Original Research

Reflections by Community Partners of Hong Kong-based Universities on Key Process Variables in Service-Learning: An Exploratory Study

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Editor: Valerie L. Holton, Ph.D.

Abstract

This research study aims to validate the typology of process variables salient in service-learning projects proposed by Snell and Lau (2022) with empirical evidence. The study employed a qualitative approach by interviewing partner organization representatives (PORs) from 11 local and two international community partner organizations (CPOs), which had a history of collaboration in various service-learning projects with four universities based in Hong Kong. Our analysis identified five key factors that were perceived to be conducive to the success of service-learning projects. These positive factors were: student ownership and initiative, positive roles for PORs and their staff; an established collaborative relationship between the CPO and university; university unit-provided support and preparation for students; and instructor commitment. These factors confirmed several variables in the Snell and Lau (2022) typology, and relationships among these factors were identified. Interviewees also identified factors impeding effective service, including the absence of some success factors, failure to align community/CPO needs and instructor requirements, and insufficient time parameters for the service. In our discussion of the findings, we infer some possible causal relationships among the positive factors. Limitations of the present study are discussed, and directions for further research are suggested.
Keywords: service-learning, process variables, project effectiveness, evaluation

Introduction

Service-learning has been defined as "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5). The first two decades of the 21st century have seen the adoption of service-learning by all government-funded universities and some private universities in Hong Kong. This has accompanied major educational reforms, extending the curriculum beyond traditional academic achievement to incorporate general education and whole-person development (see Ma, 2018; Snell & Lau, 2020b; Xing & Ma, 2010). It is generally considered that effective service-learning requires a foundation of collaboration between students, instructors, community partner organizations (CPOs), and the university to achieve its goals of fostering student development and giving rise to positive impacts for CPOs and the wider community (Wade, 1997).

The developmental outcomes for students from service-learning have been widely documented (e.g., Astin et al., 2000; Celio et al., 2011; Conway et al., 2009; Eyler et al., 2001; Warren, 2012; Yorio & Ye, 2012). By contrast, relatively few research studies have investigated community impacts (Clarke, 2003; Driscoll et al., 1996; Gelmon, 2003; Lau et al., 2021) or the CPOs' experience (Block et al., 2018). The salient process variables perceived by CPOs to lead to successful outcomes of service-learning have not been systematically investigated. Some researchers have pointed out that assessing process variables and community impacts in university-community projects is difficult due to a lack of time and resources (e.g., Block et al., 2018).

To fill this research gap, Snell and Lau (2022) developed a typology comprising the process ingredients considered conducive to effective service-learning. We chose that typology as a reference point because it was based on a comprehensive review of past literature encompassing four source types. The first was the classic service-learning literature (e.g., Eyler & Giles, 1999; Godfrey et al., 2005; Mintz & Hesser, 1996). The second source type was subsequent literature on proposed good service-learning practices in K-12 and youth leadership education (e.g., Billig, 2007; Youth Service California, 2006). The third comprised studies that identified critical ingredients of service-learning in Hong Kong (e.g., Chen et al., 2018; Snell et al., 2015). The fourth source type was a set of papers reporting large-scale survey research on crucial process variables in service-learning (Astin et al., 2000; Billig et al., 2005; Ngai et al., 2018).

The review article of Snell and Lau (2022) identified six major ingredients for successful service-learning. The first is the experience of undertaking meaningful service. For students, this entails addressing authentic problems and meeting community needs while having opportunities to encounter diversity and listen to community voices (Godfrey et al., 2005; Mintz & Hesser, 1996; Snell et al., 2015). The second ingredient involves the partner organization representatives (PORs) of CPOs playing a constructive role, acting as co-educators and providing ongoing consultation, feedback, and guidance for students. Prior research has identified the importance of PORs being responsive to other stakeholders and committed to service-learning (Chen et al., 2018; Snell et al., 2015). The third is effective preparation and student support through training and orientation (Chen et al., 2018; Mintz & Hesser, 1996; Snell et al., 2015). The fourth is an

effective reflection by the students as a process for connecting their service-learning experience with academic knowledge (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Godfrey et al., 2005). The fifth is an effective course design that aligns the service-learning projects with the course curriculum and coursework assessments (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Mintz & Hesser, 1996; Snell et al., 2015). The sixth is stakeholder synergy, arising from close collaboration between PORs and instructors and reflecting a sense of co-ownership and reciprocity, along with mutual openness to learning (Godfrey et al., 2005; Mintz & Hesser, 1996). Before the research, we presumed that although these six ingredients are closely related, they did not form a hierarchy of causation. However, in discussing our findings later in this paper, we have inferred some possible causal relationships. Snell and Lau (2022) provide a further literature review. Table 1, taken from Snell and Lau (2020a), an earlier version of Snell & Lau (2022), lists the six ingredients.

TABLE 1. A summary analysis of six key process ingredients in service learning

Key Ingredients	Reference Sources
Meaningful service	1. Meaningful action (Mintz & Hesser, 1996)
	2. Addressing authentic problems (Snell et al., 2015)
	3. Reality (Godfrey et al., 2005)
	4. Project efficacy belief (Chen et al., 2018)
	5. Community voices are included (Jacoby, 1996)
	6. Influence of community voices (Eyler & Giles, 1999)
	7. Service quality, diversity in service (Eyler & Giles, 1999)
POR plays a constructive role	1. POR responsiveness (Chen et al., 2018)
	2. POR commitment (Snell et al., 2015)
Effective preparation and support provided to students	1. Sufficient support, coordination, orientation, and training (Mintz & Hesser, 1996)
	2. Project experiences (Chen et al., 2018)
	3. In-class project consultation (Snell et al., 2015)
Effective reflection	1. Effective reflective activities (Mintz & Hesser, 1996)
	2. Effective student reflection (Eyler & Giles, 1999)
	3. Reflection (Godfrey et al., 2005)
	4. Measures to enhance student reflection (Snell et al., 2015)
Effective course design	1. Service aligning with course curriculum (Snell et al., 2015)

	2. Quality of knowledge application (Eyler & Giles, 1999)
	3. Effective evaluation (Mintz & Hesser, 1996)
	4. Crediting students for demonstrating their learning (Mintz & Hesser, 1996)
	5. Grading service-learning project reports (Snell et al., 2015)
Stakeholder synergy	1. Common goals, purposes, responsibility, and resources (Mintz & Hesser, 1996)
	2. Reciprocity (Godfrey et al., 2005)
	3. Inter-institutional commitment and trust (Snell et al., 2015)

Source: Snell & Lau (2020a)

Snell and Lau (2022) suggested that a multi-stakeholder approach should be adopted to evaluate the extent to which these process variables are present. Under this approach, quantitative data, such as ratings of service experience and service quality, would be collected from students, instructors, and the POR, supplemented by in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups. The current study examines whether this typology can accommodate qualitative data provided through interviews with PORs about the factors behind the relative success or failure of service-learning projects completed under the CPO-university collaboration.

Methods

Participants

Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with PORs from 13 CPOs that had a history of collaboration in service-learning projects in conjunction with any one of four local universities (comprising Lingnan University (LU), The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU), Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU), and The Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK)).

Hong Kong universities design and implement a wide range of service-learning programs, which involve direct, indirect, research, and advocacy service (for their definitions, please refer to University of Minnesota Center for Community-Engaged Learning, 2022). There are, nonetheless, broad similarities in provision across the Hong Kong universities (Lau & Snell, 2021). Most service-learning experiences are incorporated into credit-bearing courses. They are brokered and set up by a central coordinating unit in the partnering university, such as an Office of Service-Learning. Students are typically required to receive briefings about service-learning,

engage in pre-service preparatory training, and attend agency orientations before service. During the service period, there will be consultation sessions for students to reflect on and review their service experiences, jointly facilitated by instructors, PORs, and service-learning coordinators.

Service proposals, written project reports, oral presentations, and reflective journals are commonly used for academic performance assessment. In terms of service duration, universities have various requirements, ranging between 10 and 40 hours. While many service-learning projects are undertaken during a standard semester, some service-learning projects arranged by Hong Kong universities involve student internships during the summer term. These are credit-bearing and are designed and administered similarly to the semester-based service-learning projects described above. For example, students must participate in reflection-based sessions, submit reflective essays on their internship experience, and relate this to curricular content. Therefore, we regard them as service-learning projects. Readers can refer to Snell et al. (2019) for details of a typical arrangement for service-learning internships in Hong Kong. The final point is that service-learning projects, even if they involve students studying professional major subjects such as education, accountancy, or medicine, emphasize community outreach and are differentiated from institutionalized professional practice.

The 13 CPOs were selected through quota sampling, with reference to two criteria: the type of service-learning project collaboration (i.e., direct, indirect, advocacy, or research) and the institutional nature of the CPO (e.g., NGO, social enterprise). Invitations had been accepted by 11 Hong Kong-based CPOs (out of 16 invited) and two overseas CPOs. Table 2 lists the profiles of the CPOs and their service nature, along with details of the interviewed PORs. Table 3 indicates the type of service-learning projects referred to in the interviews. These projects mainly involved direct and/or indirect service, but some also applied research and/or advocacy. Since the interviews were conducted on a CPO basis, each CPO had typically partnered with their collaborating universities over several years in conjunction with multiple service-learning projects, and interviewees typically referred to their experiences with multiple projects. For an exploratory study to validate the typology proposed by Snell and Lau (2022), we consider that accounts referring to multiple service-learning projects were conducive to the validity of our analyses and conclusions.

TABLE 2. Profile of the partner organizations, interviewees, and collaborations

No.	CPO Type	CPO's Service Targets	Interview-ees' Position	Partner University	CPO's Service Nature	First year of collab-oration
R01	NGO	Elderly people	Senior Supervisor	LU	Providing services such as emotional	2015

			of Social Services Division		assistance, enhancement of parenting skills, and helping youth develop their talents, potential, and sense of social responsibility.	
R02	NGO	Low-income families	Project Manager	LU	Providing food collection and recycling in five local districts through collaborating with local organizations and schools, and redistributing to local families in need.	2013
R03	Social Enter-prise	Women	General Secretary	LU	Providing opportunities for otherwise low-income women to work in self-financed restaurants, operated by the NGO	2010
R04	NGO	General public include-ng internat-ional visitors	Assistant Discovery an Education Manager	LU	A major amusement park in Hong Kong run on an NGO basis with a government subsidy, focusing on education, conservation, and entertainment.	2018
R05	Social Enter-prise	Elderly people	Senior Supervisor of Communit	LU	Assisting with Financial, material, and service support for families facing	2011

		y Support Center		hardship arising from emergency situations such as accidents.	
R06	NGO	Senior Supervisor (Counseling and Caring Service Team)	LU	Providing miscellaneous services for the elderly in the community, so as to improve the well-being of them and their families.	2015
		Elderly people with dement-ia			
R07	NGO	Registered Social Worker/Officer-in-Charge	EdUHK	Providing services such as emotional assistance, enhancement of parenting skills, and helping youth develop their talents, potential, and sense of social responsibility.	Prior to 2015
		School children, youths, and their parents			
R08	Social Enter-prise	Senior Corporate Affairs & Marketing Manager	HKBU	Maintaining the viability of traditional handicraft skills such as paper cutting, jewelry, and printing by promoting them to the local and international communities	2017
		Elderly masters of tradition-nal crafts based in Hong Kong			
R09	NGO	Center-in-Charge	EdUHK	Providing services to promote the health of children and youth; collaborating with community stakeholders to create an inclusive	2015
		School children and youths			

					environment that is conducive for the young to address various life challenges.	
R10	NGO/ Social Enter- prise	Patients /low- income groups	Senior Program Manager	HKBU	Providing various supporting social services to people who are disadvantaged, marginalized, displaced or abandoned; operating various social enterprise initiatives.	2015
R11	Aided School (Priva- te)	Second- ary school children	Vice Principal	HKBU	Providing education to students aged between 12 and 19 approximately	2015
R12	NGO	Rural families in poverty	Program Manager	HKBU	Working with local communities and their children, youths, and families to address poverty and its root causes through holistic and sustainable transformation.	Prior to 2015
R13	NGO	Rural families in poverty	The Founder	HKBU	Providing services to the local communities to empower the young and address local issues, such as poverty, power supply, and health promotion.	Prior to 2016

TABLE 3. Distribution of types of projects across the types of CPO

| CPO Type | Direct Service | Service-Learning Type* | | |
		Indirect Service	Research	Advocacy
NGO	R01, R02, R04, R05, R07, R09, R10, R11	R02, R04, R11	R02	R02, R05
Social Enterprise/ Private	R03, R08	R03, R06, R08, R10	R06	R08, R10
International Partners (both are NGOs)	R12, R13			R13

Note: Please refer to the definitions provided by The University of Minnesota Community Service-Learning Center (2020).

Interview Protocol and Procedures

After the CPOs had accepted the invitation, they were asked to nominate a POR with involvement in one or more completed service-learning projects for the interview. Nominated PORs typically had close involvement with multiple projects. Before the interviews, the PORs were briefed by a research team member about the interview's goals and assured data confidentiality. All PORs consented to the interview recording (audio or video). Most of the interviews were face-to-face, but a minority were over the telephone or via Skype. The language medium for the interviews with local PORs was Cantonese, while the interviews with PORs based overseas were conducted in English.

A protocol guided each interview to ensure that they were conducted consistently. The protocol consisted of four sections. First, the PORs were asked to relate stories (Boje, 2001; Gabriel, 2000) about critical incidents (Bitner et al., 1994), i.e., specific events or occasions that were of significance to them, during completed service-learning projects that they considered had been particularly successful or unsuccessful from the CPO's perspective. Second, they were asked to explain the respective projects' relative success (or lack of success), thereby identifying factors that they considered important in determining project effectiveness, such as the extent to which the service-learning projects had achieved their service objectives and goals. Third, they were invited to offer further suggestions for increasing the likelihood of project effectiveness. Fourth,

interviewees were asked to indicate and account for their overall satisfaction with the service-learning projects. Interviews lasted between 60 and 130 minutes.

Data Analysis

Recordings of the English-medium interviews were transcribed verbatim. At the same time, those conducted in Cantonese were translated into English by the fourth author in accordance with a set of guidelines and were checked by the first and third authors. The research team then coded and reviewed the transcripts using an inductive approach (Charmaz, 2006). Each instance of the emergent categories was then compared and provisionally aligned with the typology of Snell and Lau (2022). The comparison process continued until it was established that the matches between the emergent categories and the Snell and Lau (2022) typology were stable and provided a foundation for a clear storyline about each critical incident referred to in the interviews (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

Findings

The data analysis identified 87 mentions of perceived success factors in service-learning and 81 mentions of factors that were perceived to have detracted from the success of service-learning projects. These factors are summarized in Tables 4 and 5, respectively.

Perceived Success Factors in Service-Learning

As shown in Table 4, interviewees mentioned five types of success factors at least nine times. These were: student ownership and initiative; positive roles for the POR and their staff; an established collaborative relationship between CPO and university; university unit-provided support and preparation for the students; and instructor commitment. Below, we shall provide illustrations of each success factor.

TABLE 4. Categories and mentions of success factors

Categories	Category descriptions	No. of mentions
Student ownership and initiative	Students care about the people they are serving; they act responsibly; they take initiatives	**28**
Positive roles for PORs and their staff	PORs make contributions such as orientation, training, coaching and facilitating process reviews and reflection sessions for students	**19**
An established collaborative	Long-term collaborative relationships; open communication, mutual understanding between the partners; collaboration leads to continuous improvement	**16**

Categories	Category descriptions	No. of mentions
relationship between CPO and university		
University unit-provided support and preparation for students	The university, through an office of service-learning, arranges orientation and provides supervision, training, and support for the students. Subsuming service-learning under a credit-bearing system may increase student motivation and the commitment of resources by the university	**13**
Instructor commitment	Instructors respect the POR's goals for the service-learning project and contribute to related training and coaching for students	**9**
Others	N/A	**2**
	Total	**87**

Student Ownership and Initiative

Many interviewees also attributed the success of their service-learning projects to the positive roles taken up by themselves and their colleagues. Such contributions included: providing timely training, coaching, supervision, and feedback, being responsive and available, and joining in regular process reviews. They considered that such active involvement could help improve the quality of students' service and increase the likelihood of achieving the intended outcomes.

"We would provide training for the students… We offered factual information and explained to them the theories behind the operational work … There was also a mid-term sharing session." (R04)

"We would give comments for the students … Those with queries about the operations or other matters could call us or consult us in our office." (R08)

"We had a review meeting after each event to identify areas for improvement … The students would also voice their opinions." (R10)

"If the students do not perform to our expectations, we need to communicate with them one-by-one." (R09)

Some PORs highlighted the importance of their role and that of their staff in supporting student reflection, resulting in continuous and substantial improvement of their performance during their service-learning projects. The comments of these PORs, given below, lend support to the claim (Eyler & Giles, 1999) that reflection sessions held by PORs can generate insights that the

university and instructor are unable to provide: "conducting reflection sessions in the community with community partners can be a powerful tool" (p. 184).

> "We talked [with the students] about the factors leading to them taking initiative ... we would discuss their expectations during the internship program … the alignment of our expectations could be attained in this way." (R10)

> "There were several learning occasions... First, our staff would go there to supervise them. When we spotted any problem, we would ask them to observe how other helpers handled the customers ... More often, it was the students who realized the difference through their observation. They found out there were different ways [to engage clients] … they would try out different methods and evaluated what kinds of approach would engage the children the best." (R04)

An Established Collaborative Relationship Between CPO and University

Some interviewees indicated the importance of building a long-term oriented, collaborative relationship between the CPO and the university based on reciprocity and open communication. They explained that service-learning projects could have a more significant community impact if they are undertaken in the context of an ongoing collaboration with the university instead of being regarded as one-off efforts. They pointed out that long-term collaboration could facilitate the development of mutual understanding, a clearer grasp of the project objectives, and better planning, enabling the quality of service-learning projects to be improved over time.

> "For a service-learning project, I like the two-way interactions." (R07)

> "After several years' cooperation with [the university], we understand more about the learning objectives of their academic lessons ... Gradually, I have come to know how to accommodate the learning objectives … I am more confident in supporting the learning requirements … The coordination has become better." (R09)

> "We treat [the university] as a collaborating party, a stakeholder in serving the community. I believe that each collaboration is good for future collaboration. If there had been no prior collaboration between us, an important visit [of community members to the campus] might not have been possible." (R07)

> "With effective prior communication, we [the CPO and university] do not need to talk frequently … We have arrived at a common understanding. (R11)

> "I think that the success of this camp was due to our previous collaborations so that people could be called upon to give support afterwards, leading to a win-win outcome." (R01)

University Unit-Provided Support and Preparation for Students

Although interviewees might not have been able to observe the complete set of support and preparation activities provided by university-based stakeholders, they believed that such support was an essential means for ensuring that the student's ability, motivation, and performance were of the requisite standard for achieving the intended outcomes. They expressed appreciation for university-provided support in the form of training, coaching, and supervision by staff of service learning offices or units offering similar support. Examples included the following.

> "The Office of Service-Learning (OSL) has been very helpful … by providing suitable training for the students. This minimized the costs in terms of time and administration effort incurred by a full-time staff member. Furthermore, this made the project easier for me to handle." (R04)

> "We have to thank OSL as … they helped to monitor the students' work … They appear to have talked to students about their service work and have even used various means to remind those under-performing students … I believe that they had ensured the quality of the students' work before submitting (their reports) to us ... this quality assurance process has enhanced our collaboration relationship." (R06)

> "The role of field instructor [from the university unit] is also important in monitoring [the students] to ensure that they submit service proposals on time. This relieves the workload of our colleagues. It is appropriate [for the instructor] to follow up later in monitoring academic assignment submission. It would be embarrassing for our own staff to monitor the students on this academic aspect as the students may not appreciate this, and they might get the impression that we do not like them." (R07)

Some interviewees pointed out the positive impact of subsuming service learning courses under the university's credit-bearing system. They saw this as a means for increasing students' motivation (since the quality of their service-learning projects would affect their GPA) and ensuring that a sufficient workforce from the university would be deployed to provide support and preparation for the students.

> "Under the credit-bearing system, I find that (students) are more attentive in presentations and doing their assignment, as well as being eager to meet my colleagues more often … I can sense that there are more colleagues from (OSL) to provide support when it has become credit-bearing, and with more colleagues, the quality is a little better." (R01)

Instructor Commitment

Some interviewees identified instructor commitment as a key success factor, reflected in their direct involvement in providing project-specific training to prepare students for the service and in providing consultation during the service:

> "Amidst their busy schedule [the instructor] and his colleagues have the heart to help the secondary schools." (R11)

"The instructors would ask the students to provide the design and implementation plan of the project … The instructors would also read and comment on their ideas." (R08)

"The instructors would coach students on how to present [their ideas] well." (R11)

Factors Perceived to have Detracted from the Success of Service-Learning Projects

The interviewees also identified five main factors that detracted from the success of a service-learning project. These are listed in Table 5. They comprise the following: lack of student commitment or initiative; failure to align community/CPO needs and instructor requirements; insufficient university-provided support and preparation for students; insufficient time parameters for the service; and failure to build a collaborative relationship with the POR/CPO.

TABLE 5. Categories and mentions of causes of failure.

Overarching Categories	Category descriptions	Freq. of mentions
Lack of student commitment or initiative	Students lack commitment to the service; they engage superficially; they are late; they are inattentive; they are passive	**24**
Failure to align community/CPO needs and instructor requirements	The project does not address end-beneficiary needs; the project output is impractical; the goals of the CPO and the instructor are incompatible.	**17**
Insufficient university-provided support and preparation for students	Students appear insufficiently prepared to provide the service; the POR considers that the university/ instructor should have provided more thorough orientation, training, and support for students before and/or during the project	**19**
Insufficient time parameters for the service	Service is impeded because the duration of the service-learning is too short, or the service-hours are fragmented	**14**
Failure to build a collaborative relationship with the POR/CPO	Lack of communication between instructor and POR; superficial instructor involvement; lack of continuity on the university side	**5**
Others	N/A	**2**
	Total	**81**

Lack of Student Commitment or initiative

Just as student commitment and initiative were perceived as constituting a success factor, as mentioned above, some interviewees referred to the absence of this as a factor that detracted from effective service.

> "When the students found out that the promotion was inadequate, they could have helped with approaching target customers. But they didn't do so. I think this would not have been difficult for them to do." (R03)

> "Some students were not adequately committed to serve, engaged only at a superficial level, and provided simplistic solutions." (R03)

> "Some students were inattentive or were just too tired after attending their lessons or lacked spirit or even appeared to ignore their service recipients. They were physically present but did not seem to engage." (R01)

> "Service quality was all about the quality of the students' engagement, and the issues detracting from this included them playing with cell phones and their insufficient willingness to handle the classroom disciplinary issues." (R07)

> "A typical problem with the students has been their lack of punctuality. They would promise quickly but, in the end, they give various excuses for being late." (R10).

Insufficient University-Provided Support and Preparation for Students

Some interviewees lamented that for some projects, the necessary levels of support from the instructor and/or the university in terms of training, coaching, consultation, and supervision for the students appeared to have been insufficient. The following comments thus reflected the perceived absence of another critical success factor that was mentioned earlier:

> "The students did not seem to know how to design the questionnaire that we wanted, and the instructor did not allocate any time to comment on this questionnaire. The students designed the questionnaire without the instructor's help, and the instructor did not follow up ... I feel deeply that the overall support level from the university has declined in recent years, and … the needs of CPOs have not been well taken care of ... The service from students would sometimes add pressure to us. Some students appeared to have been instructed to come to do service without being clear of what to do." (R02)

> "Sometimes the year two or year three students are not really sure about the service content, and they are not clear themselves about the knowledge required to provide the service." (R13)

Failure to Align Community/CPO Needs and Instructor Requirements

Some interviewees complained that the service needs, as they perceived them, were poorly aligned with the project requirements, as set by the respective instructors. For example:

"The whole report was rather superficial, just like secondary students, who just do a paper … In order to provide value for me, the students really needed to work out something practical and evaluate whether it works or not." (R03)

"What we are expecting, which is what the local people in the slum community (end-beneficiaries) perceive they need, is different from what the instructors are envisaging. The local people do not understand how the project can benefit them." (R13)

"The students wasted their time in developing this product … There appeared to be no community demand for the product." (R02)

"Although many community members responded to the services provided under the project, they may have done so out of courtesy but not for real benefit." (R06)

In one case, the POR perceived that there had even been a direct conflict between the requirements of the CPO and the instructor, which appeared to have compromised the quality of the service provided.

"The instructor requested the students to work on one questionnaire, and I told them that I also needed them to work on another questionnaire … Therefore, the residents had to complete two questionnaires. It appeared that the students were not so committed to administering my questionnaire … The instructor's questionnaire was part of a research study that was quite different from our expectations, which were to understand the needs of the residents." (R02)

Insufficient Time Parameters for the Service

Some interviewees explained that the typical duration of a service-learning project was too short for the intended service to be adequately completed. For example, some of them stated that the standard requirement of one of the universities, i.e., 30 service hours for a project conducted as part of a semester-long course, was insufficient. Furthermore, in such cases, they perceived that the time shortage problem was compounded by the university's practice of including training hours in calculating students' total service hours. Even in the special case of a summer practicum course, where students were expected to work full-time on their projects, an interviewee considered that the total service time requirement that had been set by the university, which in that case was 200 hours, was still insufficient to meet the project goals. Such comments, further illustrated below, are consistent with previous research findings (Sandy & Holland, 2006; Tryon et al., 2008).

"A key problem is the time limit for a service-learning project, which is run semester by semester. Their semester will end even if the S-L project has not been completed." (R01)

"The schedule is too tight. There is too little time for the students and the POR to get to know each other and build rapport, especially when there are also overseas students." (R06)

"For a social enterprise like us … there are too few service hours. To achieve the intended outcomes, 200 hours are not enough ... The students also claimed that the internship duration was too short." (R10)

"We expect well-trained staff and the training may take two days. The service hours for the project also included the training time ... The training we provided was therefore highly condensed and omitted some material ... A couple of students gave feedback that the training was too rushed and that they had too much information to remember, making them confused." (R04)

Additional time-related problems that were perceived to have detracted from service quality concerned the fragmentation of the service hours and /or difficulties in matching students' classroom timetables with service time slots.

"The students were from different academic disciplines and were struggling to match different timetables. They found it difficult to agree on common time slots for the service. Some students would just attend the service session alone and for only an hour or so. Then they had to come 20 times to fulfill the service hours' requirement." (R09)

Failure to Build a Collaborative Relationship with the POR/CPO

Interviewees indicated that the failure to build a collaborative relationship between the university/instructor and the POR/CPO had impeded the quality of the service provided by the students or had constituted a missed opportunity for service improvement, reflecting the absence of a key success factor discussed above.

"The instructor did not sit down with me to discuss the project, barely acknowledged the service-learning requirement, and delegated the entire task of setting up and implementing the project to an administrator. The instructor only paid attention to the academic requirements and neglected the service needs of the CPO. All the service responsibility on the university side was shifted to the OSL. However, without the involvement of the instructor, OSL lacked authority to intervene when there were conflicts between the instructor's requirements and the service needs." (R02)

"Sometimes I can see that the instructors had changed something, but sometimes they just allow the same problem to repeat the following year, and the year after." (R13)

Discussion

The current study identified some process variables that interviewees perceived to impact the outcomes of service-learning projects, either positively or negatively. Therefore, the commentary immediately below is best read in conjunction with Table 6, which maps the inductive categories, taken from Tables 4 and 5, against the Snell and Lau (2022) typology.

TABLE 6. Mapping the inductive categories identified by interviewees onto the typology of Snell and Lau (2020a; 2023).

Inductive categories	**Correspondence to the sub-categories and categories of Snell & Lau (2020a; 2023)**
Student ownership & initiative versus lack of this	The student commitment and meaningful action components of meaningful service
Established collaborative relationship between CPOs and universities versus failure to build this	Inter-institutional commitment and trust as an aspect of stakeholder synergy
Instructor commitment versus non-commitment	Sufficient support, coordination, orientation, and training and in-class project consultation as aspects of effective preparation and support for the students
University unit-provided support and preparation for students/ versus lack of this	
Positive roles for PORs and their staff under an established collaborative relationship between CPO and university	POR responsiveness and POR commitment as components of POR plays a constructive role
Guiding reflection sessions for students as one of the POR's positive roles	Effective reflection
Failure to align community/CPO needs with instructor requirements	Negatively related to service aligning with course curriculum as an aspect of effective course design
Insufficient time parameters for the service	Negatively related to appropriate service duration as a new sub-category of effective course design.

Student ownership and initiative as a success factor versus its converse, lack of student commitment and initiative, appeared to match the student commitment and significant action components of meaningful service in Snell and Lau's (2022) typology. However, regarding meaningful service, the interviewees appeared to focus on the importance of student commitment and meaningful action concerning delivering the service aspects of the project content. They did not refer explicitly to the inclusion of community voices or student encounters with diversity when interacting with service beneficiaries during service delivery. We believe that there are two different reasons for these omissions. First, regarding community voices, we consider it likely that PORs would have based their projects on ideas expressed to them by members of communities served by the respective CPOs. They may not have said so because they were not

specifically asked about the processes through which the CPO's service needs had been identified. Second, regarding student encounters with diversity, we suspect that PORs regarded this as an incidental element while focusing more on what students were doing to create benefits for the CPO and/or its end-beneficiaries.

A compound inductive continuum emerging in this study comprised established collaborative relationships between CPOs and universities combined with instructor commitment versus failure to build a collaborative relationship and lack of instructor commitment. This continuum matches inter-institutional commitment and trust as an aspect of stakeholder synergy in Snell and Lau's (2022) typology. Interviewees strongly valued the existence or prospect of a collaborative, win-win, long-term oriented relationship between the CPO and its partner university through the agency of the POR on the CPO side and the instructor and OSL on the university side. The importance of this kind of stakeholder synergy has been identified by previous researchers (e.g., Wade, 1997).
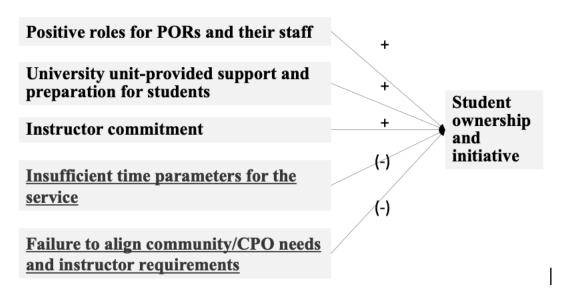
Another compound inductive continuum comprised university unit-provided support and preparation for students along with instructor commitment versus failure to provide sufficient support of this kind combined with lack of instructor commitment. This continuum appears to correspond to a similarly labeled aspect of adequate preparation and support for the students in Snell and Lau's (2022) typology.

An additional compound inductive continuum included positive roles for PORs and their staff under an established collaborative CPO-university relationship versus failure in this respect. This continuum matches POR responsiveness and POR commitment as aspects of the POR's constructive role, as indicated in Snell and Lau's (2022) typology. Also, associated with positive roles for PORs, some interviewees confirmed the importance of the process variable of effective reflection by students in the Snell and Lau (2022) typology. However, they emphasized their role in facilitating student reflection to improve the services provided by the students rather than connecting the service-learning experience with academic knowledge.

The two remaining inductive factors, both negative, were failure to align community/CPO needs with instructor requirements, along with insufficient time parameters for the service. These factors can be mapped against the converse of specific aspects of effective course design in Snell and Lau's (2022) typology, although time parameters were not mentioned in Snell and Lau (2020a). For reasons discussed below, the interviewees refrained from commenting on curricular matters regarding academic content and its delivery. However, they were very concerned that every service-learning project should be realistically designed to address community needs. It is crucial, therefore, that the CPO and the university, through the agency of the POR, instructor, and OSL staff, should jointly establish service-learning project objectives and plans, which are closely aligned with the course content, and which envisage a degree of student effort and involvement that is commensurate with the service-hours that the university requires for its students.

We may also infer two underlying patterns of interrelationships among the process variables. The first pattern is that the high levels of student ownership and initiative appear to reflect the relative presence of three other success factors, i.e., positive roles for PORs and their staff, university

unit-provided support and preparation for students, and instructor commitment; along with the absence of two other key impediments, i.e., failure to align community/CPO needs and instructor requirements, and insufficient time parameters for the service (see Figure 1). Thus, a combination of requisite preparation, training, coaching, and ongoing support; alignment of POR and instructor inputs and requirements; and enough time to meet project requirements are likely to ensure requisite levels of student motivation, commitment, and ownership. Furthermore, recognition of this pattern leads us to the issue of reciprocity between CPOs and their partner universities underpinning the provision of effective preparation and support for students undertaking service-learning projects.

Note: Underlined text denotes negative factors.

FIGURE 1. An inferred underlying pattern of how student ownership and initiative are affected by other inductive categories.

Interviewees acknowledged that they and their staff have an essential role to play in supporting and preparing the students but perceived, in addition, that the effectiveness of university- and/or instructor-provided support and preparation is also a key success factor. However, they appeared hesitant about voicing suggestions about what should be done on the "teacher side" and to regard making such suggestions as not their prerogative. Although many of them had participated in in-class consultation sessions and had seen course outline documents, the delivery of the bulk of the respective courses constituted a "black box" for them. They had no other opportunities to observe the instructor's classroom-based input and may not have considered themselves sufficiently informed to evaluate and influence instructor contributions. While responding to students' requests for help, they appeared to confine themselves to operating within the parameters set by instructors. As one interviewee stated, "We [the PORs] are not here to teach the students the things to do in the course" (R02). Therefore, it is vital that course instructors, relevant university committees, and units shoulder responsibility for ensuring that students are

adequately prepared for and supported in undertaking the service-learning projects agreed upon with the CPOs.

The second underlying pattern is that the extent to which a collaborative relationship between the university and the CPO has been established is reflected in positive roles for PORs and their staff, effective university unit-provided support and preparation, and instructor commitment (see Figure 2). In addition, interviewees implied that CPO-university service-learning collaborations should be based on co-ownership and reciprocity, mutual openness to learning, and reciprocity in terms of sharing resources, ideas, and knowledge. In turn, a collaborative relationship would also exert a positive influence as a feedback loop, as depicted in Figure 2.
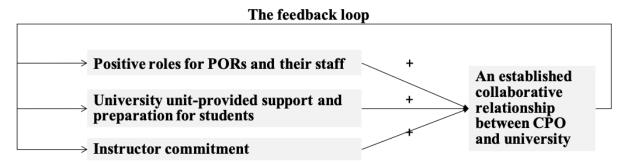
The feedback loop

Positive roles for PORs and their staff

University unit-provided support and preparation for students

Instructor commitment

An established collaborative relationship between CPO and university

FIGURE 2. An inferred underlying pattern of how the development of a collaborative relationship between CPO and university is established through other inductive categories.

Overall, we consider that there is a good match between the success factors and impediments identified by interviewees and the typology of key process variables identified by Snell and Lau (2022), noting that some elements of that typology are not invoked, possibly because the perspectives of instructors, service-learning coordinating units, and students were not examined in this study.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The current research offered some qualitative support for the typology proposed by Snell and Lau (2022) regarding the process variables salient for successful service-learning projects but also indicated the need for some augmentation and refinement of it, thus paving the way for the development of quantitative measurement instruments for use in future studies.

The current study has some limitations. First, we only interviewed PORs and did not reach out to students, instructors, representatives of satellite community organizations, other community-based contributors, or end-beneficiaries. As noted above, stakeholders may emphasize different criteria when evaluating the processes entailed in designing and implementing service-learning projects. Notably, none of the interviewees mentioned that the behavior of the PORs themselves could detract from the quality of a service-learning project.

Accordingly, we consider that studies collecting the views of multiple stakeholders in service-learning are necessary. Second, as noted above, interviewees were not asked how they initially identified the topics and related needs of the service-learning projects that formed the basis of their collaboration with the respective partner universities. Third, a complete set of records about each CPO's service-learning collaborations, including a list of project titles, project types, associated courses, and the semesters/summers of their occurrence, was unavailable from all the universities that CPOs in this study partnered with. This limitation was partly offset during the interviews with PORs, who referred to specific projects and offered recollections of when these had taken place. Further research could perform deeper analysis based on a complete set of information about the history of the CPOs' service-learning collaborations with their school partners.

Fourth, the PORs in the current study were either from NGOs or social enterprises, and there were no PORs from private enterprises. Future studies could seek to overcome this limitation of the generalizability of our findings by involving PORs from this sector. That said, communications with the service-learning coordinating units of the four Hong Kong-based universities indicated that the CPOs featured in this study were representative of the sectors that have thus far collaborated in service-learning with them and that there had been few if any, partnerships with private organizations. Fifth, the current study was based on a small sample. Although we interviewed PORs with experience in multiple service-learning projects, who were working for CPOs serving a diverse clientele, there may be some limitations to the representativeness of the findings. Based on the foundation laid out by the current study, future research can seek to draw on a larger and more diverse set of respondents to establish instruments for evaluating the key process variables for effective service learning.

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