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Effectiveness of Service-Learning

Abstract

The benefits of service-learning are explicitly mentioned in plenty development plans of different Austrian universities. To proof those benefits, effects of service-learning courses are often measured at the end of a specific course. Studies measuring effects a few years after completion of the course are rather rare. In this paper results of a study are presented, that focus on long-term effects. After a literature review focusing on service-learning as an instructional intervention as well as on the effectiveness of different Service-Learning courses, the implementation of the service-learning course discussed in this paper is described. 82 students, who had participated in service-learning-courses at the University of Graz, were interviewed three years after completing the course by means of a questionnaire. The results indicate the impact the service-learning-course had on the students in a long term run. The paper ends with the limitations of the presented research and the resulting outlook on further research.

Keywords

service-learning, higher education, mixed-method approach

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1 Introduction

An increasing number of Austrian HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) have been carrying out service-learning courses (GERHOLZ & LOSCH, 2015; RESCH, 2018) and the benefits of service-learning are explicitly mentioned in plenty development plans of Austrian universities (RESCH et al, 2020). Service-learning offers both opportunities and benefits for all involved participants, including students, faculty, community and the academic institution (RUTTI et al., 2012).

Service-learning is a state-of-the-art teaching-learning concept that combines curricular content with supporting charitable organizations. In this article, the concept of service-learning is understood as a course- and credit-based learning and teaching method (in contrast to community-service), which requires a specific instructional design to evolve purposeful and curricular learning connections between the course and service-projects outside the course. As intentions to implement service-learning-courses at HEIs in Austria increase, the question arises if this learning concept has any effects on the students. The effects, courses using this concept have on the development of student competences, have already been described in many empirical studies (as an overview SLEPCEVIC-ZACH & GERHOLZ 2015). These studies measure the effectiveness of a service-learning intervention at the end of the course. In this paper, a study conducted at the University of Graz is presented in which students are asked again three years after the service-learning-course in order to discover the long-term-effects the course might have.

2 Literature Review

In the last decade, HEIs have faced a fundamental paradigm shift regarding what they are expected to accomplish on an economic, social, and environmental level. The old paradigm of scientific discovery ('Mode 1'), which is characterized by an internally-driven taxonomy of disciplines and the autonomy of researchers, is changing to a new paradigm of knowledge production ('Mode 2'), which is socially embedded, applied, transdisciplinary and "subject to multiple accountabilities"

(NOWOTNY et al., 2003, p. 179). Therefore, the place of universities in society (MAASSEN et al., 2019) has had to change as well (EVERS & LAVILLE, 2004). While in the United States, Third Sector activities have been a central component of HE, European HEIs still lag behind. In the Anglo-American context, civic engagement, community-based research, or action methodologies are guiding terms (NIGRO, 2017). In German-speaking countries, the umbrella term "Third Mission" has prevailed. Additionally, there is a broad discourse about Social Innovation, Social Responsibility and Service-learning, which also shape the Third Sector discourse; Service-learning can be identified as the central discursive element (RESCH et al., 2020).

2.1 Service-Learning Theory

Since the 1990's, Service-learning has emerged as a central component of HE in the United States and is connected to both civic responsibility and academic learning (FELTEN & CLAYTON, 2011). While its potential lies in preparing students to be engaged citizens, it has many forms of implementation, including direct or indirect services in the Third Sector and community partners in the local neighborhood, on-campus, or even online. During implementation, equal priority is given to students, staff or faculty, and community partners. In service-learning, students deal with a specific problem situation that fits a community need and requires the application of business content in real life situations. The reflection of this activity cannot only foster a better understanding of the given business contents of the curriculum, but also the students' values and attitudes towards civic responsibility (GERHOLZ & LOSCH, 2014). Therefore, service-learning offers educators a teaching and learning tool that can help them solve the challenge of combining academic rigor and practical needs.

BRINGLE & CLAYTON (2012) define service-learning as a "course or competency-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in mutually identified service activities that benefit the community, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal

values and civic responsibility." (p. 105). The term 'credit-bearing' demonstrates a link to the curriculum and that service-learning is mostly course-based. This also represents the dissociation to 'community service', in which students also support the community, but it is not embedded in a curriculum or course. All in all, as defined, service-learning has a learning perspective as well as a community perspective.

The learning perspective refers to the combination of academic content and real-life experiences in a service-learning course. The experience made in a service-learning course refers to the specific service activity the students work and reflect on, based on their academic knowledge. Therefore, service-learning can be described as a type of experiential education. According to GODFREY, ILLES & BERRY (2005), reflection refers to the balancing of the students' internal elements with the external elements of the service experience. It is important that students reflect on their experiences and knowledge acquisition during the service activity. The latter comprises the content of the curriculum as well as the personal insights regarding the community needs.

The community perspective refers to the civic role of higher education. It is influenced by the work of Dewey and his idea that a democratic society will only work with engaged citizens. Therefore, it is an aim of higher education to prepare students to be responsible citizens. For DEWEY (1966), a civic learning process is provided when students are engaged in the community and in the problems that occur in the community. The latter focuses on the service activity in which the students face real social issues (e.g. poverty, charity, human dignity). The students work on the given social issues, including the corresponding problems. Furthermore, it is important that students and a community partner, like a charity organization, build a reciprocal relationship. Both parties have specific kinds of knowledge and experience that bring together an essential contribution to solve the given community problem. Brower argues that this reciprocal gain is an important factor leading to the initial and sustained success of the service-learning course (BROWER, 2011, p. 63).

Service-learning students (see figure 1) are confronted with a community problem (action context), which they should solve (action process) to reach a valuable contribution to the needs of the community and to their own competence development (action result). How students perceive these elements depends on the perspective. During the service process, students should clarify their service problem, work on this and come to a result that improves the community. During the learning process, students should be motivated towards the service activity and should discover and apply the relevant academic content that they need to solve the community problem. At the end, they should reflect on their learning process, that is the learning result. (GERHOLZ & LOSCH, 2014)
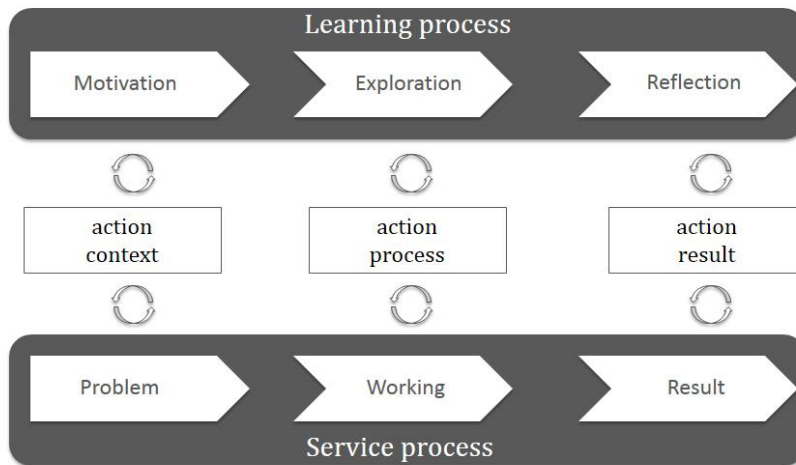

Figure 1:   Action-oriented approach of service-learning
(GERHOLZ & LOSCH, 2014)

The differentiation between service and learning process represents an analytical conceptualization. The service process and the learning process are interdependent. It is comparable to the 'organic connection' between the service experience and the

attitudes and knowledge of the student founded by DEWEY (1998). The 'organic connection' means that in service-learning courses, students should build a relationship between their professional and personal competence development and the work they undertake in the service activity. To help students to do this, a teaching and learning clarification is needed. That includes the adaptation of the service problem concerning a connection to the academic content, the support of the students during the work on the service activity and helping the students reflect on their service and learning process.

2.2   Service-Learning Effectiveness

In contrast to other countries such as Germany, Ireland or Spain, in Austria there are neither systematic attempts to evaluate the implementation of service-learning (REINDERS, 2016), nor any form of overview study on the distribution of service-learning.

Parallel to the increase of service-learning in business curricula, a growing interest in research on service-learning can be observed (for example: EOSLHE (European Observatory of Service-Learning in Higher Education) or IARSLCE (International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement)). For example, empirical studies on the impact of service-learning have revealed that academic skills such as critical thinking or problem-solving skills can be promoted during service-learning (GOVEKAR & RISHI, 2007; PRENTICE & ROBINSON, 2010). Students in service-learning courses also have a higher perception of their self-efficacy and learning success than students in traditional courses (YORIO & YE, 2012; REINDERS, 2010; PETERS, McHUGH & SENDALL, 2006). Furthermore, service-learning can contribute to the development of civic attitudes and engagement. For instance, YORIO & YE (2012) revealed in a meta-study that service-learning fosters an understanding of social issues as well as the personal development of students (YORIO & YE, 2012). Also, the willingness to be engaged can increase through service-learning courses (PRENTICE & ROBINSON, 2010; REINDERS & WITTEK, 2009).

The existing empirical studies have focused on the specific learning outcomes of a service-learning course and its effects. Some studies concentrated more on didactical elements in service-learning courses. YORIO and YE (2012) have revealed that credit bearing service-learning has a stronger impact on competence development than an extra-curricular service-learning arrangement. For the learning process and its success it is important to support students for recognizing the connection between curricular content and service activity during the service process (PRENTICE & ROBINSON, 2010; SLEPCEVIC-ZACH, 2017; FERNANDEZ & SLEPCEVIC-ZACH, 2018).

All in all, a general comparison of the results should be considered cautiously. The conducted service-learning courses in the cited studies have several variations in their teaching and learning realization. Beyond that, the studies have used different forms of methodical design and measuring instruments. Therefore, a context sensitive comparison is needed. However, a trend can be shown that service-learning has the potential to foster the professional and personal competence development of students. Studies that measure the impact of service-learning courses a long period after the completion of these courses were not found.

3 Examined Service-Learning-Course and Methodology

The examined service-learning course is implemented in the Master´s Program of Business Education and Development at the University of Graz. It is a five semester Master's Program of polyvalent nature, which qualifies students for a career in various business fields such as accounting or human resources, but also business pedagogy, adult education, administration, research – and finally as a teacher for commercial subjects at vocational schools. In the course, the student-groups presented and discussed their projects with their teachers and colleagues. A lot of time in the course was devoted to reflect the experiences the students made in their learning- and service-process with the NGOs. The students worked in groups to-

gether with charity organizations to solve existing problems the organizations and/or their clients had.

For example the students developed a marketing plan for an organization serving long-term unemployed[2], they supervised a measure to increase the employability of young adults and they developed a fundraising strategy for an organization caring for refugees. The service-learning course had a connection to relevant business content as well as to scientific methods in social science.

To examine the attitudes and perceptions of the students, a complex mixed-method approach (KUCKARTZ, 2014) was chosen. It contained a quasi-experimental pre-post survey with quantitative data collection at the beginning of the course and two measurement points after the course.[3]

A course in the master's program of business administration was chosen as control group. In this course, the students also handled practical projects in the fields of business models and location policy in cooperation with real companies. The course formats are thus comparable, in the sense that the students in both courses independently work on projects with business content and practical experience. The service-learning-concept was implemented and developed over a period of four semesters, from the 2014/15 winter semester to 2016 summer semester. In each of these semesters, the comparable course in the master's program of business administration took place. A total of 82 students in the service-learning-group and 105 students in the control group filled out the questionnaires. The first question-naire was handed out at the beginning of the courses. At this point, the service-learning students had already met once with the charity organizations. The students

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[2] The NGO established a training in which the long-term unemployed produced organic orange juice. Unfortunately, only very small numbers of these juice were sold. The students developed a marketing plan and a sales training to increase the sales volume.

[3] Additionally, qualitative interviews were performed with the students as well as with the participating social organizations. The results of these studies were published in SLEPCEVIC-ZACH & STOCK, 2018.

filled out the second questionnaire during the last session of the course. All students of the service-learning-course were contacted in autumn 2018 and interviewed by using a quantitative questionnaire comparable to the ones used for the first two measurements. In contrast they didn't fill in the questionnaire themselves but were asked by an interviewer. This procedure was chosen to attain a high response rate, that would not have been achieved by sending out the questionnaire. Depending on when the course was attended, this was three to four and a half years after the completion of the course. Only the students attending the service-learning-course were interviewed at the third measurement point. Because the control group consisted of students attending the master course of business administration it was not possible for us to gather the addresses of the students after they had left university, because the university did not provide this information. 73 former participants of the service-learning-course participated at the third measurement point.

A systematic comparison of the students showed that there were some significantly older students in the service-learning-group. The master's degree in business education enables teaching in schools, which is why people who have been working for a long time use this option to qualify for a teaching profession. However, these people cannot be compared to the other students, especially regarding some of the key competencies that the service-learning-concept is intended to promote, as they can already look back on many years of practical experience. Therefore, these people (N = 7) were excluded from the calculations for the direct proof of effectiveness of the service-learning-concept in comparison to the control group. They were considered in the calculations for the longitudinal effects. Apart from age, there are no significant differences between the control and service-learning-group, neither regarding important socio-demographic aspects nor with regard to attitudes towards social engagement before the start of the course.

The questionnaires assessed the students self-efficacy, self-concept towards the course, attitude towards civic engagement and willingness to become involved (see table 1). A 6-point likert scale was used.

Table 1: Description of the scales

Scale	Number of items	Example	Cronbachs α
Self-efficacy (RITZ-MANN et al., 2014)	10	Even in the case of surprising events, I believe that I will get along well with them.	t1: 0.890 t2: 0.907 t3: 0,792
Attitude towards civic engagement (REINDERS & HILDEBRANDT, 2008)	7	I would give some of my time to help people in need.	t1: 0.752 t2: 0.771 t3:0,728
Willingness to become involved (MABRY, 1998)	5	People have a responsibility to help to solve existing social problems.	t1: 0.847 t2: 0.818 t3: 0.787
Self-concept towards the course (REINDERS & WITTEK, 2009)	6	The course will make me see myself differently than before.	t1: 0.854 t2: 0.868 t3: 0.859

4   Results

The effectiveness of the service-learning-course was evaluated by means of multi-variate analyses of variance for repeated measurements (MANOVA). We expected that, by the end of the course, the group that is confronted with the service-learning-concept experiences an increase in self-efficacy, in their attitude towards civic engagement as well as in their willingness to become involved, which is more pronounced than the increase within the control group. This hypothesis is confirmed by interaction effects, which are moderate (COHEN, 1992) for all three

constructs. Students who have attended the service-learning course show a greater increase in self-efficacy, they rate social engagement as more important and their willingness to get involved increases compared to the control group. All students started at the same level before the courses and all students also experienced an increase in all three dimensions. However, the increase among the students in the service-learning group was significantly greater (partial eta square between .142 ** and .158 **). Gender, age, social commitment before the seminar and extrinsic and intrinsic learning motivation were included as control variables.

In addition to the influence the service-learning-concept can have on personal development, it was also important for us to determine, what effects the students attribute to the course. For this purpose, multivariate analyses of variance for repeated measurements (MANOVA) were used to check whether the students self-concepts towards the course changed after completion. Again, gender, age, social engagement before the seminar, and extrinsic and intrinsic learning motivation were included as control variables. The measurements before the course started showed that the expectations within the service-learning group towards the course were far above the level of the control group (partial eta square = .306**). This might be explained by the fact, that the students know, the service-learning-course is meant to be a special course, the concept differs from comparable courses and the concept is meant to change the sight on life and society. The increase during the semester was particularly pronounced in the service-learning group, while the control group remained at approximately the same level as before (partial eta square = .132**).

For the students in the service-learning-group, we have additional data gathered at least three years after completing the course. To prove the long-term effects the service-learning-course has on the students, analyses of variance for repeated measurements were conducted. The data shows similar trends concerning all scales measuring the personal development of the students (see table 2). Immediately after the service-learning-course, students experience an increase in their self-efficacy, their attitude towards civic engagement, as well as their willingness to become involved. Three to four and a half years after the course, all three attitudes

have decreased again, but remain on a higher level than at the beginning of the service-learning-course. While the willingness to become involved and the attitude towards civic engagement decrease more strongly, self-efficacy decreases less strongly and differs significantly from the time before the course. The data concerning the development of the self-concept towards the course shows a different picture. Here, the attributions made to the course increase in a statistically significant manner, even further from the second to the third measurement point using pairwise comparisons between the measuring points.

Table 2: Long term effects

	mean t1 (SD)	mean t2	mean t3	F	p	partial eta^2
Self-efficacy	4.50 (.53)	4.90 (.52)	4.75 (.46)	17.544	.00	.196
Willingness to become involved	4.40 (.63)	4.82 (.63)	4.60 (.67)	12.203	.00	.145
Attitude towards civic engagement	4.64 (.94)	5.01 (.70)	4.74 (.79)	7.985	.00	.100
Self-concept towards the course	3.54 (.94)	4.23 (.71)	4.41 (.69)	43.697	.00	.378

At the third measuring point, the students were additionally asked to answer a few questions considering what benefits the course might have had for them. Table 3 shows that the students strongly agree that the course helped them to gain insights into working methods of social organizations and that the course helped them to transfer theoretical knowledge into practical knowledge. They also think that the course improved their teamwork. And most of the participants are sure that they were able to help other people through the work they did for the social organiza-

tions. In contrast, only a minority thinks that the course had influence on its professional career.

Table 3: Benefits
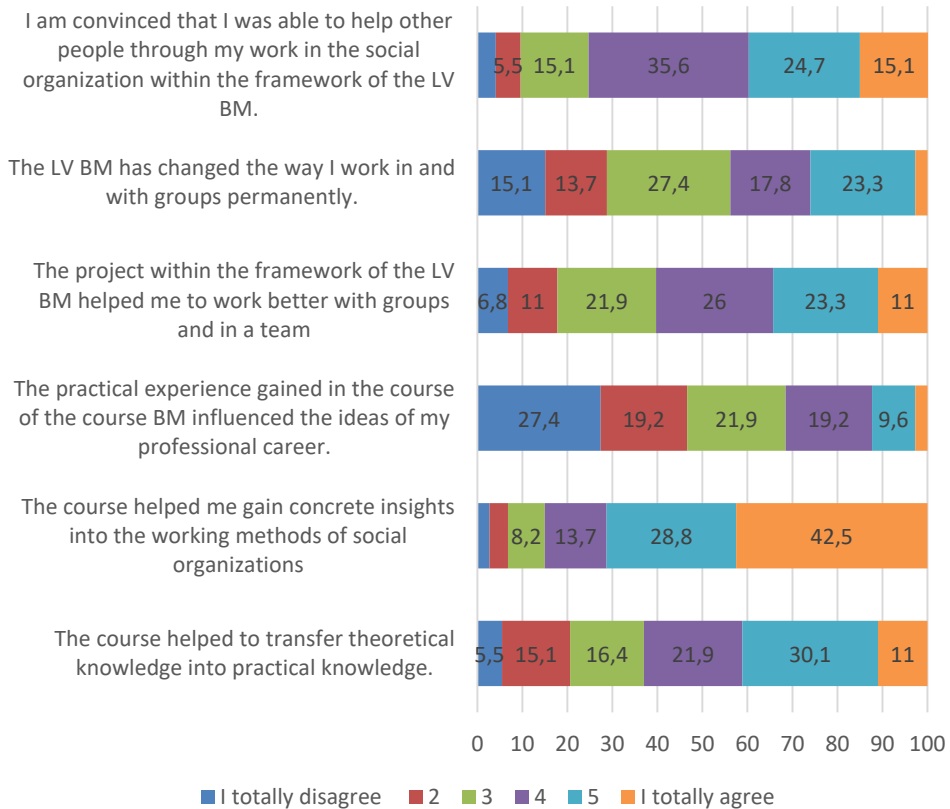
According to the goals of the service-learning-course, the former students think that their social competences had improved through participating in the course. A large part also thinks that the course had significant influence on their self- and methodological competences (Table 4).

Table 4: Competences (The service-learning course and the work with the partner organizations helped me to develop myself in the following areas)
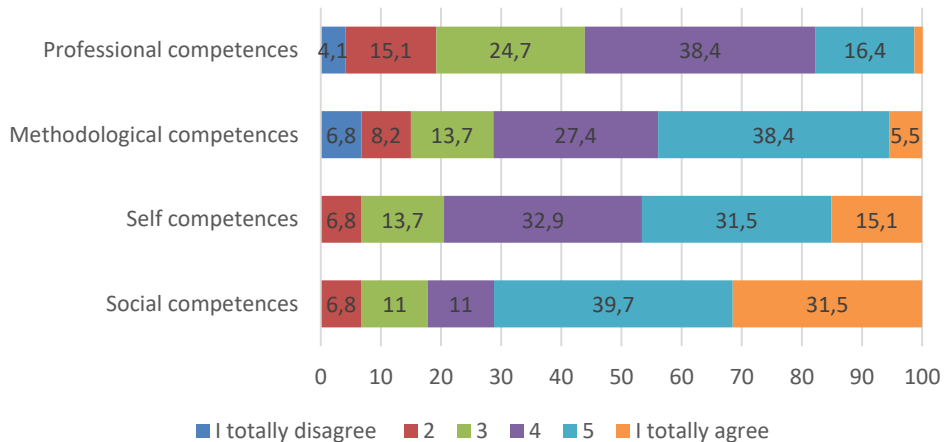
Regarding the existing literature and the presented study, service-learning seems to be a benefit for the HEIs. Service-learning-courses are often implemented in a bachelor program or in the first semesters of a master program. The results demonstrate that also a service-learning-course at the end of a master program shows interesting effects. In such courses the projects must be complex and situated in the main field of the specific master program.

5   Discussion, Limitations and further research

Service-learning has effects on different dimensions of personal development of participating students. In comparison to the control group students who have attended the service-learning course show a greater increase in self-efficacy, they rate social engagement as more important and their willingness to get involved increases. These results were also found in other empirical studies (e.g. GERHOLZ & LOSCH, 2015). At the third measurement point three attitudes (self-efficacy,

willingness to become involved and attitude towards civic engagement) had decreased but remained higher than before attending the course. The self-concept towards the course increased from the completion of the course (t2) to the measurement point three years later (t3). A possible explanation could be, that the former students confronted with various experiences in the professional world rate the value of the service-learning-course retrospectively higher than whiles attending it. Unfortunately there are some major limitations for the presented study. While for the first and second measurement point, a paper-pencil-questionnaire was handed out to the students, for the third measurement point, the students were interviewed by telephone. This change in the survey method might have had an effect especially due to socially desirable response behavior. Another qualitative study after some more years could give some informations about these effects.

A second mayor limitation are the missing measures for the control group at the third measurement point due to the impossibility of gathering the addresses. Both limitations make it difficult to classify the results of the third measurement point in a correct manner, especially because surveys on long-term-effectiveness of service-learning are missing. Nevertheless, the former students mention various benefits the service-learning-course had for their private and professional lives.

Another problem was that all former students are working in different (typically business; STOCK et al., 2019) areas. We don´t know what experience they were able to obtain in the years after the service-learning course and how this experiences affected them and their perception of the course. The reported findings focus on the perspective of the students and not on the community perspective. A recent survey with the community partners should give more details about this perspective (RESCH & SLEPCEVIC-ZACH, 2021).

Plenty questions for further research arise out of the presented study. On the one hand, the impact on the partner organizations outside the university is unclear, especially after some years after the service-learning project. On the other hand, the presented service-learning course was implemented in the last semester of a busi-

ness masters-program. Whether the effects are the same for bachelor-students or other fields of study is unclear.

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