

Creating Local Engagement Opportunities for International Students: Supporting International Student Success through Local Engagement

Peter E. Wanyenya, Chaya E. Go

The University of British Columbia (BC), Vancouver, BC, Canada

Contact Info: peter.wanyenya@ubc.ca

For decades, scholars, primarily from the United States, have intellectually engaged with and promoted experiential learning (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Vince, 1998) as a core aspect of higher education. In recent years, in parallel with internationalization efforts across, global campuses including those in Canada has led to the rapid expansion of local and global service learning programs in North America and beyond. Whether in formal for-credit courses or extracurricular engagements, these programs are attributed to the recognized value of promoting civic and social responsibility among students, and enhancing student learning of academic content in “real-life” contexts, reports the University World News (Langworthy, 2008). Similarly, Forbes Education reports that experiential learning in the real world also serves to close the skills gap between employers and graduates, as confirmed by the hiring practices of the international business community (Ma, 2015). However, while experiential learning has increasingly become a “must-have” in a quality North American higher education, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* also cautions that the simultaneous push for international engagements can pose ethical considerations given the divides of power and privilege among students (Fischer, 2015). Which highlights differences in students who can afford such placements, racialized or minority student populations who may not, and the host community members the students engage with during the experience (Fischer, 2015). In the context of a Canadian university’s increasing promotion of diversity on campus, advancing the call for global citizenship, and of attending to both the global and the local, what possibilities lie for University of British Columbia’s (UBC) international scholars to learn from their global lived experiences and positionalities?

The University of British Columbia’s International Scholars Awards Program (ISP) forms a diverse, engaged, and caring community of international undergraduate students who hold major merit and need-based awards. These awards recognize students who demonstrate superior academic achievement, leadership skills, community involvement, and financial need. In September 2014, the ISP piloted a Community-Based Experiential Learning (CBEL) component for its 29 first-year scholars from 17 countries of citizenship to explore the pedagogical and career preparedness potential for international students engaging with local initiatives in Vancouver, British Columbia (BC). The ISP CBEL team shared the social change model of leadership with the scholars during their pre-placement sessions to challenge their assumptions about volunteering, charity, and the city of Vancouver, B.C. Scholars were assigned to interdisciplinary teams of 2-5 to draw from a variety of disciplinary knowledges and skill sets in their on-site engagement. Community partners were in turn invited to serve as co-educators for scholars to learn about the complexity of local community in relation to their international experiences.

After the completion of its first program cycle, the ISP CBEL team’s evaluations concluded with fresh insights as to how the CBEL program has allowed for exciting new ways for UBC international scholars to strengthen their understanding of what it means to be working “from here.” The CBEL program allowed for the first-year scholars to draw from their own past experiences of community engagement in cross-cultural contexts, their interdisciplinary skills, and apply them in a new city where they now live and study in, while learning the complexities of social inequities in realities outside of the university. Global citizenship, becomes less an ideal or rhetoric, but embodied learning experiences for international scholars who continue to learn grounded in realities of their new home.

While we have developed more intentional and accessible opportunities for international students to begin to understand and engage with the complex configuration of local communities in Canada, we hope that we have allowed them to see their potential role in addressing these issues—locally and globally—and aim to support their ongoing community-based engagement, skill development, and networking as part of our broader institutional experiential learning agenda for them and all students to foster career and professional knowledge, skills, and competencies.

References

- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Fischer, K. (2015, May 29). A global education opens doors, but many are shut out. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/>
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Kolb, A. Y., & Kolb, D. A. (2005). Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 4*, 193-212.
- Langworthy, A. (2008, February 24). US: Service learning expanding rapidly. *University World News: The Global Window on Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.universityworldnews.com/>
- Ma, J. (2015, May 15). How unconventional, experiential learning is reshaping higher education. *Forbes Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com>
- Vince, R. (1998). Behind and beyond Kolb's learning cycle. *Journal of Management Education, 22*, 304-319.