

Exploring Community Partners' Perspectives of the Nature of Service-Learning Partnerships in Egypt

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While some attention has been paid to service-learning partnerships as the unit of analysis, past research on such partnerships focused primarily on the impacts of the collaborations and was based mostly in U.S. contexts. The underrepresentation of community voice in existing literature further complicates the problem. This qualitative study addressed these gaps by exploring community partners' perspectives on the nature of service-learning relationships in Egypt in light of Enos and Morton's (2003) framework. Findings indicated current transactional relationships with aspirations for transformation. Community partners' voices provided lively examples of how transactional and transformative service-learning relationships may become actualized in practice. The outcomes of this study promote an enhanced understanding of the barriers to developing transformative partnerships between university and community partners. Data provided can be used by partners to enhance the design and implementation of service-learning collaborations. The outcomes of this study are especially useful for partners wanting to elevate their partnerships to transformation.

Keywords: *service-learning; community partners; transformative partnerships*

Following Cruz and Giles' (2000) suggestion to focus service-learning research on partnerships as the unit of analysis, a few studies examining these partnerships have been conducted (e.g., Basinger & Bartholomew, 2006; Miron & Moely, 2006; Worrall, 2007). Yet, the need for more research on university-community partnerships for service-learning has been identified by many scholars (e.g., Clarke, 2003; Jacoby & Associates, 2009). Furthermore, past research has focused largely on service-learning partnerships in U.S. contexts, and thus little is known about such partnerships in non-Western contexts. The present study was designed to address these gaps through examining community partners' perspectives on the nature of service-learning partnerships with a university in Egypt. Specifically, the study aimed to answer the following question: What does the nature of service-learning partnerships look like in terms of Enos and Morton's (2003) transactional and transformative relationships?

This inquiry is important in several ways. First, it highlights community partners' perspective, which is relatively underrepresented in the literature. Understanding community perspective is important for establishing effective and sustainable service-learning partnerships between the community and the academy. In this regard, Sandy and Holland (2006) cautioned that disregarding the community perspective may result in misunderstanding, miscommunication, lack of trust, and less cooperation among higher education constituents and community partners. Second, this study is distinct in that it investigates the *nature* rather than the *impact* of service-learning partnerships. Exploring the nature of service-learning partnerships is especially significant since the vast majority of past research assessed the impacts of these partnerships. The sections that follow discuss relevant literature, introduce the theoretical framework informing this study, describe the analytic method employed, and present the study's findings.

Literature Review

University-Community Partnerships for Service-Learning

Establishing partnerships between universities and their local communities can result in substantial change on campus and in the community (Harkavy, 2009). In this regard, Swick (2001) asserted that mutual learning and growth can be realized when higher education, students, and the community work with each other. Many scholars advocate for campus-community partnerships to become a more intentional element for achieving the service mission of higher education (e.g., Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett 2000; Boyer, 1990; Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Enos & Morton, 2003; Jacoby, 2003). The involvement of institutions of higher education in their communities can take several forms, such as structured community service and volunteer opportunities for students, service-learning courses, research focused on community concerns, resource sharing, as well as training and continuing education programs for representatives of community based-organizations (Scheibel, Bowley, & Jones, 2005).

Significantly, Bringle and Hatcher (2002) argued that service-learning is the most meaningful way to build campus-community partnerships. In justifying their argument, they noted that service-learning embraces the fundamental mission of higher education—teaching and learning—and that it engages students and faculty members in academically meaningful service activities that address issues in their communities. They also explained that service-learning recognizes professionals of community-based organizations as co-educators. In the same vein, Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett (2000) noted that service-learning leads to more forms of civic engagement which can promote other scholarly activities. Likewise, Zlotkowski (1996, 1999) asserted that service-learning entails continuing dialogues among all partners to ensure successful delivery of its courses.

Campus-community partnerships have become linked to service-learning both as a means for providing students with service experiences and for assessing the impact of service-learning (Bailis, 2000; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Dorado & Giles, 2004; Gelmon, Holland, Seifer, Shinnamon, & Connors, 1998; Jacoby, 2003; Jones, 2003). Bailis (2000) explained concisely that “service-learning and partnerships are two sides of the same coin” (p. 5). Likewise, Jacoby (2003) asserted that “service-learning must be grounded in a network, or a web, of authentic, democratic, reciprocal partnerships” (p. 6).

Sandy and Holland (2006) emphasized campus-community partnerships in relation to service-learning, explaining that it is hard to envision how service-learning may take place in the absence of community-campus partnerships. Similarly, Kelshaw, Lazarus, and Minier (2009) asserted that partnerships are necessary for the initiation, implementation, and development of service-learning experiences. Similarly, Cruz and Giles (2000) postulated that partnership between the university and the community is the infrastructure that facilitates both service and learning in service-learning. They suggested that the partnership is an intervening variable in examining particular learning and service impacts and is an outcome in itself. Cruz and Giles further explained that focusing on the partnership as a unit of analysis provides a framework for generalization across communities and also facilitates studies examining the changes in both service and learning.

Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (2011) defined a partnership as “a close mutual co-operation between parties having common interests, responsibilities, privileges, and power.” The use of the term “partnerships” varies in the literature; many scholars use the term in a general sense to refer to any type of interaction while others distinguish between partnerships and relationships. For example, Bringle, Clayton, and Price (2009) differentiated between the two terms “relationships” and “partnerships,” suggesting that the former is a broad term that could be used to refer to all kinds of interactions among persons, whereas the latter refers to the relationships that are characterized by three specific qualities: closeness, equity, and integrity. For the purposes of this study, the term “partnerships” is used to refer to all types of interactions between university and community partners

in service-learning projects. The discussion now turns to the theoretical perspective guiding this study.

Theoretical Framework

Transactional and Transformative Relationships

Inspired by the work of Burns (1978) on transactional and transformative leadership relationships, Enos and Morton (2003) proposed a theoretical perspective for examining campus-community partnerships as they move from transactional to transformative relationships. They argued that these partnerships have the ability not only to accomplish specific tasks but also to transform individuals, institutions, organizations, and communities.

Enos and Morton (2003) posited that transactional relationships operate within existing structures in which partners come together because each has something that the other perceives as useful. These relationships are instrumental and project-based. They are characterized by limited commitments and minimum disruption of the regular work of the organizations and their constituents. By the end of transactional relationships, partners feel contented with the outcomes, but not much has changed. Transformative relationships progress in less defined manners, there are expectations that things may be altered, and order may be disrupted. These relationships are characterized by genuine and long-term commitments. Partners reflect deeply on their organizations and examine the way they define and comprehend problems. According to Enos and Morton, transformative relationships can lead to the development of new values and identities for partners. Enos and Morton's theoretical perspective serves as an analytic guide for this study, which aimed to explore the nature of service-learning partnerships, transactional and transformative, at a private university in Egypt.

Method

This study was grounded in the qualitative paradigm, which is constructivist and naturalistic in its approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Research questions in the qualitative paradigm often begin with "what" and "how" (Creswell, 1994). This approach was deemed convenient to investigate the research question in this study: What does the nature of service-learning partnerships between a private university in Egypt and community-based organizations look like in terms of Enos and Morton's (2003) transactional and transformative relationships?

Data Sources

The study was conducted at XUX¹, a single, small, private university in Egypt. At the time of the study, the University enrolled approximately 6,203 students, 5,055 of whom were undergraduates and 1,148 were graduates. XUX had an established service-learning program called the Community-Based Learning (CBL) Program. The CBL Program officially began in the fall of 2008 with several academic units offering CBL courses at four schools: Business, Humanities and Social Sciences, Global Affairs and Public Policy, and Sciences and Engineering. The number of courses has grown from 33 in the 2008-2009 academic year to 46 in the 2009-2010 academic year, increasing the number of faculty involved from 23 to 32. Similarly, the number of participating students rose from 660 to 920 (see Table 1 for the development of the CBL Program).

Table 1. Overview of the CBL Program at XUX

	Academic Year	
	2008-2009	2009-2010
Number of classes connected to the CBL Program	33	46
Students involved in CBL projects	660	920
Number of service hours, averaging 15 hours of service per student	9900	13800
Number of faculty members integrating CBL in courses	23	32
Number of departments engaged	12	12
Number of schools	4	4
Number of CBL capstones proposed to the Core Curriculum	6	1

A specific type of purposive sampling approach, with special/unique cases, was employed in data gathering. Purposive sampling focuses on the depth of information generated by the cases, and the selection is based on expert judgment (Teddlie & Yu, 2008). In this study, participants included five community partners representing several community-based agencies that collaborated with XUX on various service-learning projects. Pseudonyms were used to refer to these professionals; since all of them were Egyptians, Arab names were used. The first letter of each community-based organization was used as a pseudonym for each participating agency. The researcher strived for a maximum possible variation of community partners in terms of gender, age, organization type and size, and period of collaboration between their organizations and XUX in service-learning courses. As such, the sample included three males and two females, middle-aged and older individuals, and representatives of small, medium, and large not-for-profit organizations. Also, the community member participants represented organizations with different missions (see Table 2 for an overview of the participants and their organizations).

Table 2. Community Partners Overview

Pseudonym	Organization	Mission	Date of Inception
Alaa (الاء)	T	Community development through education	2008
Ali (علي)	A	Community development through arts	2005
Kareem (كريم)	R	Wide range of charity and development activities	1999
Laila (ليلى)	A	Community development through arts	2005
Omar (عمر)	C	Traditional skills revival	1999

One of the participants, Omar, was the founding owner of a crafts revival and development center, C. At the time of this research, C was a small company that had 15 staff members working alongside the owner. The company's primary mission was to preserve and/or revive traditional Egyptian skills, such as cotton weaving, pottery, wood, and leather. Also, this company aimed to generate income for impoverished groups in Egyptian society who possessed these artistic talents and had to work constantly to provide basic necessities for themselves and their households. Additionally, C aimed to raise awareness about beautiful art works which exist in Egypt but often go unnoticed. This company had been collaborating with the CBL Program since its inception in 2008. Specifically, it hosted several CBL courses including Sociology, Proposal Writing, and Photography. Significantly, Omar acted as a liaison between the CBL Program at XUX and several NGOs and local businesses in Egypt.

Alaa was one of the founders of a medium-sized NGO, T. This nonprofit was founded in 2008 with two major goals: to retain children in this poor area who dropped out of school to work in technical workshops in order to support their families, and to provide elementary education to children who had never gone to school. During the time of this research, T employed 38 full-time and two part-time staff members. XUX students collaborated with T on several service-learning projects, such as conducting a community needs-assessment, developing a fundraising proposal to satisfy those needs, painting homes for the households within the community, and spending time with the children whom the organization served.

Kareem was the founder and Chief Executive Officer of a large and influential nonprofit organization in Egypt, R. This nonprofit helps alleviate the suffering of several disadvantaged groups in Egyptian society, including the poor, elderly, and individuals with special needs. The nonprofit had sporadic relationships with XUX in service-learning projects mainly through the student club affiliated with R at the University. Examples of the projects included students collecting used clothes and monetary donations from the campus community and distributing them in impoverished communities served by R.

Ali and Laila represented a small nonprofit, A. At the time of the study, this nonprofit was operated by 20 full-time and five part-time staff members, as well as 20 animators who facilitated art and informal educational activities. This community-based organization had long-standing collaborations with the CBL Program at XUX since its inception in 2008. Compared with all the organizations that collaborated with the University in the CBL Program, the partnership between this NGO and the CBL Program witnessed the most frequent interactions. Many students from different classes at XUX had interacted with A in a wide range of projects and in different capacities, such as volunteers, interns, and employees. Examples of the collaborations between A and XUX included activities in which the University students were paired with children at the organization. Each pair read a story and then worked on a project on how to express this story in any type of artistic manifestation, such as a play or a picture. In another event, children were paired with XUX students and taught them how to play a musical instrument that they had learned at the organization.

Data were gathered from participants through one-on-one interviews. During these interviews, the research participants were asked to reflect on the nature of their service-learning partnerships with XUX in light of Enos and Morton's (2003) transactional-transformative framework. The individual interview protocol included semi-structured questions. The development of the questions was informed by the theoretical framework employed in the study as well as by pertinent literature (Bringle et al., 2009; Clayton et al., 2010; Cruz & Giles, 2000; Dorado & Giles, 2003; Morton, 1995). The protocol included a total of 16 questions. Examples of these questions include the following:

- "Were your goals and those of your organization aligned or at odds in service-learning partnerships?"

- “In your perspective, are the benefits associated with service-learning partnerships balanced for all involved partners, or do you think that one partner benefits significantly more than the others?”
- “In your perspective, are the costs, if any, associated with service-learning partnerships balanced for all involved partners, or do you think that one partner experiences significantly a higher cost than the others?”

Participants were first invited to participate in the study via e-mails. Phone calls were then used to provide additional details about the study and to schedule the interviews. Interview sessions were scheduled at the participants' convenience, and each interview averaged 90 minutes. Two of the interviews were conducted at the community-based organizations with whom participants were affiliated, while three interviews were conducted on the University campus.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded using an Olympus digital voice recorder (VN6200 PC), and a few notes were taken manually during the interviews. Data were coded first manually and then electronically using MAQUDA (version 10) software. Structural (Saldaña, 2009) and focused (Charmaz, 2006) coding were employed in the first and second cycle coding, respectively.

Findings

The theme of transactional relationships along with aspirations to engage in transformative partnerships emerged from discussions about the defining characteristics of current service-learning partnerships and community professionals' visions for future service-learning collaborations with XUX. This broad theme involves two main components: current transactional service-learning collaborations and aspirations for future transformative service-learning partnerships with XUX. Table 3 presents a summary of this theme.

Table 3. Community Partners' Perspectives of Service-Learning Relationships

Current transactional, along with aspirations for transformative, partnerships

1. Current transactional relationships
 - a. Lack of students' visits
 - b. Limited communication with university partners
 - c. Clear relationship boundaries and short-term relationships between the University and community partners
 2. Aspirations for transformative partnerships
 - a. Nature of service-learning activities
 - b. Relationship goal alignment
 - c. Friendly relationships with university partners
 - d. Positive attitudes toward the CBL Program
 - e. Hopes for long-term service-learning partnerships
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Current Transactional Service-Learning Relationships

The first component, transactional relationships, is demonstrated in the data when participants described their current service-learning collaborations with XUX in terms of the frequency of student visits to community organizations, communications with the University partners, scope of collaborations, and impacts of these relationships on students and communities.

Lack of Students' Visits

Community professionals stated that XUX students paid only a few visits to their organizations during the academic semester. Recalling the number of visits students paid to community organizations, Omar said:

I saw them [XUX students] three or four times, that's all. . . . So, we meet once for the presentation and go twice for the visits . . . and then a closing session where the students will come and present their outcome. So, I see them three or four times during the semester and I never see them again.

Alaa expressed a concern about the lack of visits students paid to her organization, noting that such few visits would inhibit students from attaining optimum learning experiences through service-learning projects:

I am not sure it's [the service-learning experience] educating them. It's again exposure. They [XUX students] didn't come enough. They didn't spend enough period[s] in the area to be educating for them, to know how people think, how people behave, to know their motives behind this specific behavior. But, when they come five or six times per semester, it's exposure. It's not that long of time that they would be educated, but it would open their eye how things are going in Egypt.

Similarly, the paucity of students' visits to community organizations led Ali to worry about community perceptions of these visits and to question the value of service-learning experiences to student learning:

I wonder, do students learn more when they go into the community? Do they get real experience and exposure? I don't know if they do that or not. So, it's puzzling for me. Do they learn? Is this process enough for them or it is simple? Simple that they just go, come, and come out. Do we need more interaction to get full exposure and it is not just knowledge from the superficial knowledge, it's real inside knowledge. It is not a visit. So, the puzzling thing is: Is it helpful that you go and visit a community like a tourist and leave or you should either sit and make a difference and communicate for several times and have a certain task for a time and have an impact or just a visit would be nice or it's just a touristic thing?

Limited Communication with the University

Participants' comments on their communications with XUX partners provided additional evidence for transactional service-learning relationships. For example, Ali indicated that the communication between his organization and XUX was very limited: "It was a communication to get things done. There was no continuous communication, if you are talking about the staff." Similarly, Omar explained that it was difficult for him to accurately assess the impact of service-learning partnerships on students because of his limited interactions with them and their faculty: "The thing is I don't have any contact to the students, [and] professors that deal with them."

Clear Relationship Boundaries

NGO professionals indicated clearly that there were well-defined boundaries between community organizations and XUX and that partners maintained strong institutional identities. Alaa's comments were quite illustrative in this regard. Reflecting on the collaborations between her organization and XUX, she asserted, "So, when they [XUX students, faculty, or staff] come, of course, we are in different lands because XUX is XUX and NGO and slum area [are] different." In describing student roles and service-learning activities and impacts, she stated:

They [XUX students] were not that heavily involved in our plan so that they will interfere or be different than our line of thought. They came for three, four, five times and they made an impact and that's it. No harm of it and *no really impact on us in the long-term*. Yes, the houses [were] painted and the people were pleased.

Aspirations for Transformative Relationships

The second component of this theme, aspirations to engage in transformative relationships, provides significant evidence that community partner professionals aspire to establish transformative relationships with XUX. This component is demonstrated in partners' comments on service-learning activities, the informal relationships they had with XUX staff, their attitudes toward the service-learning program, as well as their calls for long-term service-learning relationships with XUX.

Nature of Service-Learning Activities

The nature of service-learning projects provides evidence for the likelihood that the partnerships between XUX and community-based organizations may progress toward transformational relationships. Participants indicated that service-learning activities were carefully planned in a way that ensured both clear connections to students' courses and true benefits to community members. Additionally, several of these activities went beyond providing basic services to engaging the NGO's clients in meaningful activities. Ali described one of the service-learning activities for an arts course as follows:

We sat together and we planned for an intervention where . . . it was going to be events with the kids, with the students are coming to the area and everyone has a magazine something like that and sitting in groups with the kids. And then, start read with them and start make them read and then start to think how to translate this magazine into a play and then start to rehearse for the play, a play or any kind of manifestation. So, you can draw, you draw and then you make a play. So, they went through reading into group readings, doing drawings related to the magazine or the book and then having a play and then present it. . . . And then after having this kind of activities at the end, every group makes a presentation about the play to the other, the rest of the group.

Relationship Goal Alignment

Participants felt that, for the most part, the goals of community-based organizations and those of XUX were aligned. In this regard, Kareem noted that preparing students for good citizenship is a mutual goal for his organization and XUX. Reflecting on service-learning pedagogy, Kareem said that "[it] is good education and it's part of XUX mission Good citizenship is part of XUX mission. We teach students to become good citizens. That is why XUX is interested." Similarly, when asked whether or not her goals of the service-learning partnerships were harmonious with those of XUX, Laila confirmed that "they [university partners] understand our goals very well." Alaa provided a similar answer, noting, "Of course, we agreed on the kind of activities. They didn't impose their activities. We agreed. We sat together and we agreed on what to be done. Then, we

took it a step further.” Similarly, Ali noted, “It was aligned. We sat together and we thought how best we can utilize this. And we agreed and they came and do what we have asked them to do.”

Friendly Relationships with University Partners

Although service-learning relationships were characterized by minimum interactions among partners, community partners were connected to University staff through cordial and informal relationships. Such friendly relationships were instrumental in establishing service-learning collaborations and could make it easy for the program to progress toward transformational relationships. Alaa reflected on the smooth relationships she had with the director of the service-learning program, noting, “Usually, we don’t sit. Yomna [the real name of the director was replaced by a pseudonym] call[s] me on the phone and we agree. And, I know Yomna from before. That’s why it’s very informal for us.”

Positive Attitudes toward the CBL Program

Even though participants spoke frankly about the weaknesses of the service-learning program, they held positive attitudes toward the program and expressed optimistic views about its growth. For instance, Omar attributed the shortcomings of the service-learning relationships to the early stages of the program and believed that in time these relationships would develop:

Definitely they [university partners] are going to the right direction. They need a little more time to adapt, to adjust to the right direction, to maximize the outcome. . . . I am positive towards the [service-learning] program. . . . I think that this is a great program that still needs a little time to mature.

Hopes for Long-Term Service-Learning Partnerships

Community partners’ repeated comments about their hopes for having long-term service-learning partnerships with XUX provided additional powerful evidence for the potential of these relationships to progress toward transformation. When asked whether she preferred project-based or continuous service-learning partnerships with XUX, Alaa answered, “I would like to have long-term partnerships.” Similarly, Laila responded, “Of course long-term. Every season, every month . . . we want sustainability for anything we do. This is the main goal.” Likewise, Omar expressed his preference for long-term partnerships: “I am interested in continuing working with the students.” Some community partners even believed that the positive outcomes of service-learning projects were dependent on long-term relationships. For instance, Omar related the positive outcomes of service-learning relationships to the continuity of the program and suggested that students should spend more time in, and become more involved with, community organizations: “I always believe that after a while if this goes continuous, outcome will be positive . . . more involvement, more time, and that would reflect on the outcome.”

Discussion and Conclusion

In light of Enos and Morton’s (2003) conceptualization of partnerships as they move from transactional to transformative relationships, this qualitative study aimed to investigate community partners’ perspectives of the nature of service-learning partnerships with XUX, a small private university in Egypt. As shown above, service-learning collaborations with community-based organizations at XUX lean more toward transactional relationships. However, there is evidence that these relationships can progress toward transformational partnerships. This evidence is demonstrated by participants’ comments about the activities of their partnerships, their informal relationships with the program director, their aspirations for long-term relationships, and their positive attitudes toward these partnerships regardless of the costs involved. This evidence is also

supported by Dorado and Giles (2004), who contended that relationships with the potential to progress from the aligned path to the committed one may take a short time to do so because partners' commitment motivates them to overcome any initial difficulties.

The small sample size is a major limitation of this study. However, it should not eclipse the richness and depth provided by the participants, especially considering that the study was conducted in Egypt at a time of intense political turmoil. In this study, community partners' views were generally harmonious in the sense that there were not major differences in their perspectives based on the size of the organization, age of the partnership, or the frequency of interaction between the University and their respective organizations. That is why undertaking future studies with bigger sample sizes could enable us to better understand the impact (if any) of these factors on the nature of service-learning collaborations in higher education. Also, conducting future studies at different types of universities may help assess the effect of the institutional type—public versus private—on the nature of these collaborations. Given the current political scene in Egypt, investigating the impact of the political context on the nature of service-learning relationships would be an additional, potentially fruitful line of research. Outcomes of such studies would promote our understanding of the factors affecting transactional or transformative service-learning partnerships in higher education.

This study increases the knowledge base on, and promotes understanding of, service-learning in Eastern contexts, and thus it fills a critical gap in the literature. The findings should encourage and facilitate comparative studies of engaged scholarship in broad geographic locations. Additionally, the study's outcomes offer useful data on the process of these collaborations, which can be used to enhance the design and implementation of university-community partnerships for service-learning, especially for the partners wanting to elevate their partnerships toward transformation.

Note

1. All names of the institutions and individuals were removed for confidentiality purposes.

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