Key Factors in Encouraging and Empowering Undergraduates to Practice Service Leadership through Extra-curricular Service-learning Practicums

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Introduction

• The value of internships

  – Internships are very **popular** among students, firms, and educational institutions (Degravel, 2011) and they generate **positive effects** for all the players involved in this activity, interns, educational institutions, host organizations, and the larger environment (Degravel, 2011, Verney et.al. 2009; Harris & Zhao, 2004; Ryan et.al., 1996).
Service Leadership

Service leadership (Chung, 2012; Farnsworth, 2007; Grönfeldt & Strother, 2006) is conceived as a prosocially-inclined, non-hierarchical form of leadership (James et al, 2007, Kouzes & Posner, 2003), with organizational members from the frontline upwards sharing leadership responsibilities in furthering the service mission of their organization (Grönfeldt & Strother, 2006, p.6-7).

In service leadership settings, those in higher positions aim to cultivate an organizational spirit that inspires employees to build and contribute skills, ideas, and knowledge (Grönfeldt & Strother, 2006, p.9).
Practical Aims

• To set up an internship or ‘practicum’ experience that offers opportunities for students to practice service leadership rather than just doing routine work or applying specialist techniques.

• To understand how to do this better.
NGOs & Social Enterprises as Suitable Partners in Service Leadership Development

These organizations typically have flat hierarchies, in which most employees and volunteers have direct service responsibilities. (As compared with commercial contexts) service learning internships may expose students to greater variety and greater challenge, with higher expectations for use of initiative and expertise, and may provide more meaningful work with extended consequences (Rehling, 2000).

- We thus anticipated that NGOs & SEs would provide a fertile context for the development of Service Leadership attributes. They comprised the great majority of our partner organizations.
Conditions for the Development of Service Leadership Attributes

- Holyoak (2013) anticipates both individual and organizational factors that may affect internship/practicum effectiveness. She suggests investigating how to create the “optimal conditions for development”.

Overall Research Question: RQ1
- What conditions and processes (i.e., good arrangements, good practices) are effective in supporting and facilitating students in practicing service leadership?
Developmental Tasks

- Cupps & Olmosk (2008) note that if interns are given only menial jobs, the resulting motivation and quality of work may suffer.
- Often service learning internships expose students to a wider range of tasks, challenge them with enhanced expectations for initiative and expertise, and provide them with more meaningful work that has extended consequences (Rehling, 2000).

RQ2

- How can any requirement to perform routine background office work be effectively balanced with (rather than drown out) opportunities and responsibilities that empower and enable students to practice service leadership?
Students’ Own Developmental ‘Readiness’

- Interns’ attitudes to learning and motivation to learn may be key factors (Roberts, 2006; Holyoak, 2013) in reducing or enhancing the development achieved during the practicum.

RQ3
- How important is the student’s ‘developmental readiness’ as a factor yielding relatively fruitful or less fruitful practicum experiences?
**Appropriate Roles of Partner Organization Representatives (PORs)**

- Holyoak (2013) suggests that characteristics of the supervisor (e.g., willingness to provide support) can reduce or enhance the development achieved during internships.

**RQ4**

- How can PORs play effective roles (as seen by themselves as well as by students) in supporting students’ development as service leaders, such as creating appropriate background conditions and atmosphere/climate, by providing suitable coaching/facilitation, etc.?
Figure 1: Setting up the Practicum

Building relationships for the practicum
Alignment of expectations of partner organizations (PO) and learning goals of Practicums

Recruiting students
- Screening interviews by host institution
- Selection interviews by POs
- Alignment of expectations of POs and students

Preparing students
- Briefing workshop
- Setting up mini-missions

The Practicums
The Practicums: 6 weeks in 2013 & 8 weeks in 2014 between May & August

Outcomes
- Enhanced service leadership attributes for the practicum student
- Enhancement to the partner organization's service capability

Complementary sharing and self-assessment tasks
- Self-reflective journals (weekly in 2013 & bi-weekly in 2014)
- The interim meeting: sharing learning achievements and experiences with other service leaders
- Final learning report
- Feedback from PORs
## Profile of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution - Nature of business (Number)</th>
<th>Respondents (Gender / Year of Study) (Number)</th>
<th>Study Major (Number)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year 2013</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Eco-tourism (1)</td>
<td>Year 1 Female (5) Year 2 Female (5) Year 1 Male (2)</td>
<td>Social Sciences (6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Public Relations (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Visual Arts (1)</td>
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<td>- Education Centre (1)</td>
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<td>Chinese (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Tertiary Education (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Accounting (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Social Welfare (4)</td>
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<td>Business (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total : 8 POs</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total : 12 students</strong></td>
<td>Cultural Studies (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year 2014</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Eco-tourism (1)</td>
<td>Year 1 Female (1) Year 2 Female (9) Year 2 Male (4) Year 3 Female (2)</td>
<td>Social Sciences (9)</td>
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<td>- Social Welfare (7)</td>
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<td>Contemp. English Studies (1)</td>
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<td>- Education Centre (1)</td>
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<td>- Tertiary Education (1)</td>
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<td>Translation (3)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total : 10 POs</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total : 16 students</strong></td>
<td>Cultural Studies (1)</td>
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<td>Philosophy (1)</td>
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Theme 1: Appropriate Responsibilities

• Meeting real community needs
• Facing difficulties and tackling problems while shouldering responsibility for resolving them and not merely following orders or procedures
• Practicing service leadership attributes and not merely clerical or technical skills
Theme 2: Co-educator Presence and Supportiveness

• Providing orientation and systematic background training
• Available for ad hoc, timely discussions about emerging issues
• Providing guidance, coaching, constructive feedback, and review opportunities
• Encouraging students to contribute (e.g., new ideas)
Theme 3: Developmentally Ready Students Were…

- Willing to initiate activities or proposals, rather than waiting passively for instructions.
- Prepared to step out of the ‘comfort zone’ to face challenges.
- Proactive in building relationships/ offering help with co-workers and service recipients.
- Oriented toward getting things done with other people rather than through solo technical tasks.
- Compatible in terms of the values and mission of their host organization.
- Prepared through some prior situational familiarity/ practice-knowledge base.
Summary: The Themes

- Appropriate Responsibilities
- Supportive site supervision
- Developmental Readiness

- Opportunities to practice Service Leadership
- Positive Learning experiences
- Contributions by students/ benefits for the host
Summary of Findings

• Practicums in non-profit organizations provide a potentially powerful platform for students to practice service leadership.

• Lack of one or more of the 3 critical factors (readiness, support, appropriate responsibilities) may nonetheless lead to an ineffective practicum experience.
Practical Implications

• Allow for an initial period of adjustment by the practicum student.

• Readiness: Select students who understand that beyond background orientation they should not wait to be instructed on what to do, and who are willing to try out Service Leadership roles and learn from feedback thereon.

• Site Support: The partner organization needs to understand that supportive site supervision is necessary even for developmentally ready students, and must commit to providing the necessary support, feedback and recognition.

• Responsibilities: Students must be empowered to lead projects or ‘mini-missions’ that can make a difference