volunteering and charitable

field (e.g. *"I became aware of many areas and fields of activity on site"*, wiwarl79, W6). Furthermore, the development of a personal position is triggered mostly by the scientific work on the service project (e.g. *"During the transcription / coding of the interviews […] I realized how easy and uncomplicated such an engagement really is"*, aamoae7, W8). .

5 Conclusion and outlook

The starting point of the article was the question "What kind of key situations stimulate students in a service learning course to think about civic responsibility in society?". Based on the presented study, two main results can be summarized: Firstly, the key situations occur in interacting processes with the partner of the charitable organizations and the fellow students as well as during the scientific work on the service project. On the one hand, this highlights the relevance of the integration of the community partner during the service learning course. This is also shown in other studies (e.g. GODFREY et al., 2005; REINDERS, 2016). Nevertheless, the interaction between the fellow students seems relevant for triggering thinking about civic responsibility, too. On the other hand, the relevance of the link between curricular requirements and the civic engagement of the students is underlined by key situations where the students work scientifically on the service project. Thus, the curricular integration is relevant to sensitize the students to civic matters. This is also carved out in other studies (e.g. CONWAY et al., 2009; YORIO & YE, 2012). Secondly, the contingency analysis has revealed that the reasons to think about civic engagement are linked to the development of a position concerning civic engagement and a change in self-concept. These are hints that service learning courses stimulate students to find their own role in a society and position regarding civic engagement, but less to foster a willingness to be engaged.

The results must be interpreted in the light of the limitations of the study (e.g. small sample size, only graduate students, only one service learning course). Nevertheless, in future research, the process-oriented approach in the sense of conducting key situations – here as a weekly situation analysis – seems relevant to open the

black box during a service learning course. A broader investigation regarding the student groups (e.g. undergraduate students) and subject-related service learning (e.g. STEM subjects) is needed. Furthermore, a link between the results of the weekly situation analysis and effects over time (e.g. change in self-esteem) is essential to describe the connection between situations experienced in a service learning course and personal changes in greater detail. From a theoretical point of view, the article would like to offer a reference point for a development of an understanding of civic engagement in the service learning discourse. Based on the presented study, the experiences in the community or civil society and dealing with these experiences in a scientifically way seem to be important aspects in service learning. Here, it is significant to note that different concepts of the phenomenon civil society exist (e.g. ANHEIER & TOEPLER, 2003; ALEXANDER, 1998). The development of an understanding of civil society in service learning discourse seems relevant to identify which kind of service experiences are relevant to sensitize students for civic matters.

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