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Photovoice as a means of self-reflection: portraying sociocultural adaptation in service learning

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a preliminary finding of sociocultural adaptation experienced by two pre-service teachers (PSTs) during a service-learning program. They wrote photo-voices, a photo-mediated self-reflection, to share how they adapted to the sociocultural life of their first two-week service learning. Using the U-heuristic analysis model, this study found three contributing factors that helped them build sociocultural adaptation skills: peer support, self-motivation, and assimilation. Meanwhile, the PSTs' photo-voices also shared their concern when maintaining sociocultural engagement, such as language differences and indigenous traditions. The findings suggest intercultural awareness development of PSTs to build sociocultural adaptation in the context of service learning.

KEYWORDS

Emotion; photovoice; service learning; sociocultural adaptation

Introduction

Service learning has been long integrated into the higher education curriculum to facilitate students in civic engagement. It has been enacted as a part of experiential learning where students can apply what they learn in the classroom to empower communities (Chambers and Lavery 2017). It is also a powerful tool to build student leadership skills (Ferdiansyah, Winarno, and Ardhita 2022). Although service learning has contributed to developing students academically and personally, some studies have shown that it can potentially cause psychological and behavioural issues. Soong (2013) reported that five pre-service teachers who participated in an international service-learning program experienced identity construction and intercultural communication challenges. Most recently, Nurfaidah et al. (2020) found that students who

conducted service learning during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced confusion and fear because they had limited access to their assigned area. This empirical evidence suggests that students participating in service learning must build an awareness of 'sociocultural adaptation development'.

Ryba et al. (2012, p. 94) define adaptation as 'a dynamic process of negotiation between maintaining a psychological homeostasis and engagement in sociocultural practices of the host site'. This process of negotiation and engagement in sociocultural life has been widely documented using a cultural adjustment lens. In this regard, Lysgaard (1955) proposed the U-curve hypothesis of cultural adjustment, which included a process of honeymoon (feeling excited), culture shock, recovery, and adjustment. Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) highlighted the first two processes as optimism and frustration phases when a sojourner begins involved in a new community and environment. Previous studies have used the U-curve model as a parameter to examine international students' experience in adapting to sociocultural life (Menziez and Baron 2013; Rhein 2018; Soong 2013). However, portraying the sociocultural adaptation of students in service learning in a local context from the U-curve model framework is also worth further investigation. Thus, this study offers unique insight into how pre-service teachers engaged in community service experienced sociocultural adaptation.

Context

The present study involved two female pre-service teachers named Mawar (pseudonym, 20 years old, English education) and Melati (20 years old, Mathematics education). They were in the sixth semester of an Islamic state university in East Java, Indonesia. They enrolled in a service learning program with twelve other undergraduate students with different majors (Religion Education, Accounting, Islamic law, etc.). Both of them came from different cities (urban) and underwent their service learning in a semi-rural area (nearly 300 kilometres from their hometowns). They undertook the service-learning program for five weeks and worked on several projects such as community service, education, health literacy program, etc.

In this study, the participants' voices of living and adapting to the sociocultural life were portrayed using photo-voice. In the context of reflective pedagogy, photo-voice, digital photography mediated



Image 4. Language difference.

Indigenous practice

We live in a semi-rural area. Although it takes between 20 and 30 minutes to a nearby city, the village has electricity, an Internet wi-fi connection, and houses with a bathroom and toilet. It is surprising to see some women go to a small stream or river to wash clothes and do chores. There are sometimes four to five women who do the washing there. I think it is unusual and challenging to adapt. However, my friends and I decide to follow to wash clothes there. While doing the washing, we find this helpful practice to gather information about sociocultural life and community needs from women's perspectives.

(Mawar)

The last photovoice by Mawar depicted how indigenous practices (washing clothes and doing the dishes) enacted by the local women differed from her practice at home (see [Image 5](#)). However, she joined these practices to make her adapt to the new sociocultural life.



Image 5. Indigenous practice.

Discussion and implication

This study reports on preliminary findings of how pre-service teachers participated in service learning and explored their sociocultural adaptation of their first two-week placement in the assigned area. Their photo-voice depicted how peer support, self-motivation, and assimilation help the pre-service teachers adapt to new sociocultural life. It can be seen that peer support helps them with personal and professional needs. This finding is congruent with the finding of previous study conducted by Ferdiansyah, Winarno, and Ardhita (2022) that service learning promotes strong bonds among fellow participants and fosters collaboration. It also implies that engaging in sociocultural practice builds motivation to learn new things, planting chilli, and 'doing' assimilation, for example. A similar finding was also reported by Soong (2013) that a sense of belonging contributes to building motivation in service learning. On the other hand, language differences that made the participant passive when communication was enacted using local language and indigenous practice, washing clothes in a river, become two identified challenges in their sociocultural adaptation. Therefore, building awareness of intercultural communication is necessary to mediate sociocultural adaptation and avoid ethnocentrism or stereotypes (Barbuto, Beenen, and Tran 2015; Kusumaningputri and Widodo 2018).

These preliminary findings suggest that students participating in service learning should be given a briefing on sociocultural adaptation before placement in an assigned area. Furthermore, faculty members who serve as academic supervisors during the implementation of service learning can build awareness of intercultural communication during sociocultural adaptation process. Future research investigating sociocultural adaptation for depth and breadth in service learning studies is highly suggested.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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