
Addressing the Challenges of Cross-Cultural Understanding through Service Learning in Higher Education: the Oman experience

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ABSTRACT Globally, teachers need to expand their knowledge of other peoples and cultures. As a case in point, Oman is challenged by a problem of separation between national and expatriate populations. Expatriate students attend either international or expatriate community schools, whereas Omani children can only attend government schools or Arabic/English private schools. The teacher education program at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in Oman was able to implement a service learning project that helped students cross cultural boundaries while improving their own English language skills. Using a mixed-method approach in data analysis, this study discusses the experiences of thirty EFL student teachers involved in the experiment. Expatriate teachers and principals had expressed a need for their students to learn more about Omani culture. In response, student teachers prepared 45 cultural kits that included written reports, presentations and artefacts, which they presented to classes. Not only did expatriate teachers and K-12 students learn about Omani culture, but more importantly, student teachers developed new cultural awareness about the expatriate populations with whom they seldom have an opportunity to interact or exchange ideas and cultural values. The 'ELT [English Language Training] Multicultural Awareness Transaction Model' has application potential not only in teacher education, but also in EFL or ESL classes where cultural exchange is important.

Introduction

Higher education institutions around the world are under pressure to respond to the massive and urgent demands of globalization at all levels, including economic, political, geographical, educational and cultural. If the institutions are to respond to these demands, a systematic change in education, especially in teacher education, is urgently needed. Along with the pressures of globalization, there are a number of human values and principles that are seen to be essential elements for survival in a globalized world. Thus, values such as tolerance, co-existence and social justice are simultaneously seen as important. It is imperative, therefore, that teacher education takes the lead in spearheading reforms that will equip our schools to meet these new demands. Globalization requires that our teachers understand and lead students to more complex intercultural awareness.

Context of the Problem: challenges to cross-cultural understanding

The Arabian Gulf region contains unique societies comprising national indigenous populations working alongside expatriate populations that have lived and worked in these oil-producing states for decades. In some communities, the expatriates constitute over 50% of the total population. While the expatriates work alongside or in parallel with the national population, they often live in isolation in separate neighbourhoods, and with separate schools. The 820,000 expatriates in Oman

live alongside 1,923,000 Omanis. The largest expatriate groups are Indian (356,850) and Pakistani (192,150) (Ministry of National Economy, 2008, 2009). The 1052 government schools enrol predominately Omani and/or Arabic-speaking expatriate children. Most expatriate children attend 132 private expatriate community schools, of which at least 11 are Indian; others are Pakistani, Sri Lankan, French, British, American, Egyptian, Bangladeshi, Philippine and International. While classrooms around the world are becoming more diverse (Dantas, 2007), classrooms in Oman most often reflect a single nationality or ethnicity, language and culture.

Children from individual cultures seldom interact, resulting in either ignorance or misperceptions about one another. The language barrier among these groups in Oman is crossed by using English, which is a second or foreign language for all but a minority of native-speaking expatriates. Within this context, the university interacts with all schools for field placements, in-service workshops and educational conferences. Expatriate teachers and principals often expressed a need for their students to learn more about Omani culture. At the time when university faculty were considering this request, they were also exploring ways to integrate service learning in their methods course offered to pre-service teachers.

Overview of Service-Learning Research in English Teacher Education

In the design of this project, the English language teaching faculty were seeking to accomplish two goals. The first was to provide authentic situations in which student teachers could communicate with others using standard English. The second goal was to use service learning to enhance cross-cultural awareness, mutual respect and appreciation of others.

Prior research that informs the design of this study has explored service learning as an instructional strategy in ESL (English as a Second Language), EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ELL (English Language Learner) classrooms, as well as its use in teacher education programs. As reported in Anderson (1999), 'educators at all levels report that well-designed and implemented service learning can help to address unmet community needs while simultaneously providing students opportunity to gain academic knowledge and skills' (p. 1). Service learning is generally defined to be teaching and learning strategies or approaches that integrate meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities (NSLCH, 2007). Bringle & Hacher (1996) also view 'service learning as a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and 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 civic responsibility' (p. 2). In addition, Anderson (2007) explains service learning 'as both a philosophy of education and an instructional method. As a philosophy of education, service learning reflects the belief that education should develop social responsibility and prepare students to be involved citizens in democratic life. As an instructional method, service learning involves a blending of service activities with the academic curriculum in order to address real community needs while students learn through active engagement in worthwhile projects. A growing body of research indicates that carefully planned and implemented service-learning projects can contribute to both K-12 students' and pre-service teachers' learning and growth' (p. 1).

A review of service-learning research in teacher education highlighted social as well as psychological and academic benefits for the student teachers (Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Root, 1997; NSLCH, 2007). Service learning is also seen as an approach that can enhance personal and social responsibility, self-esteem, moral reasoning and problem-solving skills (Conrad & Hedin, 1991), along with self-efficacy (Seals, 2000). Moreover, community-based service learning decreased the participants' sense of alienation and isolation (Howard, 1993; Waterman, 1997).

Also important to this study were prior investigations of multicultural service-learning projects along with more general investigations of the development of student teachers' cultural identity. Hale (2005) provides a comprehensive review of cultural studies, experiential instructional strategies, resistance and political pedagogy, and second and foreign language pedagogy related to service learning as an instructional strategy in language teaching. Hale concludes the article with her endorsement of the following service learning objectives (based on Sinbach, 1995, as cited in Hale, 2005), which provide a good foundation for our project:

- Expand students’ awareness and understanding students’ problems and their ability to address or personally overcome such problems;
 - Enable students to learn from a segment different to the one which he or she would normally interact with;
 - Break down racial and cultural barriers through students’ reaching out and building bridges between demographic groups;
 - Introduce students to an experiential style of learning;
 - Teach students the meaning of service, and creating understanding, independence, and humility;
 - Teach students tools of self-evaluation of critical institutions, social systems, and their impact on a given community; and
 - Further the acquisition of a foreign language, when with another culture.
- (Sinbach, 1995, p. 10, as cited in Hale, 2005, p. 6)

These learning objectives suggest that correctly designed service-learning projects could be effective in helping students not only to enhance their English language skills, but also to create an opportunity for the development of intellectual capacities and promote cross-cultural awareness.

Cultural Competencies in Service Learning

Despite extensive descriptions of service learning, Angelova’s (2006) review of research explains a lack of service-learning research measuring either cognitive or affective outcomes. The same lack of outcome measurement exists in the literature on cross-cultural awareness in language learning and service learning as related to cultural literacy.

Lindblom (2007) explores the meanings of terms such as cultural literacy, cultural awareness and global literacy within the context of how these concepts should affect his teaching of English to native speakers and second and foreign language learners. He suggests that English as a lingua franca is a communication tool that affords access to other cultures. A person’s use of English should go beyond anglophone political and identity borders to provide ‘continuous interchange among people of many nationalities’ (p. 100). He states that ‘one goal of studying English should be to examine the content of other cultures and languages while we examine the content of ours’ (p. 101). Alptekin & Alptekin (1984) suggest that English language teachers should devise a methodology which enables learners to use the language actively as a product of their own needs. They want students to have opportunities to use English in relation to local situations and international contexts which are culturally and cross-culturally relevant to students’ lives. They emphasize that teachers should be able to demonstrate cultural pluralism as a frame of mind. Tseng (2002) builds upon Alptekin & Alptekin’s theories suggesting a progressive theory of culture that highlights participation, social transaction and tension in enhancing the acquisition of the target language. Each learner brings a personal culture or cultural perspective to the language lesson. Culture is not static knowledge, but is created as learners work to generate their own meanings of words and instructional materials. Tseng recommends that students recognize their own culture, engage in transactions with other cultures, and reflect on all of the cultural stances and information. Six instructional activities suggested by Tseng are: presentations of aspects of a learner’s individual culture; telling family stories; confronting taboos; exploring eating habits and cuisine; exploring arts and crafts; and journal writing in the target language – English. Through these activities, learners will be able to actively create an expanded perspective and understanding of the target culture, and at the same time enhance their language proficiency.

Angelova (2006) found that student teachers who tutored and taught classes for ESL students in the United States self-reported ‘increased understanding and appreciation of people with diverse backgrounds and life situations’. Survey and journals were the major data collection instruments. Reitzel’s (1999) student teachers were required to listen to cultural stories told by the K-12 students’ family members. The cultural knowledge helped student teachers improve the outcomes of their ESOL tutoring sessions. While the goal of the Oman project was different, the researchers agreed with Reitzel’s (1999) explanation of the value of service learning and cultural knowledge acquisition: ‘The best way to learn the principles and practices of intercultural communication is to reflect on real experiences that promote responsible, effective, authentic learning. Future teachers

need to construct their knowledge and skills in intercultural communication through active self-assessment in real contexts' (p. 1). Prior research has indicated that a service-learning project could be useful in bridging cultural boundaries.

Service Learning: ELT Multicultural Awareness Transaction Model

The ELT Multicultural Awareness Transaction Model [1] includes specific activities used in this project that are recommended by other researchers. Tseng (2002) suggests the use of cultural presentations and journal writing. Reitzel (1999) and Lear & Abbott (2008) recommend analysis of assumptions and honing of communication skills. The inclusion of service learning is most directly related to Alptekin & Alptekin's (1984) quest for a methodology that provides 'EFL learners the opportunities and occasions to express their own cultural needs and ideas in English' (p. 17). The model represents the elements of this research project designed to enhance cultural awareness across multiple cultures wherein English usage is not the end linguistic goal. The goal in Oman is the maintenance of multiple languages, heritages and cultures. Future studies might explore its applicability for EFL or ESL in a monolingual society.

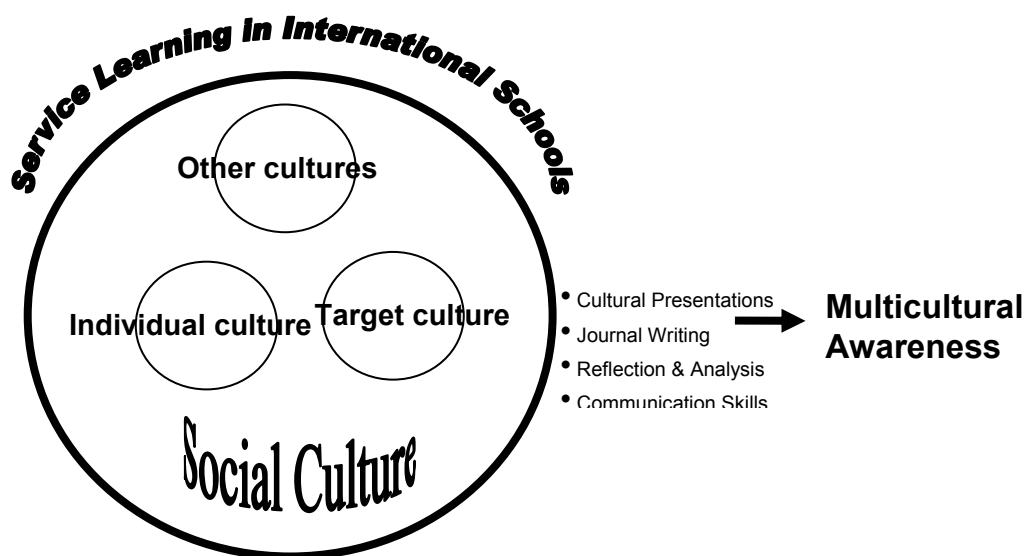


Figure 1. ELT Multicultural Awareness Transaction Model.

The purpose of this study was to use a service-learning project to accomplish two goals: to provide an opportunity for EFL student teachers to communicate in standard English, and to enhance cross-cultural awareness. The students were able to present in standard English and to hold conversations with the expatriate teachers in standard English. This was a curricular goal assessed and reported elsewhere (Al Farsi & Al Khartiry, 2007; Issan & Washburn, 2007; Issan et al, 2008; Neisler & Stevens, 2008). On the other hand, research data support the fact that expatriate teachers and students valued the presentations about the culture that surrounds them. More importantly, student teachers created new personal cultural understandings of the international context in which they live. The faculty wanted to know how and why student-teacher attitudes changed so dramatically when the focus of the project was not on them. The changes in their thinking, however, are consistent with those explained by Tseng (2002). However, his model did not extend to such internationally diverse interactions. He saw the American ESL classroom as linguistically and culturally diverse but existing in a single target language environment. In contrast, Oman maintains and encourages a multilingual international living and learning environment. English is taught and spoken as the lingua franca within the context of very multilingual and multicultural communities. These findings suggest that learners have individual cultures which change through transactions with the target culture, international cultures, and the social culture in which they

interact. The students, teachers and student teachers in the study reported enhanced awareness of the multiple cultures of the people living in Oman. Figure 1 reflects the elements of the project.

Guided by the review of the literature, the researchers decided to use a service-learning project or projects to give EFL student teachers an opportunity to communicate in standard English and to provide a service whereby the expatriate community can learn about the culture of the Omani people.

Method

The steps in this project follow the basic model for a service-learning project (NSLCH, 2007). First, the project was aligned with the curriculum and course goals. To facilitate the integration of the project into the English Methods of Teaching course, an early decision about the basic design of the service project was made by the research team and the course faculty.

After the college faculty decided on the focus of the study, they contacted six expatriate schools to host the thirty student teachers enrolled in the English Teaching Methods course. The schools were all located in Muscat, Oman and included two Indian schools, and one Philippine, one Bangladeshi, one Sri Lankan, and one native English-speaking school. After the principals agreed that their schools would be partners in the service-learning projects, 41 teachers were assigned to participate in the project. The study participants comprised 71 respondents: 30 student teachers and 41 expatriate adults. Table I shows the distribution of the study sample according to gender within each group.

Groups	Male	Female	Total
Expatriate Adults	22	19	41
Student Teachers	6	24	30
Total	28	43	71

Table I. Study sample by gender and group affiliation.

The faculty at SQU and the teachers at the expatriate schools decided that the 30 student teachers would present information about Omani culture to K-12 students in expatriate community schools. The service-learning goal was defined as teaching of Omani cultural topics to international students who knew little of the culture of the country in which they were living. Therefore, through teaching these topics, student teachers were expected to gain a deeper understanding of their own culture (they had to select a topic, research it, and prepare a presentation and a lesson plan, communicate and share with others and, in the process, learn about cultures of people with whom they were interacting). Similarly, it was anticipated that the service that the student teachers would provide to the expatriate community schools would require them to use both written and oral English. As an attempt to overcome cultural barriers and to ensure student teachers' personal involvement and interest, the expatriate communities and Sultan Qaboos University student teachers were involved in determining the appropriate cultural materials that could be used at the service-learning sites. Thus, it was imperative that the service-learning experience be built on the basis of true partnership founded on team spirit, mutual respect, dialogue, willingness to share and transparency.

Research Questions

At this point in the process, research questions were formulated. Specifically, the project was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What do the expatriate communities consider to be important and of interest to them with regard to Omani cultural topics?
2. What do SQU student teachers involved in the service-learning experiment perceive to be important aspects of Omani culture that they would like to share with the expatriate communities?

3. Are there any significant differences in the perceptions of expatriates of their need for and interest in Omani cultural topics according to nationality, age and gender?
4. How did the service-learning experience improve cross-cultural awareness between the expatriate communities and the student teachers?
5. To what extent did the service-learning experience promote an appreciation of cultural differences and elimination of the stereotypes of expatriate communities and the student teachers?

Because of the interactive nature of service-learning projects, related research also needs to be interactive, flexible and fluid, as do the data collection and analysis methods selected. A mixed-method approach was therefore used for data analysis. To answer research questions 1-3, data were collected by a questionnaire that was developed for this purpose. The data for questions 4 and 5 were collected from a reflection questionnaire that was distributed to student teachers after experiencing service learning. Descriptive statistics were used for analysing the quantitative data, while content analysis was used for the qualitative data.

Quantitative Data Analysis

To facilitate decisions about what Omani cultural topics would be taught, expatriate teachers from the six schools and student teachers participated in the design of the project, including selection of the Omani cultural topics, format and content of the presentations, and scheduling. To facilitate topic discussions, an exploratory survey method was used to collect the required data. Omani student teachers were each asked to suggest an Omani cultural topic that they would like to write about and share with the expatriate community residing in Oman. Forty-five topics covering diverse themes were identified. The main themes were: Culture and Customs, Arts, Crafts, Clothing, Traditions and Celebrations, Animal Life, Tourism, Production and Commerce, Traditional Suqs, Waddis in Oman, and Caves in Oman.

The topics were then arranged in a questionnaire form where student teachers were asked to indicate their perception of the level of importance of these topics to expatriate communities, using a five-point Likert scale. The refined topics were then developed into a questionnaire for the adult expatriate population members, who were asked to indicate their perceptions on a five-point Likert scale using two different dimensions: *Importance* and *Interest*. The topics were then pilot tested on a group of elementary-level students from an expatriate community school in Muscat after being validated by a number of curriculum specialists and practitioners. Expatriate teachers also wrote additional topics that they wished to see added to the list. Some of these topics were included in the final topics the students selected.

Need for and Importance of Omani Cultural Topics for the Expatriate Community

When the student teachers involved in the service-learning experiment were asked to identify topics that they would like to share with the expatriate community in Oman, a list of 44 topics was compiled. In answer to the first question of the study, student teachers were asked to indicate their perceptions of the degree of importance of these topics to the expatriate community in Oman. As indicated in Table II, the results of the analysis show that the student teachers' perceptions of the expatriates' needs for cultural topics obtained an overall mean of 4.41, with a standard deviation of 0.4573, indicating a high level of agreement among student teachers on the importance of the selected topics (means ranging between 2.67 and 4.43). The most important topics were shown to be: Omani History and Culture in East Africa (mean 4.43); Tourism (mean 4.40); Omani Traditional Handicrafts (mean 4.30); and Eid Celebrations (mean 4.20).

Groups	n	Mean	SD
Expatriates' self-proclaimed level of importance	41	4.75	.54829
Students' perceptions of expatriates' importance	30	4.41	.4573
Expatriates' self-proclaimed interest	41	3.96	.515

Table II. Means and standard deviations for groups: student teachers and expatriates.

Then the expatriate participants were asked to rank the topics in terms of their importance and usefulness. Table II compares the rankings of the expatriates and the student teachers in terms of the importance of the topics. There are similarly high rankings by the majority of the expatriate respondents, with a mean of 4.75. The majority of the topics were therefore considered to be important with means ranging between 2.85 and 4.37. The four most highly ranked topics in terms of importance are: Omani History and Culture in East Africa (mean 4.43); Bedouin Life (mean 4.27); Omani family relationships (mean 4.37); and Traditional Architecture (mean 4.15).

The expatriate communities' expression of interest in cultural topics was shown to be equally high (mean 3.96), with means ranging between 2.98 and 4.39. The items of highest interest were identified as: Omani History and Culture in East Africa (mean 4.39), History and Benefits of Falajes (water channels) (mean 4.32), Caves in Oman (mean 4.29), and Bedouin Life (mean 4.27).

Regarding differences between expatriates and student teachers in their perceptions of the importance of Omani cultural topics, an independent *t*-test analysis produced no significant differences between the two groups (Table III).

Groups	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	<i>T</i>	Sig
Student teachers	30	3.6300	.45734	.087	.14435
Expatriates	41	3.7716	.54829		

Table III. Independent *t*-test results of expatriates' and student teachers of the expatriate communities' need for Omani cultural topics.

Differences in Expatriates' Need for and Interest in Omani Cultural Topics according to Nationality, Age and Gender

Data collected from the expatriate communities were also further analyzed across age groups, nationalities and gender to check the degree of agreement with regard to the level of importance given to the topics as well as their level of interest in these topics. Results indicated all the means and standard deviations to be relatively high, showing similar interests and needs among the expatriate sub-groups. *T*-tests were then performed to check if statistically significant differences could be detected as a result of age, nationality and gender of the expatriate respondents. These results, too, showed that no significant differences could be attributed to the variables studied.

Teaching the Omani Cultural Lessons

After each student teacher selected a topic, s/he conducted research, wrote a research paper, collected artefacts, and prepared lesson plans and presentations in collaboration with their peers and in consultation with the mentor teachers assigned at the expatriate schools. Faculty from the Language Center in the university campus assisted with report revision and English language usage in the presentations. The presentation kits were then pooled so that each student teacher could present a different topic each week. During the semester, additional topics were added to be used for specific occasions, such as Omani National Day and religious holidays.

The students spent one day a week at the expatriate schools assisting in classroom activities decided upon by the mentor teachers. Every week, each student teacher presented one of the cultural topics to his/her class. Student teachers also observed peer presentations. The presentations lasted for 12 weeks, and each service-learning session was followed by a reflection session where students shared their experiences.

Expatriate Cultural Awareness, Perceptions and Motivation

After the completion of the lesson presentations, surveys were completed by the expatriate teachers and student teachers. The numerical analysis of these data indicates that the Omani cultural presentations were of value and that expatriate K-12 students gained new insights into several aspects of Omani culture. In response to an open-ended question, expatriate teachers wanted to learn about twenty-eight new topics about Omani culture. It is interesting to note that

the extra topics requested by the study sample were mainly those that sought a deeper understanding of Oman as a land, a society and a culture, and of different aspects of the Omani people's history and way of life. The requested topics included, among others: Sea and Marine Life in Oman; Tourism Development - Benefits and Problems; Bahla – its Supernatural Connection; Languages Spoken in Oman; Etiquette in Oman; Cultural Diversity in Oman; Omani Music; Architecture; and Literature. This list, comprising 28 new items in total, can be categorized into the following nine themes:

1. Omani Arts, Crafts and Costumes
2. Omani Folklore
3. Omani Folk Tales
4. Tourist Places
5. Traditional Celebrations in Various Events
6. Domestic Animals, Birds and Plants
7. Historical and Geographical Monuments
8. Traditional Omani Food
9. Languages and Dialects in Oman

From the formal data as well as from informal conversations and the continuing partnership, it was clear that the expatriate school communities valued the presentations.

The open-ended questions were used to collect data to answer the research questions 5 and 6. An analysis of the students' reflections revealed that the recipients enjoyed the following topics most: The Bedouin Life; The Effect of Omanis on Zanzibar Society; Omani Folk Tales; Jabbali Language; and Myths and Legends in Omani Culture and Tradition.

On the issue of the benefits of these cultural presentations, the student teachers were unanimous in their view that the participating schools benefited in a variety of ways. Following are some edited comments from the survey answers.

The students and teachers in the target schools showed interest and were enthusiastic to learn more about Omani culture and traditions.

K-12 students and teachers started to relate more to the Omani cultural topics, comparing them to similar topics from their own [expatriate] cultures.

They were not only interested and willing to learn more, but they also gained cultural information. They knew very little or nothing about Omani culture, even though in a number of cases they had been in Oman for several years.

The children benefited a lot from [my] presentations as afterwards, they searched for new information about Oman and its history and culture and they kept asking [me] questions and were astonished at some of [my] answers!

The children were eager and excited to be learning about Omani culture.

As a result of the service-learning project presentations, the student teachers felt that they had contributed greatly to bridging the cultural gap. Student teachers, expatriate teachers and K-12 students at these schools began to compare Omani culture with elements of their own cultures. This process reflects the creation of 'an identity which is able to transcend the ... confines of the native and target cultures by understanding and appreciating cultural pluralism by virtue of the new language' (Alptekin & Alptekin, 1984, p. 19). In this case, English as the new lingua franca for all participants served as the tool for the type of cultural transactions explained by Tseng (2002).

Qualitative Data Analysis

One other instrument was used to answer questions 4 and 5. A reflection questionnaire was distributed to student teachers at the end of their service in their respective sites. Semi-structured reflection questions were designed to collect information about the student teachers' reflections vis-à-vis their experiences in sharing their culture with others. These student-written entries produced complex multi-layered data that needed to be sorted and coded (Lincoln & Guba, 1985;

Neisler, 1994; Quezada, 2010). In some ways these data were ethnographic, providing insight into the interactions between teachers and students of different cultures. In other ways, the study was phenomenological, providing data about the subjective reality of the changes in student teachers' cultural perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In fact, research questions 4 and 5 address both of these foci.

The first step in the analysis process was to sort the data from the seven survey questions according to the elements of research question 4 and 5 (Byrne, 2001). The data were analyzed twice. First, each of the three authors read the reflection answers separately and coded the answers to the seven questions independently. Codes were given to the data as the themes emerged. Then all the data for a specific question were compared against these emergent themes. Then the team met to compare and revise codes and themes. Next, the group reread and recoded the data, and verified the data against the emergent themes. This data analysis process resulted in the identification of the following themes: relationships; professional growth; respect; and cultural awareness.

Student Teachers' Cultural Awareness, Perceptions and Motivation

The student teachers' cultural awareness, perspectives, stereotypes and appreciation changed as a result of the service-learning project experience. Analysis of the student teachers' journal entries provided the major data to answer the primary research questions about appreciation of cultural differences. The data for the themes discussed below come from the student teachers' written responses to the seven open-ended questions. They wrote about new relationships and personal cultural awareness development in their answers to all questions.

Relationship Formation

First, student teachers formed close relationships with teachers and students. Some of the relationships were described as friendships, while some others were characterized as respectful and others as professional. Edited comments follow by category.

Friendships

I became warmly attached to the students and was happy when I arrived at the school.

I made so many friends from many nationalities.

The participants were kind and I got close to them.

The teachers like to mingle with the student teachers

We became more integrated with the participating communities.

Respect

As well as being treated as fellow teachers, the student teachers felt that they were respected. They had not expected the results they were shown and were further surprised that respect enhanced their ability to teach. One student teacher explained that 'I was able to work in a multicultural environment because of the care and respect staff and students in the school gave me.' The formation of these personal relationships surprised many of the student teachers. Over half of the students wrote that they expected people to be negative and to laugh at Omani culture.

Professional Growth

The student teachers felt that the teachers and students at the expatriate schools had helped them develop their professional skills. They valued the feedback from the teachers while also feeling that

they had been treated as 'real' rather than as student teachers. The following quotes provide examples of teacher actions that students felt aided their professional growth:

I was able to exchange information with the teachers.

I wrote some techniques that the teachers used with the students.

I discovered new ways of teaching by working with the teachers.

The research team also observed that the student teachers were treated more as peers than is usually seen in field placements. However, no data were collected from the teachers, and no systematic field observations were recorded for this topic. One hypothesis for later exploration is that these student teachers were seen as experts in their topics.

Change in Cultural Awareness

The last emergent theme provides more detail of expectations, stereotypes and the acquisition of new knowledge. Each of the edited quotes that follow provides a different aspect of the ways in which individual student teachers reacted to the cultural transactions precipitated by their service-learning cultural presentations.

Students and teachers started to relate more to our topics, comparing them with similar topics from their own country of origin.

I thought the students would be lazy, but they were active and liked learning new things about our culture.

I would do this again at other sites for more and different experiences.

I had an inaccurate stereotype of Indian culture. I discovered their great ways of teaching and how clever they are.

Several student teachers reported that they 'learned about other cultures and got to see a truer picture of the culture of the schools we worked with'.

My stereotypes of foreigners in general and Philippines people and Asians in particular proved false.

I had perceived Indians as manual workers, but in reality found them to be brain workers too.

In contrast to what I expected, the students were very polite, highly motivated and kind.

I think such rich cultural exchanges should be carried out on regular basis.

The changes in student teacher attitudes and increased cultural awareness are consistent with previous findings from service-learning teacher education research. Research that has looked into the effect of service learning on teacher education programs has shown similarly positive and generally promising results. Flippo et al (1993), Green et al (1994), Wade (1995) and Seals (2000) maintain that pre-service teachers who are involved in service-learning experiences show gains in their commitment to teaching and in their self-efficacy, and reported feelings of compassion and concern. Similarly, Root & Batchelder (1994) found that service learning enhanced the complexity of students' thinking. Wade (1995) discovered that pre-service teachers who participated in service learning made gains in their feelings of connection to other people and in their attitudes towards community involvement. Moreover, those who served multicultural communities appeared to have revised their own attitudes toward multicultural curricula and teaching strategies adapted to diverse student populations. As Seals (2000) explains, service learning can be used to create opportunities for equipping teachers, or, more broadly, 'citizens', with the skills to work for the public good.

Conclusions

The expatriate community school staff and students are interested in cultural exchanges. Combining the original list of topics with the teacher-suggested topics provides a comprehensive coverage of topics that not only are considered to be of interest to the student teachers, but have also been endorsed as being important and interesting to expatriate communities. The overall high level of agreement between the various groups involved in the study gives the researchers further confidence that the topics had a positive impact on the groups involved. These topics are not only important for the service-learning project, but they might also be used to promote cross-cultural understanding in different public and business sectors in Oman.

In addition, the following conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the reflection questions:

1. There is a high level of agreement between students' and expatriates' perceptions of the importance of, and level of interest in, the topics presented to the expatriate community.
2. The existence of a wide and serious cultural divide between different nationalities and the need to bridge them was unanimously recognized by student teachers and site participants. However, fear of approaching each other and taking the initiative to bridge these gaps was observed. Nevertheless, there was willingness and enthusiasm on the part of the expatriate community schools (students and teachers) to share their cultures with Omani student teachers.
3. Service learning was found to be an effective tool in bringing about change in participants' attitudes, overcoming their fear of approaching others, and encouraging the sharing of information about their cultures with the Omani student teachers.
4. At the same time, service learning also contributed greatly to bringing about change in the Omani student teachers' negative stereotypes of expatriate communities, especially the Asian and western ones.
5. Service learning was seen to have led to the development of warm and intimate relationships between the Omani student teachers and the children of different nationalities.
6. The student teachers expressed a desire to be involved in similar activities in the future.

The willingness of the expatriate community to collaborate at different levels in support of the service-learning experiment has in itself created a positive sharing environment. The schools that participated in the project were pleased to contribute to the professional development of Omani student teachers. They welcomed the enthusiasm with which student teachers shared their culture, as well as the opportunity to share similar aspects of their own cultures. The dialogue and exchange between the groups has presented new opportunities for further collaboration. This project has helped to build bridges over the cultural divides that currently exist.

Service learning has proved to be an important component of the Omani pre-service teacher preparation program. The findings indicate that well-designed service-learning projects can provide effective solutions and authentic situations in which student teachers can achieve curricular learning outcomes. The researchers found, as did Westrick (2004), that service-learning projects also have the potential to help students develop intercultural sensitivity.

Note

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APPENDIX

List of Cultural Topics Developed by Student Teachers

Culture and Customs

Jabbali language
Bedouin life
Traditional houses
Folktales
Omani history and culture in East Africa
Traditional games
Marriage in Oman
Omani families' relationship
Importance of neighbours in Omani Society
Superstitions
Traditional medicine

Arts, Crafts, Clothing

Omani traditional handicrafts
Traditional Omani jewellery
Women's traditional clothes
Men's traditional clothes
Omani pottery
Art and artists of Oman

Traditions and Celebrations

Weddings
Eid Celebration
Traditional dancing: celebrations
Traditional occasions
Traditional birthday party

Food

Omani Halwa: recipe and production
Omani food

Animal Life

Domestic animals
Birds of Oman
Camel breeding
Camel racing
Raising horses in Oman

Tourism

Muscat: blend of the old & new
Forts and castles
Museums
Hot springs: locations, types & uses
Tourism in Al Sharqiya
History and benefits of Falajes

Production and Commerce

Rose water
Traditional market
Palm trees: production and uses
Traditional suqs
Frankincense: its history and uses
Caves of Oman
Tourism in Sohar
Waddis in Oman

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