



A Pilot Study: The Impact of COVID-19 on Student Learning in an Academic Service-Learning Course

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ABSTRACT

This pilot study examined the impact from COVID-19 on academic learning. An explanatory mixed-methods research design was used to explore student learning outcomes for 70 students who participated in an academic service-learning course during the pandemic. Student surveys revealed increases in their racial-cultural-ethnic identity development and interest in multicultural work from the beginning to the end of the semester. Student reflections also indicate that they gained confidence and patience, reformulated diversity attitudes, and acquired White privilege awareness through participation in service activities with recipients who culturally differed from them. The impact of COVID-19 on student learning is discussed.

Key Words: Student Development and Learning, Academic Service-Learning, COVID-19

The University established an academic service-learning faculty development program (ASLDLP) in 2001 (Dowshen & Pickron-Davis, 2011). The ASLDLP trained faculty on how to develop course outcomes, connect with the community, incorporate reflection activities, and assess student learning. Academic service-learning (ASL) is a pedagogical approach in which students apply theoretical knowledge to “real world” situations, and, at the same time, they connect their service experiences to the course content (Eyler & Giles, 1999). The Educational Psychology course was one of the first service-learning courses offered at the University. Assessment of student learning in the Educational Psychology course suggests that students increase their understanding of diversity and interest in working with diverse recipients (Simons & Cleary, 2006; Simons & Cleary 2005). In spring 2020, this course transitioned from in-person to online because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal of this pilot study is twofold: (1). Detect differences in student learning outcomes from the beginning to the end of the semester for students enrolled in an ASL course during the pandemic using student surveys and reflections, and (2). Identify differences in student learning outcomes for students who did and did not take part in an ASL course during the pandemic.

Academic service-learning (ASL) initiatives are frequently integrated into undergraduate liberal arts curricula to prepare students for work with children and adults from different

racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Several scholars suggest that ASL is an effective pedagogy for developing culturally competent critical thinkers and civic leaders in undergraduate students (Bell, Horn, & Roxas, 2007). Students who participate in service-learning are often immersed in a cultural that differs from their own. Students learn about the community, forge relationships with service recipients, and acquire information that negates their preconceived views. In contrast to this perspective, several other researchers propose that students retain stereotypes through participation in service activities that reinforce their preconceived views (Dunlap, Scoggin, Green, & Davi, 2007; Hess, Lanig, & Vaughan, 2007). Students are likely to leave service experiences with stereotypes intact unless their assumptions are challenged. Simons, Marshall, Weaver, and Blank (2020) found that ASL provides students with opportunities to work with service recipients who culturally differ from them and connect these experiences to the course content through critical reflection. The use of course assignments, class discussions, and guided reflection questions challenge students to think critically about diversity and social justice issues. Simons and Greene (2017) further found that students exposed to ASL in an educational psychology course develop a deeper understanding of social inequities, acquire problem-solving skills, and gain civic responsibility by the course end.

COVID-19 impacted student learning in and out of the class. Students who took part in an educational psychology course in spring 2020 had to pivot from in-person to online instruction in the middle of the semester. Students were required to tutor and mentor children for 15-hours at either a public elementary or high school in the district surrounding the University. The pandemic also disrupted service activities. COVID-19 forced public schools to close which required the children to transition from in-person to online school. As a result, tutoring either occurred online or abruptly ended because the children did not have access to technology resources (i.e., computers, internet). This situation provided an opportunity to evaluate student learning. The purpose of this pilot study is to examine student learning outcomes (i.e., problem-solving, civic responsibility) for students who took part in an ASL course during the pandemic. Two research questions guided this study: (1). Are there differences in students learning outcomes from the beginning to the end of course for students who took part in ASL during the pandemic; and (2). Are there differences in student learning outcomes for students who did and did not take part in an ASL course during the pandemic?

METHOD

Participants

A total of 70 undergraduate students enrolled in an ASL course during the Spring of 2020 at a private teaching university in a northern metropolitan area took part in the study. Most students were White (76%) and female (76%) with mean age of 20.06 years ($SD = 1.17$). The remaining students self-identified as African-American (16%), Asian-American (4%), and Biracial (4%) and male (24%). Of these students, most of them were either Psychology (40%) or Education (40%) majors. Few students were freshmen (4%). Students were either sophomores (40%), juniors (32%) or seniors (24%). Slightly more than half (52%) of the students reported taking at least one service-learning course prior to their current ASL course. This group did not differ in demographics from the students who took this course in Spring 2019.

Course Content

Academic Service-Learning

Educational Psychology is a three-credit course intended to prepare students to work with children at a public school (as described in Simons & Cleary, 2006). The class begins with a lecture on service-learning and an orientation from a guest speaker representing the partnering school in the Chester-Upland School District. Students are required to complete 15 hours of service in which they tutor or mentor children who may differ from them in race, ethnicity, and/or socioeconomic status. Students also are required to answer structured reflection questions before, during, and after service. These questions require students to apply their service experiences to the course content, integrate course readings to support their perspectives, and reflect on their thoughts and feelings about both the service context and the course content (Simons & Clear, 2006). The rest of the class is devoted to lecture and discussion that correspond to topics on measurement theory, achievement tests, developmental, behavioral, and motivational theories, and diversity in school settings. Students also complete three examinations and a cultural competence paper which requires them to summarize a diversity film, compare the main character in the film to the child with whom they are paired at the school, and apply psychological theories from various scholars (i.e., Bruner, Erikson, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Werner).

The course content remained the same despite transitioning from in-person to online because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The course was taught synchronous and students zoomed in during class periods three-days a week. Students completed the remaining exams (n=2) online. The cultural competence and structured reflection assignments were slightly modified because most students were unable to complete the required 15-hours of service. Only one student did not answer questions about service-learning in the assignments.

Measures and Procedure

The measures that were used in this study were previously described (Simons et al., 2020) and included a Demographic Questionnaire, the Civic Action Skills Questionnaire (CASQ), the Color-blind Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS), the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM), the Multicultural Experiences Questionnaire (MEQ), and the Three Aspects of Engagement. The Demographic Questionnaire was used to gather information on gender, race, age, and year in school. The **Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire (CASQ)**, developed by Moely, Mercer, Ilustre, Miron, and McFarland (2002), assessed civic attitudes and skills. The Interpersonal and Problem-Solving Skills (respondents evaluate their ability to listen, work cooperatively, and solve problems and the Social Justice Attitudes (respondents assess their attitudes about how social problems can be solved) subscales were used in this study.

The **Color-Blind Racial Attitude Scale (CoBRAS)**, developed by Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, and Browne (2000), assessed contemporary racial attitudes. The Unawareness of Racial Privilege (respondents evaluate their lack of awareness of White racial privilege), the Unawareness of Institutional Discrimination (respondents evaluate their lack of awareness of racial issues associated with social policies, affirmative action, and discrimination), and the Unawareness of Blatant Racial Issues (respondents evaluate their lack of awareness of blatant racial problems in the United States) were used in this study.

The **Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM)**, developed by Phinney (1992), measured two aspects of students' ethnic identity including identity development and achievement. The **Multicultural Experiences Questionnaire (MEQ)**, developed by Narvaez, Endicott, and Hill (2017), measured multicultural attitudes based on multicultural experiences and desire to increase multicultural experiences. The **Three Aspects of Engagement**, developed by Gallini and Moely (2003), assessed students' views of their engagement. The Community Engagement (respondents evaluate the extent to which their attitudes changed as a result of course participation and feeling connected to the community), the Interpersonal Engagement (respondents evaluate the course's influence on their ability to effectively work with others), the **Academic Challenge** (respondents assess course qualities such as intellectual challenge and difficulty), and the **Retention** (respondents evaluate the course's impact on continuing at the university) subscales were used in this study.

An explanatory mixed methods design was used to detect differences in student learning outcomes for 70 students enrolled in the educational psychology course during the Spring of 2020, 2021, and 2022. An explanatory mixed methods design refers to a two-phase model in which quantitative data is collected and then qualitative data is gathered (Creswell, 2005). The quantitative data are merged with the qualitative data and qualitative data are used to refine, explain, and extend the quantitative results. All students completed an informed consent form, a demographic information sheet, and a survey that measured Civic Action Skills Questionnaire (CASQ), the Color-blind Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS), the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM), the Multicultural Experiences Questionnaire (MEQ), and the Three Aspects of Engagement. Students completed an online survey at the beginning and end of the course. Student reflections were collected at the end of the semester and analyzed for common themes.

RESULTS

Quantitative Analysis

A paired t-test was conducted to measure differences in student learning outcomes (i.e., CASQ, CoBRAS, MEIM, MEQ, & Three Aspects of Engagement). There were only two significant results. Students improve their racial-cultural-ethnic identity development $t(16) = -2.90$ $p < .05$ from the beginning ($\chi = 15.06$) to the course end ($\chi = 17.12$). This student group also increased their desire to take part in multicultural experiences $t(15) = -3.04$ $p < .01$ from the beginning ($\chi = 49.18$) to the end ($\chi = 54.62$) of the course.

An independent t-test was conducted to measure differences in student learning outcomes (i.e., CASQ, CoBRAS, MEIM, MEQ, & Three Aspects of Engagement) for students who did and did not participate in an ASL course during COVID-19. Students who took part in service-learning during the pandemic had higher retention ratings compared to those students who took part in service-learning prior to the pandemic as shown in Table 1.

Qualitative Analysis

Student reflections underwent an item-level analysis through which thematic patterns were identified and coded using a content analysis technique (Creswell, 2005). Two coders analyzed data on 26 student reflections. Student reflections were compared and analyzed using open and axial coding procedures. Open coding consisted of categorizing and naming the data according to service-learning concepts (i.e., personal & civic development) (Eyler & Giles, 1999); while, axial coding consisted of systematically analyzing the data using topical codes based on cultural

competence models (i.e., White Privilege) (Case, 2007; Helms, 1990). Topical codes and categories were further compared using the constant comparative method. As shown in Table 2, five major themes emerged from the data. Coders counted the number of responses and divided them by the number of student journals to obtain the percentages for each major theme as also shown in Table 2. One unique theme that emerged from the data was the impact of COVID-19. This theme emerged as a result from taking part in the ASL course during the pandemic and illustrates the disruption of service on student development.

DISCUSSION

The outbreak of the coronavirus created a major disruption for college students across the county in the Spring of 2020. Most institutions cancelled in-person classes and moved to online instruction. Students returned home and were taught either synchronous or asynchronous. The disruption in academic learning was greater for students who were enrolled in academic service-learning courses. For instance, service activities abruptly ended or required students to work with children online. Students in ASL courses faced challenges stemming from the emotional loss with service recipients to the difficulty of connecting with children who were learning at home with little resources and support. This situation provided an opportunity to evaluate student learning. The goal of this pilot study was to assess student learning over the course of the semester during the pandemic and compare learning outcomes for this group of students to those students who took this course in the Spring of 2019 prior to the pandemic.

The primary objective of this study was to measure differences in student learning outcomes (i.e., CASQ, CoBras, MEIM, MEQ, & Three Aspects of Engagement) in a course that utilizes ASL as the primary pedagogical method during the pandemic. Students made expected changes in their racial-cultural-ethnic identity development from the beginning to the course end, consistent with previous research (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Simons et al., 2020). Ethnic identity is fluid and increases as students socialize with others from different backgrounds (Phinney, 1992). Helms (1990) further proposes that White students transform their White racial identity development and become less racist through intercultural interactions with others who are racially and culturally different from them. White students formed relationships with children who differed from them in race, class, and ethnicity, thus contributing to increases in their racial-cultural-ethnic identity development scores and consistent with student reflections. Students describe how the course and ASL made them aware of their racial identity. As one student noted, *"I never thought about being White or my White privilege until I took this class. ASL exposed my Whiteness."*

Intercultural interactions between students and children in a public-school setting may have also contributed to increases in multicultural experiences scores. Students increased their interest and desire to participate in multicultural experiences by the end of the term, consistent with previous research (Simons et al., 2020). Most students did not complete their 15 hours of service. It is possible that students acquired a deeper understanding of the inequities in the community because they observed pandemic impacts on the children. In fact, many students did not connect with the children virtually because the children did not have resources to pivot from in-person to online instruction. This finding suggests that the combination of COVID-19 and fewer service hours increased students' interests and desires to engage in multicultural experiences, also consistent with student reflections. As one student noted, *"We were taught that the children lack stability; therefore, we have to be consistent with our service because it*

means a lot to them and provides them with stability. Knowing this fact, left me and other students heartbroken about having to stop going to the school because of COVID-19. Everything we were taught changed. We were left to wonder how our experiences would have been different and wishing for more time with the children." Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative findings suggest that students did form relationships with the students. These relationships and the pandemic may have influenced student interest in multicultural work.

The second objective of the study was to measure differences in student learning outcomes (i.e., CASQ, MEIM, MEQ, & Three Aspects of Engagement) for students who did and did not participate in an ASL course during the pandemic. Students who took the educational psychology course in spring 2020 were compared to a similar group of students who took this course in spring 2019. Both groups of students were assigned to tutor and mentor children at either a public elementary or high school. Student learning outcomes did not differ for the two student groups. However, students who took part in ASL during the pandemic had higher retention scores compared to those students who took part in ASL prior to the pandemic. Students who took part in ASL during the pandemic felt more connected to and had more favorable ratings of the University. Students who took part in ASL during the pandemic were also more likely to return to the University compared to those students who took part in the course prior to the pandemic. The University provided resources and support so that the students could easily transition from in-person to online instruction. The University also provided professional development to faculty that emphasized teaching synchronous courses. Faculty were taught how to engage students online, address COVID-19 impacts on students, and transition from in-person to online instruction. It is possible that the high level of support made transitioning to virtual teaching and learning seamless, which in turn, may have contributed to students' positive perceptions of the University.

A final objective was to explore student development and learning. Five major themes emerged from student reflections including: Student Development, Diversity, White Privilege, Service-Learning Impacts, and COVID-19 Impacts. All students noted how they acquired patience, developed leadership skills, and gained confidence through participation in service. Almost all students also noted how service-learning influenced their own learning. One student's reflection illustrates the impact of service-learning on student learning, *"The students taught me. I could not understand the concepts in this class without service-learning."* In addition, all students commented that they learned to reformulate their diversity attitudes through participation in service. Two student comments illustrate diversity, *"Service exposed my own stereotypes I had about Black children at an urban school. My ignorance emerged and I learned to become open-minded. I learned to relate to others who are culturally-different, work with others who differ from me, and value diversity in the community,"* and *"I learned that I cannot teach a Black student about being Black because I am White. However, I can learn, understand, and relate to my students."* More than half of the students also made reflections about how service-learning made them aware of their White privilege. One student's comment illustrates the impact of service on White privilege awareness, *"I can read about racism and privilege, but service-learning made me understand it."* More than half of the students mentioned COVID-19 impacts throughout their reflections; while, slightly-less than all of them specifically noted how the pandemic was the worst part of their service experience. Two student comments illustrate pandemic impacts, *"I felt cheated. I felt horrible that I couldn't finish my time and had to leave the children."* *"Thinking about the children and their learning is heart-breaking. I felt the progress we*

made together was cut short and thinking about what they will need to do to catch up is devastating." and *"The worst part and my only regret is that service-learning was cut short by COVID. I learned a lot even though my time was limited. I can't help but wonder how it would have been different if COVID didn't happen and I was able to continue with my service."* Although COVID-19 disrupted in-person class instruction and service activities in the community, students did develop and learn in that they acquired soft-skills (i.e., patience, confidence) and improved their understanding of diversity and White privilege. It is possible that the pandemic enhanced students' understanding of racial advantages and disadvantages, congruent with previous findings on service impacts (Simon & Greene, 2017).

The qualitative findings were partially consistent with the qualitative results. Students described acquiring an awareness of their Whiteness and White Privilege, reformulating their diversity attitudes, and increasing their interests in multicultural work. In contrast, students did not increase their racial awareness or improve their diversity attitudes. The lack of observed differences on the CoBras and CASQ scores are inconsistent with previous research on ASL and student learning (Simons & Greene, 2017; Simons et al., 2020). It is possible that the diversity content of the course may not have been impactful online. Students systematically analyze race and class concepts in this course through experiential activities which were modified for a virtual learning environment. The inefficient or small sample size may also explain the lack of observed differences in student surveys (Rosenthal, & Rosnow, 1991). In addition, fewer service hours may have contributed to the lack of observed differences. Students are situated in a service context, work with service recipients who culturally differ from them, and acquire information that forces them to examine their beliefs and reformulate their attitudes. Establishing this type of relationship is a process and takes a long time, and time was not afforded for this group of students. It is further possible that the service experience reinforced their stereotypes (Bell, Horn, & Roxas, 2007; Dunlap, Scoggin, Green, & Davi, 2007; Hess, Lanig, & Vaughan, 2007). More research is needed on the impact of virtual service-learning on student learning to understand how online service challenges students to think critically about diversity and social justice issues.

Researchers may want to explore virtual service-learning on student learning; while, addressing some of the methodological limitations associated with this pilot study. Data was collected on a small sample of White female college students. Students of Color, male and transgender students may have answered questions inquiring about White privilege and diversity differently; therefore, researchers should employ equal sample sizes of Students of Color, male and transgender students in future research. Researchers should also gather data from large samples of undergraduate students in different majors in liberal arts colleges and professional schools to detect differences in student learning post-pandemic. In addition, students either tutored or mentored children who were academically-behind at a public elementary or high school in an urban school district that ranks last in student proficiency in the state (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2019). COVID-19 required the children to pivot from in-person to online instruction in the middle of the semester. Few students continued with virtual service activities because the children did not have the resources until after the academic term. COVID impacts on service activities and the uniqueness of placement sites make replication difficult.

In conclusion, the pandemic provided new opportunities for student learning. Racial-cultural-ethnic identity development occurs in students through interactions with recipients who are culturally different from them regardless if these intercultural interactions occur in-person or online. Students described how intercultural interactions made them aware of their own White privilege in their reflections even though this finding was not supported on survey reports. It is possible that the impact of COVID-19 made students more aware of the educational, racial, and economic disparities in the community, thus influencing their views of their own development, the children with whom they were paired for service activities, and the University. Additional research is warranted to understand pandemic impacts on student development and learning.

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Table 1. Mean differences in Retention Outcomes

Retention Variables	COVID M	SD	Non-COVID M	SD	df	t
I feel more connected to this University	4.23	.72	4.05	1.19	31	2.04*
I am more positive about being at this University	4.15	.89	3.55	.75	31	2.07*
I am more likely to continue as a student at this University	4.15	.98	3.50	.76	31	2.14*
I am more likely to graduate from this University	4.23	.92	3.80	.89	31	1.33

Note. * $p < .05$ **Table 2. Major Themes That Emerged From Student Reflections**

Major Themes	%	Examples
Diversity	100	The value of diversity within a community is that it reduces stereotyping, prejudice and racism; it increases awareness, understanding, open-mindedness, knowledge, and tolerance. This course teaches you how to relate to others who are culturally different from you. You work with children at a school that differs from your own experiences. You need to know the children and their background to teach them. Diversity is taught through service-learning; it was an eye-opening experience. The course and service exposed my own stereotypes I had about Black children at an urban school; my ignorance emerged.
Service-Learning Impacts	92	<p>The children look forward to Widener students; the students instill hope, promote resilience by being a positive role model, tutoring and motivating them to do well and stay in school. I could not fully understand the concepts in this class without service-learning (SL). This class changed my idea of what SL is because there was a strong connection between the service and the class.</p> <p>My expectations for service-learning changed as a result of the school closing due to COVID-19. My expectations for the course and spring semester completely changed. I was disappointed to learn that I could not return to the school; service came to an abrupt end. I am genuinely sad.</p>
White Privilege	73	Service-learning (SL) illustrates White Privilege because it highlights the privileges that White people have by exposing them to more diversity. SL exposed my White Privilege. I will never understand what it is like to be Black. I cannot teach a Black student about being Black because I am White. However, I can learn, understand, and relate to my students. This is not something that can be taught but experienced; one has to witness it first-

		hand to understand the magnitude of it. I can read about racism and privilege, but SL made me understand it; White Privilege is not having to think about your race; I'm embarrassed to say that I never thought about my White Privilege until I took this course.
Student Development	100	I learned to be a leader and a good listener. I learned I was ignorant and to work on my stereotypes. I learned to be professional; a parent would not sign-off on an accommodation for her child; the child would not be able to get the services he needs. This experience taught me to put my views aside and accept the parent's decision. Service-learning gave me courage and taught me patience; I am more comfortable working with children. I learned to learn from my students.

Table 2 (continued).

Major Themes	%	Examples
COVID-19 Impacts	73 (throughout reflections) 82 (mentioned as worst experience)	My service was cut short by COVID. I cannot express how devastated I was when I found out I could not return to the school. I wish I had more time to make connections. I feel that COVID-19 cheated me out of relationships and my service-learning experience. I felt horrible that I couldn't finish my time and had to leave the children without notice. Thinking about the children and their learning and what they will need to do to catch up is heart breaking. I am most disappointed that the progress I made with the children was cut short; I think the children were benefitting from our work together. I wish I had more time. The children are struggling and the thought that some of them may not have a safe environment to learn in made me feel helpless. I grew close to the children I was paired with at the school and because COVID hit in the middle of the semester, I had to leave abruptly; I wish I got to say goodbye. WU students were taught that the children lack stability; therefore, when we come in for SL it means a lot; we have to be consistent because it provides them with stability; knowing this fact, it left me and other students heartbroken about having to stop going to the school because of COVID-19.