

Fostering Transformational Thinking Through Boys' Service-Learning

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Further Information

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Introduction

My research focus was a service-learning partnership with *Habitat for Humanity*, Cambodia. I was concerned that boys may have developed a patronising view of those living in poverty, reinforcing a power binary where students were perceived as powerful and charitable while Khmer partners were conceptualised as powerless and needy. I investigated pre-service pedagogy and reflection strategies aimed at deepening boys' critical engagement. My research led me to the ideas of Aboriginal activist Lilla Watson, citing Leonen (2004):

If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time.
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine,
then let us work together.

Watson's provocation underpinned the project. Price's service-learning practice wisdom (2008; 2012) provided the pedagogical framework. I aspired to Mezirow's "transformational learning" (1997) in challenging boys' world-views and shifting their frame of reference about poverty and their place in the world.

The Research Question

To what extent does a service-learning program for Year 11 boys foster transformational learning?

Research Context and Participants

Scotch College, Melbourne, is an Australian Presbyterian boys' school, of 1868 P-12 (5-18 year old) student enrolments. Scotch, established in 1851, is the oldest Victorian school with strong academic, sporting, artistic, and religious traditions. In 2017, Twenty-seven Scotch boys in Year 11 (17 years old) opted to travel to Cambodia.

The Research Action

Step 1: Pre-service Learning and Staff Engagement. Boys undertook eleven 75-minute pre-service sessions exploring core values including humility, integrity, awareness, and solidarity, and concepts such as "coming as a guest" and "respecting the innate dignity of others." Brother Damien Price (2008, 2012) provided professional development for Scotch staff.

Step 2: Coaching and Reflection During the Service-learning Experience.

Boys toured Cambodia for a fortnight. They participated in a house-build project with *Habitat for Humanity*. During the trip, boys were guided through formal reflection activities, linking their experiences in Cambodia with the pre-taught values.

Data Collection and Analysis

I collected qualitative data (Creswell,1998; Freebody, 2003) through:

- three semi-structured formal interviews with eight participants (pre-trip, during the trip, and post trip), developing a longitudinal picture;
- a reflective-practitioner journal (O'Toole, 2006);
- written reflections from participants capturing responses at different stages of the Cambodia trip; and
- nightly informal interviews with a different group of eight boys about their challenges and highlights.

I used Stringer's (2014) process of reviewing, unitising, categorising, coding, identifying themes, organising categories, and developing a report, coding data for divergent viewpoints and points of consensus.



"Sometimes we did a bit of that reflective stuff not prompted by teachers ... we exchanged views on stuff and what we saw ... we'd had so many reflections – we were kind of in this routine of just like saying what we felt, what we saw or experienced ... we probably wouldn't have had that if we hadn't been doing reflections every day."
(Chris*)

* Participants names are replaced with pseudonyms through the report



"I don't think I was a very emotional person before the trip. Whereas, I feel that now, coming to the end of the trip, I know a better way to show my emotion and portray that to other people."
(Louis)



Key Findings and Discussions:

Key themes that emerged from my analysis of the data included:

- **Boys' Awareness and Appreciation of Cultural Difference and Poverty.** This project helped James understand "**what goes on beyond ... our enclosed life at Scotch.**" Prior to the trip, Rob believed that poverty is something "everyone could at least try to get out of," but he learned that, "being poor is something that is really hard to get out of."
- **Boys' Communication Skills and Their Ability to Forge Connections With People From a Different Culture.** Neil noted, "**Although there was a language barrier I still was able to communicate.**" Interactions were enhanced between Louis and his teachers and family in Australia. Boys enjoyed forming connections with Khmer people.
- **Boys' Understanding of the Core Values of Service.** Boys referred to the pre-taught values of service as a framework for transforming actions and perceptions. Sean said, "**those sessions helped us to learn how to tread lightly.**" James felt that the experience taught him "about being humble and ... being more aware of other's dignity." Some boys reported, however, being unclear on some of the terminology used to describe the values.
- **Boys' Self-awareness.** Louis felt that the experience made him more "**grounded**" and "**mature.**" Some boys loved the self-reflection process. For others, like Andrew, "Getting up in front of people sucked ... you have to think of something that's going to be good and isn't going to make you seem dumb."
- **Boys' Deepening Interpersonal Connections with Other Boys.** The experience transformed boys' interpersonal relationships. A recurrent theme was how boys thought their peers "**have good hearts**" and how the program facilitated some challenging of gender stereotypes.
- **Boys' Understanding of Helping and Participating in Service-learning.** Lucas said "**I'm not here for me, I'm here for somebody else.**" However, the converse side of this was that some boys found it difficult to adapt when the work did not go to plan. Some boys were unable to articulate how they might contribute to community development projects after their time in Cambodia.

Conclusions

- Pre-service exploration of values and frequent, ongoing teacher-facilitated reflection, were significant features of the project.
- To an extent, the project achieved transformational thinking and learning, successfully shifting the boys' world view and frames of reference about poverty and cultural difference.
- The boys also increased self-awareness and emotional literacy and forged deeper relationships with themselves and others.
- Though some boys were challenged by reflection processes, they saw value in introspection.
- The program piloted through this project was refined and repackaged to guide eight immersion programs at Scotch College in 2018.

Key Readings

Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, Summer 97(74), 5-13.

Pluin, G. W., & Jorgenson, S. R. (2012). A reflection on the broader, systemic impacts of youth volunteer abroad programmes: A Canadian perspective. *Intercultural Education*, 23(1), 25-38.
doi:10.1080/14675986.2012.664751

Price, D. F. (2008). *An exploration of participant experience of the service learning program at an Australian Catholic boys secondary school* (Unpublished master's thesis). Australian Catholic University, Brisbane.

We were guests in these peoples' houses and these peoples' country... it's respecting people's privacy and the vulnerability that they're in.
(Louis)



"The other boys are really compassionate ... I probably learned as well that there's another level to my emotions. That I can show a lot more compassion ... I've found a new part of myself in a lot of the things that we did.... Probably this idea in my head that, like, especially with Aussie males, that like we all have to act tough and we're all so masculine and we can't like show a lot of emotions. But this trip has really flipped it on its head."
(Louis)