

Learning about Social Diversity in a Community-Based Research Service-Learning Project: Changing Students' Conceptions and the Impact on Individual Behaviour

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Abstract

Diversity learning experiences of students occurring in experiential learning settings in higher education are regarded as very valuable to enhance moral development and support students to be or become active citizens in an increasingly diverse society. While the general impact of service-learning and community-based research and the positive influence on students' skill acquisition has been extensively studied, there are limited empirical studies that focus specifically on diversity aspects. The aim of our investigation was to expand this empirical basis. Our qualitative interview study was conceived as an accompanying research of a community-based service-learning project dealing with social inequality, poverty and homelessness in the Ruhr area. We described the course participants' conceptions of social diversity, investigated students' experiences with social diversity during coursework, asked how the understanding changed or was expanded and what relevance this had for students' behaviour. We examined these questions by conducting qualitative online interviews (N=13) via Zoom with the course participants. The audio data were coded by qualitative content analysis using inductive and deductive approaches to answer our research questions.

Keywords: learning diversity, student conceptions, higher education, experiential learning, community-based research, service-learning

1. Introduction and Background

1.1 Service-Learning, Research-Based Learning, Diversity

Experiential learning, as well as research-based learning, are modern constructivist approaches to teaching and learning which are becoming increasingly important at universities and colleges across disciplines. In the course of a new understanding of teaching and learning, there is a shift from teacher-centred teaching as instruction to a focus on the learner as an active learner [20]. In the context of experiential learning theory ELT, learning is understood as a process of adaption or a cycle that encompasses the whole person. Learning by experience as well as reflection about thoughts, feelings, achievements and behaviour plays a central role in this approach. Learning processes are always embedded in the interaction between the individual and their environment [20,21]. Different learning forms are summarised under the "umbrella term" experiential learning; one of them is service-learning. Service-learning combines academic learning with a service to the community [13] whereby, according to [12], a distinction should also be made here among different types of service-oriented experiential education programmes. According to [12], the intention of SL should be to focus equally on the service provided to the community and the learning process of the participants. Variations such as the indirect model of service-learning have also been described [7].

Research-based learning is an approach to teaching that has a direct link to research. Students become active researchers, familiarising themselves with the individual phases of the research cycle, applying research methods, and compiling results in reports under the guidance and supervision of an experienced lecturer and researcher [34].

We consider both forward-looking approaches and have combined aspects of both in a study project on social inequality, poverty and homelessness in the Ruhr area, as part of a teaching grant from the university. The project deliberately focussed on a socio-geographical issue that is highly relevant in the Ruhr region. Although homelessness and other signs or manifestations of poverty are images that are part of everyday life in many city centres in the Ruhr area, little attention is paid to this topic. Students often have little knowledge and awareness of life on the margins of society, the causes, the



extent of this phenomena, realities of life. This was the starting point to deal intensively with this topic for one year and to investigate the diversity learning outcomes of the students involved.

There is no universal definition for the concept diversity and its dimensions. The underlying phenomenon is complex, which makes a definition difficult [1]. Several understandings of the term are therefore used in different contexts and should be assessed against this background [6]. Today, it can be seen as a key concept in political, social and cultural sciences [1], intensively discussed in politics [33]. It is also used by organisations and in the business world as a management tool to increase diversity and inclusion at workplace, to see value in difference and prevent discrimination [29]. Diversity is often defined in terms of the (manifested and invisible) differences between people [1,16, 33]. The uniqueness of each individual is recognised [1] and diversity is thereby understood as counter-term to uniformity [6].

We used the four layers model of diversity as a conceptual framework for our work on students' diversity learning outcomes. The focus here is on the personality of each individual, which represents the core, the uniqueness of each individual. Otherwise, a distinction is made between internal, primary dimensions of diversity, areas over which we have little or no influence e.g. age and external, secondary dimensions of diversity, which can be named as external influences. The fourth layer is the organisational dimension, e.g. the position you hold in a company. [14,15].

1.2 Literature Review

Looking specifically at students' diversity outcomes, the results of several empirical studies show that service-learning can contribute to scrutinize and rethink students' beliefs and assumptions about the population they work with as well as students' notions about social issues by which the population group is affected [2,4,5,10,13,19,30]. In individual cases, however, a reinforcement of existing prejudices was also observed [10]. The authors of [5], for example, investigated in a multimethod study if participation in a service-learning project at the University of North Carolina in collaboration with a community initiative to provide help for the homeless raised awareness by the participating students and changed their notions of the problem and the persons affected by this. Other studies demonstrate that views of diversity changed during a service-learning experience and that some participants developed a more complex, differentiated understanding of the topic [3,10,19,31]. By immersing yourself in a world that is different to your own, through personal contacts, interactions and relationships that developed, talking to the people, recognising similarities and differences between the worlds, themselves and the people served, through the practical experience gained and the reflection on it, social inequalities and injustices are recognised, understood in their complexity and can be placed in the (political) context. This is often linked to the perception that something needs to change, the desire to contribute making the world a better place, what other research found out [5, 25,28,31]. As [25] stated based on the investigation of undergraduate college students' experiences in Arizona and California, service-learning not only has a positive output at the individual level but also leads to a benefit for society. The ability to put yourself in the other person's shoes and understand complex societal problems is an important step to develop empathy. [28,35] provided empirical evidence that taking part in a service-learning experience contributes through personal interactions to the development of empathy. Furthermore, researchers were able to demonstrate for service-learning projects with teacher candidates serving in diverse, heterogeneous communities that the intercultural competence and sensitivity increased [17]. A more comprehensive review of the literature on diversity-related outcomes of service-learning experiences on the student level is provided by [18]. The results were: "tolerance of difference, stereotype confrontation, recognition of universality, interactions across difference, knowledge about the served population and belief in the value of diversity" [18, p.6]. [32] emphasises, that a broader view on service-learning and diversity effects generally makes sense, which goes beyond the individual level of the participating students. In addition, analysing the outcomes for the community and the organisation, as well as the examination of group compositions in service-learning courses, also appears to be important [32]. A general analysis of the outcomes of service-learning is provided by the comprehensive literature review 1993 – 2000 of [11].

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to identify and classify different conceptions and meanings of the term social diversity among students (1). In addition, we wanted to investigate in which work situations students, as participants in a bachelor degree course in human geography which combined elements of service-learning and community-based research on social inequality, poverty and

homelessness, perceived aspects of social diversity as significant (2). According to the analysed literature on diversity learning effects in service-learning courses [2-5,10,11-13,18-19,25,28,30-32], the objective was also to examine whether these conceptions have undergone a significant change and how these looked like (3). Finally, we were interested in finding out whether the learning experiences with diversity aspects have resulted in longer-term changes in students' views and behaviour (4).

1.4 Concept and Structure of the Course

The aim of the course was to bring together bachelor students of geography from diverse backgrounds to work on an overarching socially highly relevant topic in collaboration with community partners. The course concept was project-based, newly developed and combined elements of the research-based teaching and learning approach with the service-learning approach. The university financially supported the development and initial implementation of this new course concept through a teaching grant in the university programme "research-based teaching and learning". The course could be chosen as an elective course by the students in the "study project" module from several courses with a conventional course concept. The very heterogeneous composition of the course participants worked in three self-assembled project groups, each on a topic defined in collaboration with community partners, social organisations, which was relevant for the students and as well was intended to provide added value for the everyday work of the partner organisations. The predetermined topic area was social inequality, poverty and homelessness, with a regional focus on the Ruhr area as an old industrialised region that has now developed into a knowledge region with new economic pillars but is still struggling with a variety of problems. The course content was prepared theoretically in advance based on extensive literature work and a secondary data analysis in order to focus specifically on two case study locations. The responsible senior lecturer accompanied the coordination processes with the partner organisations. The work in the heterogeneously composed teams was moderated, and students' experiences gained during the project were reflected in special sessions. In line with the service-learning pedagogy approach, a form of experiential learning, the aim was to offer a variety of rich learning experiences that offered the opportunity to reflect on one's own views, prejudices and habitual behaviour.

2. Methods

For the purpose of our study, we used a qualitative approach to deeply explore the course participants' complex conceptions of social diversity and their different experiences with social diversity during the work in the community-based research service-learning course. Due to the complexity of the phenomenon to be investigated, the small empirical basis of existing studies and the small sample size, the implementation of quantitative measures did not appear to be adequate [8]. According to the research focus, the approach of the qualitative interviews can best be described as phenomenological research [8]. The 13 participants of our study were aged 21 to 27 years, 5 male and 8 female geography students in the bachelor's degree programme at the Ruhr University Bochum who participated in the community-based research service-learning course in the years 2019 and 2020. 11 were born in Germany, of which 10 in the Ruhr region, 2 in other European countries. Participation in the study was voluntary for the students and informed consent was obtained.

The willingness to participate and the interest in the study were high, with only two students of those who completed the course deciding not to take part. As one of four sub-studies, the study on social diversity was integrated into a more comprehensive overall social science study as accompanying research for the course and the newly developed teaching concept funded by the university.

The principal investigator of the study was also the senior lecturer responsible for the course and the course concept developer. A trained student research assistant conducted the qualitative interviews via the Zoom conference system with the study participants in July 2020 at the end of the course period, which lasted over a year. We used an interview guideline and asked to the topic area diversity 12 open narrative-generating questions plus maintenance and specific follow-up questions [22] to grasp the students' understanding of social diversity, their experience with social diversity, changes in their views and the effects of these experiences. The interviews, which also covered the topics of the three other sub-studies, lasted between 32 min and 60 min, the language was German. In one interview, some of the questions were answered in English. We audiorecorded the interviews. In addition, an interview postscript sheet was filled out by the interviewer to describe the communication



situation and record further observations during the interview. The interviews were fully transcribed verbatim [9]. We used qualitative content analysis following Mayring to analyse the data [26, 27]. For each individual research question the content analytical units were defined before start coding [26]. To work as closely as possible to the text material and to eliminate the researcher's pre-understanding as far as possible, in line with the basic understanding of the openness of qualitative research, we used the method of inductive category formation. As coding unit, the smallest component of material which can be coded (sensitivity) we defined the clear meaning component [26]. While coding the data for research question 1, we used mixed content analysis procedures and combined inductive and deductive approaches [26]. Coding and data analysis was software-supported with the MAXQDA Analytics Pro software (version Release 22.8.0) [23, 24]. We then merged some of the codes initially obtained from the data material and summarised some of these into overarching themes [24].

3. Results

First, we would like to summarise the most important results of our qualitative interview study according to the four research questions asked. The focus here is particularly on the presentation of the categories (main themes) developed from the interview material by inductive coding and the corresponding frequencies (in relation to the occurrence in documents). Second, we would like to present exemplary interview quotes to illustrate the main themes and to support the arguments of our analysis.

3.1 Course Participants' Conceptions of Social Diversity

In this section we summarise the results of RQ1. The course participants' conceptions of social diversity can be assigned to the following categories (a) dimensions of diversity (b) characteristics of a diverse society (c) social diversity is a reality in Germany (Table 1). All participants (13) described aspects that are related to the four layers model of diversity from Gardenswartz & Rowe [14,15]. More detailed results show that all students referred to the internal dimension of diversity, followed by the external dimension according to this model.

Descriptions relating to the characteristics of a diverse society were the second most common (8 out of 13 interviews). One participant also stated that social diversity is a given reality in German society.

Table 1. Frequencies of main themes and subthemes – course participants' conceptions of social diversity

Main Themes and Sub Themes	Documents	Percentage (valid)
Social diversity is reality in Germany	1	7.7
Characteristics of a diverse society	8	61.5
A colorful mixture	1	7.7
Appreciation of the individual	1	7.7
Acceptance	2	15.4
Openness, open-mindedness	1	7.7
Mutual enrichment	1	7.7
Equal valuation, equal treatment	2	15.4
Integration plays a significant role	1	7.7
Conflicts	3	23.1
Dimensions of diversity	13	100.0
Personality	4	30.8
Internal Dimensions	13	100.0
External Dimensions	8	61.5
Organisational Dimensions	1	7.7
Analysed documents	13	100.0
Total of coded segments	49	100.0

3.2 Students' Experience with Social Diversity during Coursework

When looking at activities and work situations in which aspects of social diversity played a role during the course (RQ2) participants mentioned mostly encounter with literature & theory (39%, 5 out of 13 interviewees), collaboration with community partners (31%, 4 out of 13 interviewees) and the preparation of the empirical data collection (23%, 3 out of 13 interviewees) (Table 2).

Table 2. Frequencies of main themes – students' experiences with social diversity during coursework, main themes with single occurrence are not reported

Themes	Documents	Percentage (valid)
(would have been) of importance when conducting interviews	2	15.4
Preparation of empirical data collection	3	23.1
Diversity plays a role in all aspects	2	15.4
Selection of case study sites / social area analysis	2	15.4
Encounter with literature & theory	5	38.5
Analysis of (quantitative) data	2	15.4
Teamwork	2	15.4
Collaboration with community partners	4	30.8
Analysed documents	13	100.0
Total of coded segments	38	100.0

With regard to working in heterogeneous teams during the project course, one participant remarked, for example:

"Perhaps in terms of the work situation, simply when it was basically about teamwork. Then dealing with all the team members themselves and then bringing their characteristics, ideas and thoughts together, evaluating them and bringing them to a common thread. In principle, that was the most important thing we experienced in terms of teamwork." (Alfons Eberth, pos. 61 – *theme: Teamwork*)

3.3 Change of Students' Understanding of Social Diversity

Regarding the question of whether the understanding of social diversity has changed as a result of participation in the course (RQ3), it appears that this is predominantly the case. Only two participants (15%, 2 of 13 interviewees) stated that their understanding of social diversity has not changed that much. It was said that the learning experience led to a clearer and more detailed understanding of social diversity (31%, 4 of 13 interviewees), that the complexity of social problems was recognised (15%, 2 of 13 interviewees), that one became aware that social diversity is a reality (15%, 2 of 13 interviewees) and that the complexity of social problems has been recognised (15%, 2 of 13 interviewees) (Table 3).

Table 3. Frequencies of main themes – change of students' understanding of social diversity (view)

Themes	Documents	Percentage (valid)
Understanding of social diversity has not changed so much	2	15.4
Social diversity is a reality	2	15.4
More positive understanding of social diversity	1	7.7
More detailed / clearer understanding of social diversity	4	30.8
Complexity of social problems has been recognised	2	15.4
Different reasons for social emergencies	1	7.7
Benefits of social diversity are seen	1	7.7
Necessity of research in subject area recognised	1	7.7
Documents with code(s)	10	76.9
Documents without code(s)	3	23.1
Analysed documents	13	100.0
Total of coded segments	14	100.0

For example, one participant explained her broader understanding of existing social problems:

"When we talk about homeless people, for example, I have once again become aware of different problem situations. I realised that there is no such thing as *THE* homeless person or *THE* homeless person, and that we need to differentiate further and further. That every person here is individual with their very own problems. That you can't lump everyone together, not for any group of people. This individualism has simply become more visible." (Carmen Spieß, pos. 97 – *theme: Social diversity is a reality*)

3.4 Relevance for Students' Behaviour and Attitudes

Finally, we would like to consider the influence that the participation in the course, working in heterogeneous teams, cooperation with community partners and initial contact with homeless people had on students' future behaviour and attitudes (RQ4). A general greater understanding of life realities, overcoming prejudices as well as less fear of contact with homeless people (all 23%, 3 out of 13 interviewees) were mainly mentioned here (Table 4).

For example, students told us, that the direct contact with homeless people through participation in meetings of street newspaper vendors, a city tour with (formerly) homeless people and the conversations with social partner organisations have in some cases changed their views.

"As I mentioned earlier; I always had a few prejudices, as you would expect. These were all dispelled by the project, so I realised that it's not like that. That's why I now have a different image of many people and also of the organisations." (Berta Schleich, pos. 53 – theme: prejudices overcome through encounters)

"Even if you associate that in everyday life, it's not really a clientele that you would like to get in touch with. It just showed that they are actually all nice people who have all just had bad luck in life, most of them at least. Some of them are certainly there because they didn't want it any other way, but really, it's just that the people are just as human as we are, no matter where they come from, what happened and whatever." (Nico Gunf, pos. 61 – theme: greater understanding of life realities)

Table 4. Frequencies of main themes – relevance for students' behaviour, general learning effects, behavioural adjustments, behavioural changes

Themes	Documents	Percentage (valid)
Greater openness	1	7.7
Greater understanding of life realities	3	23.1
Importance of treating others with respect	1	7.7
Greater serenity	1	7.7
Less fear of contact	3	23.1
Learned approaches to work in heterogeneous teams	1	7.7
Learned approaches to work with community partners	1	7.7
Prejudices overcome through encounters	3	23.1
Motivation to help people increased	1	7.7
Documents with code(s)	8	61.5
Documents without code(s)	5	38.5
Analysed documents	13	100.0
Total of coded segments	16	100.0

4. Discussion

Based on the presented findings, the most relevant conclusions of our qualitative interview study are that there exists a variety of different concepts of social diversity which on the one hand refer to descriptions of individual aspects of a diverse society and on the other hand fit particularly well into the four layers model of diversity from Gardenswartz & Rowe [14,15] which can be a useful framework for the conceptualisation of students' views on diversity. These existing concepts can be expanded and changed through various experiences with social diversity in a community-based research or service-learning course and the learning and reflection processes which are related to this. In this respect, our study confirms the results of previous empirical studies [e.g. 2-5,10,13,19,25,28,30-31] which have shown the positive effect of service-learning projects on "learning for diversity".

5. Strengths and Limitations

The strengths of the study include the extensive data generated due to the chosen qualitative approach. The interview guide was excellently suited to the interview situation and strongly narrative-generating. The open questions asked were answered consistently. The positive interviewer-interviewee interaction was consistently conducive to obtain the qualitative data. The available data

material is of very good quality. Furthermore, with one exception, the entire course took part in the qualitative interview study. The limitations of the study primarily result from the small sample size. Some of the students with migrant background had difficulties understanding certain questions, so some of the answers given could not be coded because the answers did not fit to the defined unit of analysis. Intra- and intercoder reliability could not yet be determined due to time constraints. The most important limitation of the study consists in the necessary changing of the course schedule. This resulted from regulations of the Ruhr University Bochum during the COVID-19 pandemic. The course, which ran for one year (two semesters), was affected by this. After half a year the course format had to be switched to a purely online format due to the complete closure of the university in March 2020. Further direct interaction between students, vulnerable people and project partners was unfortunately no longer allowed. This should have a particular impact on our qualitative research study, especially on the questions of the experiences with social diversity, changes in understanding as a result of course participation and the relevance for students' behaviour. It can be assumed that the expected effect would have been more significant if the course had been continued as initially planned, and that the answers given might have been more complex. Nonetheless, the extensive and high-quality data material enabled us to gain valuable insights into students' perceptions of social diversity and changes through experiences gained in a course format that innovatively combined elements of service-learning with elements of research-based teaching and learning. Our study should be regarded as a starting point for future research. Similar studies with a larger sample size in the post-COVID era are needed. In accordance with the changes in the students' concepts of diversity identified in our study, it makes sense for further investigations to carry out a pre-post study with interviews or written reflections, if possible, as has already been done in other studies [3,4], to enable a direct comparison of diversity concepts before and after attending the relevant course.

6. Supplementary Information

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6.2 Authors Contributions

Janine Bittner (senior lecturer) was the principal investigator, responsible for the conceptualisation, design and methods of the research study, the data analysis, presentation of the results and drafting the paper.

Janina Kempchen (student research assistant) contributed to the creation of the interview guideline, was responsible for conducting the online interviews and critically reviewed the manuscript.

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7. Declarations

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.



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