

Community Service Learning: Successfully Engaging Emirati Business Students

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Abstract—Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) is often considered inclusive of Project-based learning and Problem-based learning and the overarching model for authentic student learning. A key component of IBL is that students have a high degree of autonomy and self-determination. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), motivation is contingent upon three existing factors: autonomy, competence and relatedness. This present study looks at two different types of student assignments: traditional class projects and community service-learning projects. Six case studies of female, Emirati undergraduate business students compared their experiences with both these two projects conducted under the guidance of the same instructor. The results indicate that students are less engaged with traditional class projects that require the students to research a topic and present on the findings. Students, however, reported greater engagement with the community service-learning project because it includes all three criteria of SDT and greater depth of learning.

Index Terms—service learning, project-based learning, motivation, self-determination, depth of learning, student engagement, Emirati success

I. INTRODUCTION

Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) is often considered inclusive of Project-based learning and Problem-based learning and the overarching model for authentic student learning [1], [2]. Considerable research has shown the value of IBL in all of its forms in terms of engagement and motivation, depth of learning, and cognitive flexibility [3], [4]. Similarly, researchers [5] demonstrate in their study with high-achieving high school students that the implementation of project-based learning results in increased formal knowledge and shows a positive change in attitude towards technology and technological studies. However, the practice of IBL in the classroom can be a difficult transition for student and teacher as roles shift from consumers or deliverers of content to content creators and facilitators [3]. Various models have been developed to help provide structure to IBL. Project-based frameworks, for example, focus on a deliverable

and structure the learning experience to that end while Problem-based frameworks focus more on the process of solving the problem [2]. One of the difficulties with engaging teachers in IBL is often the lack of support and adequate models to help them understand and apply IBL [3]. Reference [1] has suggested that teachers go through three stages of implementation of IBL: Experimenting, Developing, and finally Committing. As well, there are many models of IBL to choose from at each stage and levels of implementation [2].

A significant amount of research has been conducted on implementations of IBL at the K-12 level but far less has been conducted in higher education [2]. Even less has been conducted with students at K-12 or in higher education especially in the areas of perception and support [6]. The benefits of IBL have been well documented but as has been pointed out, the success of IBL depends on support for teachers and students especially as they engage for the first time [1] [2] Research conducted at post-secondary levels should inquire into the types and levels of support provided for teachers as they engage with IBL and the perceptions of students as they engage with IBL.

A key component of IBL is that students have a high degree of autonomy and self-determination. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a theory of motivation put forth to explain what motivates people [7], [8]. According to SDT, motivation is contingent upon three existing factors: autonomy, competence and relatedness. *Autonomy* refers to a person's ability to have control over their life. For example, if a student is permitted to choose the topic of a project and/or the people to work with, autonomy is present. A second factor necessary for SDT is *competence*. Deci & Ryan [7] explain that competence is a human's need to be effective in dealing with his/her environment. In an educational context, this would refer to a student's ability to understand the material and be comfortable with the application of the material inside and outside of the classroom. The final factor for SDT is *relatedness*. Deci and Ryan also [7] posit that a third basic need for humans is the need to have a close affectionate relationship with others. In the case of community-service learning project, the students are

engaged in their community. They theoretically should see the connection between themselves and people in the community. Furthermore, they should make a connection between their learning in the classroom with the direct application in the community. Therefore, community service-learning project, a type of project-based learning, has all the components of SDT: autonomy, competence and relatedness. The students should be more motivated and engaged with community service-learning projects than traditional research and presentation projects.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. *Participants*

The sample is composed of six female Emirati students from Zayed University between the ages of 20 and 22. Zayed University students are generally second language learners completing their undergraduate studies in English. Therefore, they are not only studying in a second language, but also adapting to a curriculum that is quite foreign from the traditional Arabic curriculum. The sample of 6 was collected in Spring of 2014 from a total of 78 potential students. All participants had taken Business Communication in Fall 2013. 5 of the 6 participants were College of Business students and 1 of the 6 was a student from the College of Communication and Media Sciences. The participants volunteered to share their perceptions of two different types of class projects and to compare their experiences. The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis with the instructor. Prior to the beginning of this research project, ethics approval was granted by the Zayed University Ethics Review Board.

B. *Traditional Class Project*

Students were asked from week 4-7 to complete a traditional class project. They were instructed to research a country and present upon the intercultural communication characteristics of said country and how it compares to Emirati intercultural communication. All students had to choose a different country. The presentation was individual and could be a maximum of 5 minutes long. The presentations were accompanied with a student-created PowerPoint presentation. The project counted for 20% of the students' final grade.

C. *Community Service-Learning Project*

Students were asked from week 2-10 to complete a project-based community service assignment. They were instructed to use business communication skills to do something good in their community. Students were free to choose how they would make a difference in their community and also free to choose whom they would work with. They were instructed on how to evaluate appropriate channels of communication, and how to write e-mails, progress reports, memos and analytical reports. Students were asked to give a final group presentation on how they used business communication to make a positive difference in the community. The project counted for 30% of the students' final grade.

D. *Procedure*

Each student was invited to a one on one interview in May, 2014. The students had completed the course projects in December of 2013. Students were asked their age, major, grade and also to complete the informed consent form. The interviews were recorded. They were asked to summarize their service-learning project in a semi-structured interview with 4 guiding questions: (1) what they enjoyed about the project, (2) what the source of their motivation was, (3) what they learned about the project on a personal and educational basis and (4) what they would change about the project. The students were then asked the same questions about the traditional class project. They were asked to summarize their traditional class project. Also they were asked 4 questions related to their traditional class project: (1) what they enjoyed about the project, (2) what the source of their motivation was, (3) what they learned about the project on a personal and educational basis and (4) what they would change about the project.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. *Data Analysis of Traditional Class Project*

Upon completion of the interviews, the student responses were analyzed to look for common themes. When asked to summarize the traditional class project, 66% of the students (4 out of 6) reported no impact. Students needed to be reminded about the content of the project because they had forgotten about it. Each of the students' work was arbitrarily labeled a case. Case study #2 admitted the following: "The culture project [traditional class project] did not leave anything with me". The lack of impact that the traditional class project had with students can be explained with SDT. Students did not have a great deal of autonomy with the project. The instructor requested that students choose a different country from each person in the class. Therefore, some students felt that they lacked freedom of choice. Case study #6 explained that she chose Turkey. She said, "I wanted to choose other countries but could only choose the countries that we left". When asked to recount the intercultural communication characteristics, the student could not recall any specific information. The only comment she could offer was that Turkey has the largest number of mosques per capita. Her lack of choice with a topic limited her self-determination. A second key factor was missing with the traditional class project: competence. The students needed to rely on their research ability and information literacy to get an accurate account of the intercultural communication characteristics of the country. Although they could read the information, it was an abstract concept. The students could speak about the country but did not feel qualified to accurately describe the country and culture. As case study #6 describes, "These presentations are boring for me. If I were in a research course, I would be a very bad student". The third component of self-determination theory, relatedness, was also missing from the traditional class assignment. The students were unable to make a connection between what

they were researching and their own life. Case study #3 complained that the “project was online and sometimes we can’t understand”. Since this was only a research project, very few students were able to have direct contact with a citizen of the researched country. Only one of the six case studies was able to talk with someone from the country she chose. In fact, case study #4 was the only student to have anything of substance to report about the traditional project. She reported that she enjoyed speaking to a Spanish faculty member because it helped her understand how business is conducted outside of the UAE. Her ability to connect with someone from outside her culture gave her a small degree of relatedness, which left some impact. However, the degree of impact was remarkably low because traditional class projects lack the three basic needs that humans require for motivation: autonomy, competence and relatedness.

According to self-determination theory, there are three types of motivation that an individual can be classified into. Demotivation, which is when a person does not experience any motivation. Extrinsic motivation occurs when an individual is motivated because of outside rewards to be gained or punishment to be avoided. Finally, intrinsic motivation occurs when the individual is motivated because the task is enjoyable. The person does the action for his or her own pleasure.

During the interview stage, students were asked to recount what motivated them to do the traditional class project. Once they recalled their traditional project, often with some prodding or reminding, they students gave the following results. 33% (2 out of 6) reported they wanted a high grade on the project. 33% (2 out of 6) reported a desire to gain information about the culture. 33% claimed they were not motivated on with this project.

B. Discussion of Grades as a Motivating Factor for Traditional Class Projects

When asked what the motivating factor was with the traditional project, 33% of the case studies (2 out of 6) responded that they were mainly interested in getting a good grade. This shows that students were mainly extrinsically motivated because they wanted a reward for their efforts.

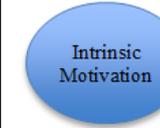
		
Absence of motivation	Externally directed motivation	Interest and pleasure in the task Automatic autonomous motivation

Figure 1. Types of motivation as defined by self-determination theory. Adapted from [8].

The viewed the reward in the form of a grade rather than the value of learning and understanding the intercultural communication characteristics of another country.

Therefore the students were less engaged with the project because 33% of the students claimed to be doing the project to get good grades. They did not have intrinsic motivation so they discontinued their study after a grade was awarded.

C. Discussion of Acquisition of Information as a Motivating Factor for Traditional Class Projects

33% of the students (2 out of 6) claimed that they wanted to know more about the country they were researching. Case study #4 demonstrated extrinsic motivation because the instructor externally directed her. She claimed that she does not read books, so it was an opportunity to learn about something. She said, “I work when someone forces me. I am motivated when the professor tells me what to do”. This student has the autonomy to continue researching; however, she will not read or research unless directed to do so. Again, this answer reveals that students are less engaged with traditional class projects because most students only research what is required.

D. Discussion of Demotivation in Traditional Class Projects

Demotivation occurs when there is a lack of motivation. 33% of the students answered that the traditional class project did not motivate them at all. Interestingly, their demotivation occurred for different reasons. Case study #6 claimed it was just like any other project she does in university. She researched what she felt the teacher wanted to hear and finished quickly. Case study #5 reported she was not motivated at all. However, her demotivation was due to choosing a country she already knew about in order to make the project easier. These results indicate that students are less engaged with traditional class projects that require the students to research a topic and present on the findings.

E. Data Analysis of Community Service-Learning Projects

When asked about the community service-learning projects, 100% of the students reported significant impact on their learning and personal fulfillment. They were able to discuss at length the details of their project despite six months passing since its completion. They recounted the activities they chose to do and the people they chose to work with. All six students, or 100% of the case studies, described experiencing fulfillment from this service-learning project. The students claimed to have enjoyed the project. They explained that they liked the project because it was real and they were doing something meaningful with the material learned in class. For example, one student said, “We communicated with each other and the community. We saw things and we did real things. I like courses where we go out and do things because these are the projects we will remember.” These results are conducive to the SDT outlined by [7]. The students had autonomy because they were all free to choose an area of the community to work with. The students were also free to choose their team members. Furthermore, the students gained competence through this

project. They were instructed in class and gained the business communication skills necessary to be successful. This project gave students an opportunity to take an abstract concept and apply it in a real-life scenario. They had the support of the instructor in case issues arose, but students were able to strengthen their competency in business communication by employing those skills directly in the community. By doing so, students were able to fulfill the basic need of relatedness. Reference [7] point out, relatedness is a basic human need to connect with people and have relationships. The community service-learning project promotes relatedness in two ways. First, it allows students to work together and practice inter-personal skills. 50% of the students commented that they developed lasting friendships due to the close communication they had over the course of the project. Case study #1 said about working with her group, "We worked so well together because it made us happy. It [the project] was for us not just for the grades". Case study #5 said, "We became closer because of this project. It was not a normal project. It was one of my favorite projects because we were involved with so many people". The connection to people is precisely what relatedness is all about. Secondly, relatedness is emphasized with this type of project because it allows students to work with the community and make an impact in a small but important way. The students were pleasantly surprised to see that "a small thing could have a big effect on the community". 66% of the case studies claimed that they have continued their projects despite the class being over. For example, case study #3 said, "I do this now. I continued to do this work. It motivated me to continue. Now I go to the supermarket and give fruit to the workers". Therefore, 100% of the students reported the service-learning project impacted them and they had a sense of fulfillment from the assignment.

When asked what motivated them to do the projects, three themes became evident. The most significant motivation was described as *happiness*. 83% (5 out of 6 case studies) described happiness as a motivating factor. A second theme was students surpassing their own personal expectations. 66% of the case studies (4 out of 6) were pleased with their effect on the community that resulted in surprising themselves by surpassing personal goals or *expectations*. The third theme to emerge was surprising to the researcher. The case studies revealed that a motivating factor was *Islamic values*. 33% of the cases (2 out of 6) described their religion as a reason to engage with this project in a meaningful manner. Each of these themes will be discussed in further detail and with student testimonials.

F. Discussion of Happiness as a Motivating Factor for Community Service-Learning Projects

When asked what motivated them to do a good job on their community service-learning project, 83% of the case studies mentioned that happiness was the greatest motivator. Case study #3 states, "If you make someone happy it makes you happy". However, it is the case study #2 that most clearly demonstrates how *happiness* changed

the motivation of this project from extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation. Case study #2 chose to work with Zayed Higher Organization for Humanitarian Care. This is an organization that caters to children with special needs. In the UAE, children with special needs are not encouraged in mainstreamed schools. Therefore, unless a local citizen is in personal contact with a relative who has special needs, they have little exposure to people with special needs. As such, there can be misunderstanding and often fear towards special needs students. This group of students chose to work with children with special needs. The group of students used their business communication skills to do the following: contact the organization; engage in fundraising to result in a party for special needs students. The students were able to organize the party, buy gifts for special needs students and play game with the children. This project not only resulted in happiness, but also had a profound impact on their beliefs. Case #2 reported the following during the interview:

We were very happy when we saw how happy we made others. We were happy when we saw them [special needs children]. We were always scared about those people. I always tried to avoid those people because I was afraid. They are the most needy people and we made them happy. Their disease is not their fault. Now I understand it was not just for a school project. It was interesting and we wanted to do this. We want to visit them again and continue with this project. I learned how to communicate and I am not afraid of these people anymore.

Case study #2 shows that SDT was exemplified because she found value in working with children with special needs. The depth of learning is evident since she wishes to continue this project and her original concept of special needs people has changed in a more positive direction. Happiness was a motivating factor according to her. This happiness depended on her ability to choose an area to work with. She was able to exhibit competence with business communication and feel more confident in her skills because her effort resulted in a significant effect on the community. This in turn develops relatedness with a group of people in the community that she was once afraid of.

G. Discussion of Surpassing Individual Student Expectation in Community Service-Learning Projects

A second common theme that emerged from the interviews involved students surpassing their own expectations of what they thought they were capable of. 66% of the case studies admitted that they were motivated because they realized they could accomplish more than they thought possible. Case study #1 is one example of how these students did more than they thought possible. A group of five students raised 5000\$ in two weeks to buy clothes for workers in the community. The workers receive a meager wage for their labour and they appreciate greatly any help from the outside community. This group of students not only collected money from friends and family, but also experimented with social media by using Twitter and Instagram. They

used the hashtag #MakeTheirSmile to collect funds. The use of social media was beyond their comfort zone and the students were surprised with their success. They had hoped to collect 1000\$ but far out surpassed their expectations by collecting 5000%. As one student from the team said,

"I had the ability, so why not do more? We are educated so we can do more. I feel responsible now. I must help my society because my country does so much for me. Plus, you feel that you really did something. We [females] don't go in the society because we are women and are not allowed to go to society. It was my first time to go into society on my own"

This is only one description of how students surpassed their own expectations with the service-learning project. 66% of the case studies volunteered that a motivating factor was the ability to do more than expected for intrinsic reasons.

H. Discussion of Islamic Values as a Motivating Factor for Community Service-Learning Projects

2 out of the 6 case studies, or 33%, mentioned that a motivating factor for the community service learning projects was Islamic values. The UAE is a Muslim state and Islamic values are deeply rooted in all areas of society. Therefore, students felt that this sort of project fit closely to their religious beliefs. When questioned as to why the service-learning project complied with Islamic beliefs, one student said,

"We are encouraged to help the poor in our society. We all do this secretly because it is better to do this secretly in our religion. The more you give, the more you get back".

The Islamic values can be viewed as both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. The students are motivated intrinsically to help others in the community because they are happy to serve Allah. They feel that serving others is a key to being a good Muslim. The motivation can also be seen as extrinsic. As the student states, "The more you give, the more you get back". This student went on to explain that,

"After finishing the project, I found 500aed [150\$US] that was lost in my handbag. I was so happy and thought it was from doing this project. In our religion when you die, if people keep on doing your own work, you will get more credit. Doing it for the poor will benefit you more".

However, whether or not the motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic or both, the student were motivated by Islamic values which support the values of the UAE. Case study #4 said that this project "was from the heart. If I have 'Niyah' [Arabic for intention] Allah will give me the strength to continue". This student and her group went far beyond the requirements of the project. They wanted to help a family in need, and they wanted to make a change in their lives. At first they found a family with a newborn baby. The family could not afford medical insurance but their baby was sick with a life-threatening disorder. The group of students raised 600\$ to pay for medical insurance and potentially saved the life of the child. Feeling inspired and motivated by Islamic values to do more, they organized fundraisers to collect 7000\$ to

support the educational and basic needs of a family in a rural setting. The mother of the family prayed for them with tears streaming down her face in thanks. This further motivated the students to do more. They finished their assignment by giving Red Crescent 2500\$ to aid people in Syria. Raising a certain amount of money was not a requirement. The students were only asked to do something good in their community by using business communication skills. However, Islamic values prompted two of the six case studies to do more than expected to help those in need.

IV. CONCLUSION

Undergraduate Emirati students taking Business Communication were given two assignments. The first assignment was a traditional research assignment. They had to research a country and present upon the intercultural communication characteristics of said country and how it compares to Emirati intercultural communication. The second assignment was a community service-learning assignment in which they were instructed to use business communication skills to do something good in their community. Five months after the completion of the course, the students were invited back to be interviewed about their learning experience with four guiding questions for each assignment. They recounted their experiences with both projects regarding their enjoyment level, motivation, personal and educational learning outcomes and finally changes they would make to the projects.

The results showed that the traditional class assignment had less of an impact on students. They reported less enjoyment and motivation. The main motivating factor was good grades. This research study reveals that students are less engaged with traditional class projects because most students only research what is required with little impact on learning outcomes. On the other hand, 100% of the students reported that the service-learning project had a significant impact on their learning and personal fulfillment. The results indicate that students are motivated by the level of happiness they experience doing the project, the tendency to surpass personal expectations and the projects alignment with Islamic values and responsibilities.

Based on these results, more service-learning projects should be incorporated in curriculum design within Emirati educational institutions. The service-learning projects promote significant impact on learning and personal fulfillment. These results lend themselves to Emirati success and can aid in the Emiratisation of the United Arab Emirates.

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