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Impact of Service-Learning on Communication Skills Development of Students of Vocational Schools

Iqbal Ahmad[1], Rukhsana Ahmad[2]*, Sarwat Begum[1]

[123]Department of Education
University of Malakand, Pakistan

*Corresponding Author: ikbalchitrali@gmail.com

Abstract: Service-learning is a promising and effective strategy to achieve the goals of facilitating communication skills development among students. However, there are many issues remain unexplored related to the role of service-learning regarding the communication skills improvement of vocational and technical students. This study was conducted to explore the impact of service-learning on the communication skills development of undergraduate students in vocational training schools in Punjab Pakistan. Data was collected from 213 students of vocational institutes who participated in the service-learning course using a survey questionnaire. the data was analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques and ANOVA. The analysis showed that service-learning positively contributed towards the students' course knowledge. However, most of the students replied that it did not improve their communication skills or problems solving skills which are essential academic skills. The study further revealed that there was no significant difference in the perceptions of male and female students about the contributions of service-learning towards the communication skills development of students. The study results provide new pertinent information to management and teachers at vocational institutes about the benefits of service-learning as a language enhancement pedagogy. Based on the results, it is suggested that the findings of this study may be tested in other cultural contexts for further understanding the implementation of service-learning in language classes.

Keywords: service-learning, communication skills, vocational education, undergraduate

1. Introduction

Communication skills development is one of the important outcomes of service-learning. Communication skill is a wider and multidimensional concept (Porto, 2021). Effective communication skills help students to actively participate in community life as an informed, committed, and constructive manner and work for common welfare (Kendali & Associates, 1990). It is believed that

the promotion of communication among students can be better enhanced through interactive experiences outside classrooms (Billig, Root & Jesse, 2005). Students' exposure outside the classroom increases their understanding of society and social change. As a result, they develop a more meaningful relationship with society through effective communication and service-learning promotes this more effectively as compared to other teaching methods. During service activity students develop their skills and knowledge about social issues and find ways to solve such issues (Folgueiras, Aramburuzabala, Opazo, Mugarra & Ruiz, 2020).

Researchers argue that the measurement of communication skills is a challenging task due to its multiple understanding (Folgueiras et al, 2020). Resultantly, the role of service-learning related to the communication skills of students has been disparate and diffused (Root & Billig, 2008). Studies have shown that the communication skills development of students can be possible by providing them opportunities to speak and present their views. This is a major issue in the context of a classical classroom environment where students are passive listeners. However, service-learning is an interactive pedagogy. It encourages them to share views and perspectives without any bar. This increases their confidence (Wilczenski & Coomey, 2007). Research has revealed that service-learning increases students' communication skills as well as a positive attitude towards others (Conrad & Hedin, 1991).

For a broader understanding of this concept, this study uses the concept of communication skills as an ability to communicate views through writing and speaking (Al-Murshidi, 2020). Although previous studies have provided solid evidence about many service-learning outcomes such as communication skills, leadership, social justice attitude, critical thinking, appreciation of diversity, the feeling of responsibility, and commitment to civic responsibility (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2007). However, there is no consensus in the existing literature about the consistency of these outcomes. The definitional issue is basically aggravated by the nature of the service-learning itself as there are many service experiences ranging from optional course related projects to compulsory courses (U.S. News and World Reports, 2006).

There could be many ways to develop the communication skills of students, but service-learning has been identified as one of the important and proven catalysts to promote active communication among learners (Hutchinson, 2000). However, in relation to service-learning, variations in definitions of communication engagement have made the concept of communication skills development obscured and difficult to be understood easily. The existing definitions range from connection to the community to discussion on politics and relationship between individual and social institutions and political awareness (Giles & Eyler, 1994). Hence, rather than limiting the construct to a single behaviour or attitude, it is necessary to have a broader understanding of the concept of student communication enhancement. Based on their study, Eyler and Giles (1999) proposed a model of citizenship which includes: values (understanding the importance of social justice), knowledge (understanding social problems), skills (leadership and communication) and commitment and efficacy. This current study also draws its conceptual understanding for evaluating the aspects of communication skills in each of the five areas (Cone & Harris, 2000).

1.1 Service-Learning and Communication Skills

Communication skills such as speaking, writing and gestures are interpersonal skills which are important for engaging students in community work as active citizens (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Research has indicated that interpersonal and communication skills are essential life and employment skills. Qualitative studies have reported about improvement in communication skills because of participating in service-learning (Furco, 2000; Kolb, 1984). Quantitative studies have also provided the same evidence, but the results are less reliable as they are based on a single item survey. Writers argue that improved communication skills increase students' interpersonal and problem-solving skills abilities (Jacoby, 1996). Most often communication and problem-solving abilities are discussed in association with leadership skills. Leadership skill is one of the essential civic skills. Some of the leadership

qualities: the ability to lead a group and feeling responsible for others are reported to be the direct results of service-learning participation but this construct has not been extensively explored (Freire, 2000).

One important element related to service-learning that has yielded attitudinal changes in students' perspectives about social issues is the attitude toward social justice (Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill & Gallay, 2007). Participation in service-learning may indicate increased awareness among students regarding structural inequalities, critiquing social issues, and advocating for social justice (Dewey, 1997). Students investigate the issues through social dialogue, and social structure in the community and examine their own assumptions and biases. This helps them to develop a broader understanding of social issues, diversity, and social justice (Salgado-Robles & Thompson, 2022). A study on a service-learning programme that spanned over 20 hours per week for 2 two semesters found that students showed reduced racial and class discrimination, appreciation for diversity, and an increased desire to work with others and listen to other perspectives who came from different backgrounds (Deans, 1999). But this was limited to one question only which is whether 'they had an increased understanding of racial and cross-cultural issues. Other studies also support the idea that maintaining direct contact with people from different cultures, and backgrounds minimize stereotyping and maximize appreciation of diversity (Campbell, 2009).

Service-learning experience increases the ability to critique and discuss societal issues at a deeper level and solutions to the challenges. It is the result of critical thinking that students do during service activities (McLellan & Youniss, 2003). To achieve this, the type of content of the course, discussion and activities are important that are used to enhance students' abilities to find out analyze and solve problems. Another important area of knowledge related to community work is a deeper awareness of political structure in society. Service-learning provides a good environment to develop this understanding (Starkey, Hugh, Osler & Audrey, 2006). The reflective process is a critical and important tool available for students during service-learning to develop their knowledge about how things work and refine their civic skills along with improvement in political awareness (Ravina, 2022). Interestingly, to date, political awareness as an outcome of service-learning has been frequently considered a subject of political science courses. In 15-20 hours of service-learning course that facilitated students to attend political meetings, and interview elected members resulted in a change in their perspectives on local policy issues, the complexity of political issues, and solutions (Kenneth, Stroupe, Jr. Larry & Sabato, 2004).

Researchers argue that only having better communication skills and values related to civic engagement does not guarantee improvement in communication skills accuracy and commitment to future community work (Tinkler, Tinkler, Reyes & Elkin, 2019). Research has produced mixed results over the years in these areas (Aronowitz, 1993). For example, some researchers found that students participating in various semester long service-learning activities across disciplines scored higher on the communication skills improvement and civic engagement scale, but the post-test showed reverse results (Baker, 2019). Another study on university students involved in the service-learning course in Hong Kong showed that their desire to work beyond service hours increased and their commitment to work in the future increased (Cone & Harris, 2000).

1.2 Study Rationale

In service-learning students are engaged in actions that shape and mould their communication skills and interpersonal capabilities leading to improvements in their lives and those of others (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2009). Other studies have found weak or mixed support for the development of communication skills among students because of service-learning (Pazmino, 2019). This study aims to investigate the perceptions of undergraduates about the impact of service-learning on their communication skills.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To investigate the perceptions of undergraduates about the impact of service-learning on their communication skills.

2. To compare the perceptions of male versus female undergraduates about the impact of service-learning on their communication skills

2. Methodology

The materials and methods section, otherwise known as methodology, describes all the necessary information that is required to obtain the results of the study.

2.1 Materials

A quantitative survey method was used to conduct the study. A survey method is helpful in collecting data in a short time from a larger sample which is simple and economical. This study was conducted based on this approach. All students at vocational training institutes in Pakistan constituted the population of this study. However, based on a convenient sample a total of 213 students were approached and the questionnaire was distributed on the spot personally. The questionnaire was collected on the spot. The consent of the students was obtained before distributing the questionnaires. A survey questionnaire was used to assess students' perceptions of service-learning's contribution to their communication skills. The scale consisted of 21 items. The questions are based on different writers who have divided communication skills into four categories: speaking, writing, gestures, and postures. For this study, these four categories of communication skills were assessed. The collected data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. In this regard, mean, standard deviation and ANOVA were applied.

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis of data includes the frequency distribution of students' responses to the survey based on survey statements. Descriptive statistics and ANOVA were applied to describe the differences between the groups on the basis of gender and region distribution. Background characteristics such as gender influence the aspiration and dreams of people (Phillips, 2011). For this study, ANOVA was used to describe the mean differences among the two groups on the basis of gender distribution.

Table 1: Perceptions of students on communication skills development

Service-learning	SA %	A %	UD %	D %	SD %
Improved my interactive skills	02	14	19	50	14
Improved my oral communication skills	04	13	21	45	15
Lead others while working on a community site	04	10	22	46	17
Reflect more on my learning	06	14	11	48	19
Improve my ability to talk with people in my community	05	11	14	43	25
Identify problems of people in the community	15	31	14	28	10
Feel more connected to my community	09	08	06	48	27
Inspired me to be more involved in community activities	07	10	04	52	26
I want to continue doing community service	13	12	03	45	24
Feel that my service benefited the community	05	06	05	49	23
I would like to work with others	05	07	06	50	30
I can see social problems in a new way	05	08	07	46	31
I can solve problems more effectively	03	08	05	50	32
Recognize that service-learning rewarding to help others	46	07	04	08	33
Developed a deeper understanding of complex problems	06	04	04	56	28
Increased my awareness of social injustices	06	04	03	52	33

My service project positively impacted my learning	45	37	06	06	05
Feel that I made a difference in the community	06	04	03	52	33
Enjoyed working with people from different backgrounds	13	12	06	38	29
Feel that cultural diversity within a group makes it interesting	14	08	41	10	26
I have no hesitation to work with others	36	38	07	10	07

Table 1 shows that forty-five percent of the students did not agree that service-learning improved their oral communication skills. Forty-eight percent disagreed that service-learning led them to feel more connected to a community. Fifty-two percent said they did not want to be involved in volunteer activities. Forty five percent said that they did not want to continue doing volunteer service. Forty-nine percent did not feel that their service benefits the community. Fifty percent reported that they did not appreciate working with others. Forty-six percent said that they did not see social problems in a new way. Fifty percent disagreed that they solved the problems more effectively. Forty-six percent agreed that they recognized that it was rewarding to help others. Forty-six percent disagreed that they developed a deeper understanding of the complex issues facing the community. Fifty-two percent said that it did not increase their awareness of social injustice in society. Fifty percent of respondents did not believe that service-learning improved their problem-solving skills. Forty-six percent did not agree that service-learning developed their leadership skills while working on a community-based project. Forty-eight percent said that they could not reflect more on the problems. Forty-three percent reported that their ability to understand how a community works improved. Only thirty-one percent agreed that they could identify the problems facing the community. Forty-nine percent of the respondents did not feel that the service in which they were involved benefited the agency/organization. Fifty-two percent responded that service-learning did not make them feel that they made a difference in the community. Forty five percent of the respondents strongly agreed that they think more about their service project and how it impacts their learnings. Fifty-two percent of the respondents believed that service-learning inspired them to become more involved in volunteer activities. Forty-six percent agreed that service-learning helped them recognize whether it was rewarding to help others. Thirty-eight percent replied that they did not enjoy working with people of different backgrounds. Thirty-six percent said that they had no hesitation to work with others.

3.1 Descriptive Statistics of Communication Skills

The mean score and standard deviations of respondent results are illustrated.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Communication Skills

Civic Responsibility	N	M	SD
Improved my interactive skills	350	2.39	.96
Improved my oral communication skills	350	2.46	1.04
Lead others while working on a community site	350	2.39	1.02
Reflect more on my learning	350	2.38	1.12
Improve my ability to work with a community	350	2.27	1.10
Identify problems of people in the community	350	3.14	1.27
Feel more connected to my community	350	2.23	1.20
Inspired me to be more involved in community activities	350	2.18	1.13
I want to continue doing community service	350	2.44	1.34
Feel that my service benefited the community	350	2.32	1.18
I would like to work with others	350	2.05	1.05
I can see social problems in a new way	350	2.09	1.11
I can solve problems more effectively	350	1.99	1.00
Recognize that service-learning rewarding to help others	350	2.09	1.18

Developed a deeper understanding of complex problems	350	2.01	1.00
Increased my awareness of social injustices	350	1.95	1.04
My service project positively impacted my learning	350	4.13	1.09
Feel that I made a difference in the community	350	1.98	1.05
Enjoyed working with people from different backgrounds	350	2.42	1.36
Feel that cultural diversity within a group makes it interesting	350	2.41	1.33
I have no hesitation to work with others	350	3.88	1.21

Table 2 indicated the average or means for students' perception of the extent that service-learning contributed to their civic responsibility. Based on mean scores, it is evident that service-learning did not contribute to the development of their civic responsibility. The students' responses in the table ranged from a mean of 1.95 to 4.13 and the standard deviation ranged from 1.00 to .96. These results show that the students primarily disagreed or strongly disagreed with the majority of the statements in this category of the survey.

3.2 Communication Skills and Gender

This section describes the differences between male and female respondents of their perceptions of the extent that service-learning contributed to the development of their communication skills development. The mean and standard deviations for both genders are illustrated along with the F statistics and the significance of probability.

Table 3: ANOVA of Communication Skills Development and Gender

Statements	Male		Female		F	P
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Improved my interactive skills	2.44	1.010	2.34	.91	1.00	.31
Improved my oral communication skills	2.40	1.04	2.52	1.04	1.10	.29
Lead others while working on a community site	2.42	1.04	2.35	.99	.34	.56
Reflect more on my learning	2.43	1.16	2.32	1.09	.82	.36
Improve my ability to work with a community	2.18	10.6	2.36	1.14	2.34	.12
Identify problems of people in the community	3.14	1.27	3.15	1.26	.00	.95
Feel more connected to my community	3.32	1.27	2.14	1.11	1.99	.15
Inspired me to be more involved in community activities	2.24	1.17	2.12	1.08	1.09	.29
I want to continue doing community service	2.53	1.41	2.35	1.26	1.48	.22
Feel that my service benefited the community	2.46	1.25	2.17	1.08	5.11	.02
I would like to work with others	2.07	1.06	2.02	1.06	.14	.70
I can see social problems in a new way	2.13	1.16	2.06	1.05	.33	.56
I can solve problems more effectively	2.01	1.02	1.96	.97	.14	.70
Recognize that service-learning rewarding to help others	2.01	1.12	2.18	1.23	1.96	.16
Developed a deeper understanding of complex problems	2.04	1.00	1.96	1.00	.55	.45
Increased my awareness of social injustices	2.01	1.09	1.90	.97	.90	.34
Service learning positively impacted my learning	4.17	1.08	4.09	1.10	.45	.50
Feel that I made a difference in the community	2.01	1.02	1.95	1.08	.26	.60
Enjoyed working with people from different backgrounds	2.47	1.40	2.36	1.33	.60	.43
Feel that cultural diversity within a group makes it interesting	2.35	1.32	2.48	1.34	.78	.37
I have no hesitation to work with others	3.98	1.13	3.78	1.28	2.27	.13

**Calculations are rounded to the nearest whole number

Table 3 showed a significant difference with a < .05 was found in only one statement: Feel that my service benefited the community. The male respondents were found to agree more strongly with the feeling statement having a mean score of 2.46 as compared to 2.17 for female students. There was no statistically significant difference in the rest of the statements. Based on this analysis, it can be said that strongly disagree that service-learning contributed to their enhancement of communication skills.

4. Discussion

The main aim of this study was to explore the effectiveness of service-learning Through this study it was found out that most of the respondents agreed that service-learning improved their communication skills. Previous studies have also highlighted that service-learning helps in improving communication skills of students. During service-learning students interact in the field and share views on different community issues (Cone & Harris, 2000). Overall, the results of the study support previous research findings. For example, former studies have reported that service-learning approach provides ample opportunities to students to discuss issues and take decisions. In this way students become aware not only of their responsibilities but act as active learners and community mobilizers (Starkey, Hugh, Osler & Audrey, 2006). This study further showed that many of the respondents disagreed that service-learning led them to feel more connected to a community.

Through this study it was found out that that most of them replied that they did not want to be involved in volunteer activities. This finding was unique in the context of this study as in the existing research this aspect is supported by numerous research studies. One of the key findings of this study is that service learning helped improved the course preparation of students. This finding is in line with the results of previous studies (Jacoby,1996). Participation in service-learning may indicate increased awareness among students regarding structural inequalities, critiquing social issues, and advocating for social justice (Dewey, 1997). Students investigate the issues through social dialogue, and social structure in the community and examine their own assumptions and biases (Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill & Gallay, 2007).

This study further explored that the service-learning did not contribute to students' communication skills improvement. In contrast to this, previous studies have revealed that service-learning has generously played a key role in developing communication skills (Kenneth, Stroupe, Jr. Larry & Sabato, 2004). This current study further revealed that both male and female students' responses showed that the students primarily disagreed or strongly disagreed with most of the statements in this category of the survey that service-learning enhanced their communication skills (Eyler & Giles, 1999) There was no statistically significant difference in the rest of the statements. Based on this analysis, it can be said that strongly disagree that service-learning contributed to the enhancement of communication skills enhancement of vocational students.

5. Conclusion

This research study has many implications for future service-learning practices and course implementation in the context of vocational and technical education. This study was limited in terms of sample and methodological procedures. For example, this study used only a survey tool to evaluate the effectiveness of service-learning for developing the communication skills development of students in a technical and vocational education context. This survey did not ask students how they achieve the abilities of communication through participating in service-learning. Therefore, further research is needed to find out how service-learning helps students better prepare for their courses. This study was limited to vocational education institutes in Pakistan which a conclusive curriculum. The research findings cannot be generalized to other fields of study or contexts. Hence more studies are needed to be conducted. This will also help to understand the effectiveness of service-learning as a pedagogical tool for developing the communication skills of students from a larger perspective.

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