PRACTICE-BASED ARTICLE

A Novel Instrument for the Community-Centred Assessment of Outcomes Resulting from Visits by Foreign Student Groups

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Abstract

Academic institutions in the United States have increasingly emphasised Community-Based Global Learning (CBGL) programs within international contexts. These programs are assumed to have positive outcomes, but often lack substantive assessment data to support their claims. Although meaningful program evaluation has increasingly become a priority, these investigations frequently overlook the views, opinions and goals of community organisations and community members. At present, few brief quantitative instruments are available to assess higher education CBGL project outcomes from the perspective of community partners. Here we detail the initial use of the Community Benefit Survey (CBS), a novel 17-item instrument designed to help fill this gap, within the context of a unique CBGL program in rural Sri Lanka. The CBS demonstrated value in facilitating equitable community assessment and centring the voices of community members. The CBS possesses significant utility in describing the benefits of student group/community partnerships and can be generalised for use across a wide variety of domestic and international contexts.

Keywords

Assessment; Community-Centred; Quantitative; Community-Based Global Learning; Service Learning; Undergraduate

Introduction

In the past two decades, colleges and universities in the United States have increasingly emphasised the creation and growth of academic and co-curricular Community-Based Global Learning (CBGL) programs within international contexts. The label 'CBGL' was coined by Hartman et al. (2018) and will be used here in lieu of the more common, but conceptually and linguistically problematic term, 'service-learning' (Gendle & Tapler 2022). All too often, CBGL programs are simply assumed by their sponsoring institutions to have positive outcomes, but typically offer little or no direct assessment of long-term benefits to support these claims (Reynolds et al. 2022).

Although meaningful assessment of program outcomes is increasingly becoming a priority for many institutions, such assessment has often been student-centred, with less attention being paid to the needs, goals, desires and perspectives of community partners (Blouin & Perry 2009; Choudhary & Jesiek 2016; Cruz & Giles 2000; Geller et al. 2016; Goemans et al. 2018; Miron & Moely 2006; Mogford & Lyons 2019; Natarajarathinam et al. 2020; Reynolds 2019; Sweatman & Warner 2020). In recent years, the body of academic CBGL research that centres on community voices has grown substantially (Goemans et al. 2018). However, as noted by Choudhary and Jesiek (2016), much of the research that has investigated community viewpoints on academic-community partnerships has been conducted within domestic settings in the United States and may not have translated well to international contexts. Thus Reynolds (2014; 2019) has called for a focus on the creation and assessment of community outcomes of international CBGL programs that prioritises an intentional community-based participatory orientation in this work.

Community-centred impact assessments of CBGL programs have typically relied on focus groups, structured or semi-structured interviews, or open-ended response questionnaires to gather community views and opinions (Blouin & Perry 2009; Choudhary & Jesiek 2016; Goemans et al. 2018; Grain et al. 2019; Habashy & Hunt 2021; Haines & Lambaria 2018; Jordaan & Mennega 2021; Kindred 2020; Miron & Moely 2006; Reynolds 2014, 2019; Sweatman & Warner 2020). Although these methodologies are completely appropriate for this type of assessment and can provide feedback that is rich in detail, they are not without limitations. Interviews and focus groups can be time consuming to conduct, and data from interviews, focus groups and open-ended surveys require significant training to translate and score them properly. Inherently, interview methodologies can decrease respondents' perception of anonymity and may inadvertently encourage favourable (but inaccurate) responses, due to perceived power differentials between the interviewer and the respondent. In addition, the risk of overly positive responses can be magnified in situations where the respondents have received, or hoped to receive, some type of material or non-material benefit from extending their relationship with the group or organisation they are hosting.

A mixed-methods approach that includes both quantitative and qualitative instruments has been recognised as the 'gold-standard' for community-centred assessments (Geller et al. 2016; Hartman et al. 2015; Srinivas et al. 2015). However, there are few widely available concise and general quantitative instruments (such as the closed-ended item portion of the Community Impact Scale, or CIS; Srinivas et al. 2015) for assessing higher education CBGL program outcomes from the perspective of community partners. The further development of such instruments would fill a critical need for assessments that: (1) can be easily scaled to administer to a large numbers of respondents; (2) are sensitive to respondents' limited temporal resources; (3) can be readily adapted to different languages in both oral and written form; (4) produce data that can be quickly scored and analysed without the need for coder training and extensive

response coding; and (5) allow for straightforward comparisons in instrument administration outcomes across both time and location.

Development and use of one such instrument within the context of an undergraduate CBGL program in Sri Lanka

Founded in 1958, Sri Lanka's Sarvodaya movement is grounded in Dr Ahangamage Tudor Ariyaratne's vision for a society that is free of conflict, poverty and affluence, with welfare for all through local community mobilisation (Gendle 2021). Sarvodaya is Sri Lanka's largest non-governmental organisation and is a central actor in the country's primary economic, political and social development networks (Gendle 2021). Sarvodaya promotes local community-initiated self-development and inclusive participatory democracy, with a focus on eliminating poverty and addressing community needs within hyper-local contexts (Gendle 2021). One of Sarvodaya's key principles is that of 'shramadana', or shared labour (Clark 2005). The concept of shramadana is not simply a restatement of the idea that large tasks are best completed through collective effort. Rather, it stems from Ariyaratne's connection of Buddhist principles to community organising, and his understanding that a collective awakening of mind and compassionate practice can arise from group collaborative labour for the common good (Clark 2005). This concept was eloquently summarised by Ariyaratne himself, in the phrase 'we build the road and the road builds us' (Ariyaratne 1999).

Since 2016, the U.S. university academic program that Gendle and Tapler co-led has been partnered with Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka to co-create several community-based undergraduate educational experiences. Many of these have included shramadanas, who help address the community's basic needs and local community-initiated homestays for students and staff. Students may also engage in cultural exchange activities with community members, such as village tours, dancing, storytelling and other public performances. These activities differ from those of many international community-based university programs, in that the community and local Sarvodaya staff (rather than the faculty and student visitors) choose the location and task(s) of each shramadana. Importantly, material outcomes are not a focus of the shramadana activities. Rather, these collaborative experiences are fundamentally centred on bringing different peoples together to work towards a common goal in a collective community and, in so doing, create a transitory 'university of life' that unites and facilitates personal and community awakening (Ariyaratne 1999).

As discussed earlier, there is a paucity of brief quantitative instruments that can be broadly utilised to assess community members' views on the potential community outcomes resulting from engagement with visiting foreign student groups. Given our program's continued involvement with Sarvodaya and shramadana activities, along with our commitment to Fair Trade Learning (Hartman et al. 2014; Hartman 2015), there was substantial interest in developing an instrument that could gather community perspectives. Development of this instrument was grounded in the principles of Fair Trade Learning, a powerful framework of practical ethical standards that promotes equity, justice, and an understanding of interconnectedness to international and domestic/local community-based global learning programs (Hartman et al. 2014; Hartman 2015). One of the goals of the Fair Trade Learning framework is to re-centre academic organisation–partner relationships such that positive and definable outcomes for both student learning and the community are of equal importance (Hartman et al. 2014; Hartman 2015). When developing and maintaining international partnerships, academic units need to be intentional in avoiding engagement approaches that are paternalistic or grounded in colonialism, or other problematic power dynamics (Sharpe & Dear 2013; Tiessen et al. 2018; Van Leeuwen et al. 2017). In all cases, academic–community partnerships must be constructed in a way that allows for significant benefits for all stakeholders, focuses on reciprocity, and integrates meaningful community voices and agency in every step of program creation, execution and assessment (Bringle et al. 2009; Hartman et al. 2014).

Below, we describe the preliminary implementation of the Community Benefit Survey, a brief survey instrument of our own design that was constructed through an Elon University/Sarvodaya partnership to assess community views on the potential benefits and harms of hosting an international/foreign academic group. Although this instrument was initially utilised to gather community voices within the context of a shramadana experience in Sri Lanka, we believe that it also has substantial utility and value in any domestic or international context where community members or organisations host student groups.

Method

The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Elon University, and all procedures were in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 1983. The Community Benefit Survey (CBS – Figure 1) consists of 17 closed ended statements (such as 'The student visit provided a positive economic benefit to your community.'), the responses to which are provided on a 5-point Likert-type scale coded as: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. A summative score of responses (the Community Perceived Benefit Score) can be created by reverse-coding items 5 ('The student visit presented a hardship to the community') and 15 ('The student visit harmed your community'), and then calculating the grand mean of the responses to all 17 survey items. Higher values of the Community Perceived Benefit Score are conceived of as suggesting elevated levels of perceived community benefit. At present, the CBS is available in both English and Sinhala (Figure 1).

No		strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
		සම්පූර්ණයෙන් එකඟ නොවේ	එකඟ නොවේ	සාමාන්‍යයි	එකඟයි	සම්පූර්ණයෙන් එකඟ වේ
01	The student visit provided a positive economic benefit to your community.					
	ශිෂ්‍ය සංචාරය ඔබේ ප්‍රජාවට ධනාත්මක ආර්ථික ප්‍රතිලාභයක් ලබා දුන්නේය.					
02	The student visit provided a significant physical/infrastructure benefit to your community.					
	ශිෂ්‍ය සංචාරය ඔබේ ප්‍රජාවට සැලකිය යුතු භෞතික/යටිතල පහසුකම් ප්‍රතිලාභයක් ලබා දුන්නේය.					
03	The student visit provided a significant social or cultural benefit to your community.					
	ශිෂ්‍ය සංචාරය ඔබේ ප්‍රජාවට සැලකිය යුතු සමාජ හෝ සංස්කෘතික ප්‍රතිලාභයක් ලබා දුන්නේය.					
04	The student visit helped people think about ways they could utilize existent resources to promote community tourism within the community.					
	ගමේ සම්පත් උපයෝගී කරගනිමින් ගම තුළ විදේශීය සංචාරක වැඩසටහන් ආරම්භ කිරීමට අවශ්‍ය විවිධ වූ ක්‍රමවේදයන් පිළිබඳ ප්‍රජාවට අවබෝධයක් ලබා ගැනීමට මෙම වැඩසටහන උපකාරී විය.					
05	The student visit presented a hardship to the community.					
	ශිෂ්‍ය සංචාරය ප්‍රජාවට දුෂ්කරතාවයන්/අපහසුතාවයන් ගෙන දුන්නේය.					
06	The community had a central role in organizing and leading the student visit.					
	ශිෂ්‍ය සංචාරය සංවිධානය කිරීම සහ මෙහෙයවීම් සම්බන්ධයෙන් ප්‍රජාවට ප්‍රධාන භූමිකාවක් තිබුණි.					
07	The time dedicated to hosting the students in your community was time well spent.					
	ඔබේ ප්‍රජාවේ සිසුන්ට සත්කාර කිරීමට කැප වූ කාලය හොඳින් වැය කළ කාලයකි.					
08	All community members were offered the opportunity to be involved in planning the student visit.					
	සියලුම ප්‍රජා සාමාජිකයින්ට ශිෂ්‍ය සංචාරය සැලසුම් කිරීමට සම්බන්ධ වීමට අවස්ථාව ලබා දෙන ලදී.					
09	All community members were offered the opportunity to participate in and host the student visit.					
	සියලුම ප්‍රජා සාමාජිකයින්ට ශිෂ්‍ය වාරතාවට සහභාගී වීමට සහ සත්කාරකත්වය ලබා දීමට අවස්ථාව ලබා දෙන ලදී.					
10	All community members were offered the opportunity to receive monetary or non-monetary benefit from the student visit.					
	සියලුම ප්‍රජා සාමාජිකයින්ට ශිෂ්‍ය සංචාරයෙන් මුල්‍ය හෝ මුල්‍ය නොවන ප්‍රතිලාභ ලබා ගැනීමට අවස්ථාව ලබා දෙන ලදී.					
11	It would be good to have student groups visit your community in the future.					
	අනාගතයේදී ශිෂ්‍ය කණ්ඩායම් ඔබේ ප්‍රජාවට පැමිණීම හොඳය.					
12	The community should expand its engagement with foreign student groups.					
	ප්‍රජාව විදේශීය ශිෂ්‍ය කණ්ඩායම් සමඟ තම සම්බන්ධය පුළුල් කළ යුතුය.					
13	The student visit facilitated your community's understanding of the customs and perspectives of foreign citizens.					
	ශිෂ්‍ය සංචාරය විදේශීය පුරවැසියන්ගේ සිරිත් විරිත් සහ සිතුම් පැතුම් පිළිබඳව ඔබේ ප්‍රජාවට අවබෝධ කර ගැනීමට පහසුකම් සැලසීය.					
14	The students served your community in a useful way.					
	සිසුන් ඔබේ ප්‍රජාවට ප්‍රයෝජනවත් ආකාරයෙන් සේවය කළේය.					
15	The student visit harmed your community.					
	ශිෂ්‍ය පැමිණීම ඔබේ ප්‍රජාවට හානියක් විය.					
16	The student visit facilitated your community's long-term economic development.					
	ශිෂ්‍ය සංචාරය ඔබේ ප්‍රජාවේ දිගුකාලීන ආර්ථික සංවර්ධනයට පහසුකම් සැලසීය.					
17	The student visit was an important event for cultural exchange.					
	ශිෂ්‍ය සංචාරය සංස්කෘතික හුවමාරුව සඳහා වැදගත් සිදුවීමක් විය.					

Figure 1.   The Community Benefit Survey (*provided in both English and Sinhala*)

In May 2022, students and faculty from Elon University completed a homestay and shramadana program with community members in Yahalagama, Anuradhapura District, Sri Lanka. This program focused on

a collective project chosen by the community members – a physical clean-up and rehabilitation of the building and grounds of a local elementary school. At the conclusion of the shramadana, everyone gathered for a community-wide meeting. Following the meeting, adult community members were verbally invited to voluntarily complete the CBS. Of the approximately 75–100 persons attending this meeting, 12 adults agreed to complete the CBS. To maximise community trust, the CBS was administered via paper and pen, distributed and collected by a Sarvodaya staff member, and to ensure anonymity of participant responses no demographic data was collected. Descriptive statistics were generated using Microsoft Excel 2016 for Windows.

Results

Descriptive statistics for the 17 items of the Community Benefit Survey are provided in Table 1. A significant range of responses were given for most items. Particularly high mean scores were given for items 11 ('It would be good to have student groups visit your community in the future', mean = 4.92, s.d. = 0.29) and 14 ('The students served your community in a useful way', mean = 4.91, s.d. = 0.30), whereas a noticeably lower score was provided for item 9 ('All community members were offered the opportunity to participate in and host the student visit', mean = 4.17, s.d. = 1.27). The Community Perceived Benefit Score was 4.51.

Table 1.   Descriptive statistics for each of the 17 items of the Community Benefit Survey

Item #	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range of Responses
1	4.83	0.39	4-5
2	4.25	1.14	1-5
3	4.58	0.67	3-5
4	4.42	0.67	3-5
5	1.83	1.34	1-5
6	4.5	0.71	3-5
7	4.33	1.15	1-5
8	4.36	0.67	3-5
9	4.17	1.27	1-5
10	4.45	0.69	3-5
11	4.92	0.29	4-5
12	4.45	0.52	4-5
13	4.67	0.49	4-5
14	4.91	0.30	4-5
15	1.42	1.17	1-5
16	4.25	0.87	3-5
17	4.83	0.58	3-5

Discussion

The Community Benefit Survey (CBS) was designed to efficiently capture community members' views of the potential benefits and harms that result from hosting a visit from a foreign student group. Based on the assessment of a small number of respondents from a rural community in Sri Lanka, this instrument demonstrated value in facilitating equitable community assessment that centred the voices of community members. Within this context, community members who completed the survey agreed that the students collaborated with their community in a useful way, and that it would be valuable to host additional student groups in the future. There was disagreement in relation to whether all community members were offered the opportunity to participate in or host the student visit. Based on the ratio of foreign visitors to community members, complete community participation was not possible, but we hoped that community members would feel as though they had, or were offered, the opportunity to significantly engage with the student group.

We believe that the CBS is a flexible instrument and has significant utility in assessing the perceived benefit of student groups/community partnerships across a wide variety of domestic and international contexts. When administered alone, the CBS provides data that is appropriate for a variety of quantitative assessment strategies. It also affords significant portability across both time and location, as well as scalability, allowing for the simple collection of data from very large sample sizes. When administered in combination with open-ended surveys, structured or semi-structured interviews, focus groups, or other qualitative approaches, the CBS can serve a critical quantitative role in assessment strategies that utilise mixed methodology.

In the current study, we observed a wide range of responses for most CBS items, which we inferred suggested that community members were comfortable sharing their views and did not feel compelled to provide universally positive responses to all items. However, we were unsure how to interpret the relatively low proportion of community members that completed the survey (12 of the 75–100 people present agreed to do so). Our positionality – authors MHG & AT are academics from the US; author BS is a member of the leadership team of a large non-governmental organisation in Sri Lanka – necessitates that we recognise that community members may have agreed to participate or provided overly positive responses overall in the hope that such responses might lead to ongoing benefits for the community. Without question, the authors' positionality as both participants in community work and researchers of this work limited our ability to function as truly detached 'third party' observers, and thus limited our own objectivity. However, this dual existence as participant-observers also provided us with unique insight into the subject of this research (Reynolds 2019). Two of us (MHG & AT) are not Sri Lankan and do not speak or read Sinhala, but have extensive experience working in rural Sri Lanka and India, and have used these experiences to facilitate effective engagement with the international communities with which we partner. This article's other author (BS) is a native Sri Lankan and Sinhala speaker, with many years of experience creating fruitful partnerships with rural communities in his home country. Although these experiences necessarily limited our ability to be completely objective, collectively they provided us with specific knowledge sets and tools to be effective participant-observers and able to listen to and understand our community partners as a research team (Reynolds 2019). Future assessments using the CBS should consider administration methodologies that decouple the dual roles the authors had as both researchers of, and participants in, community engagement activities.

Given the small number of participants in this preliminary study, additional investigations should use larger samples across a variety of community contexts to ensure that the presumed functional robustness of the CBS is indeed present. Within our own academic programming, we are planning additional future administrations of the CBS in Sri Lanka, as well as to organisational partners in India, Morocco, Costa Rica, and the Lakota Nation of Pine Ridge Reservation (South Dakota, USA).

At present, only a few brief quantitative instruments for assessing higher education CBGL program outcomes from the perspective of community partners exist in the public domain. The CBS fills a critical need for assessments that are easily scaled, require minimal time commitment from respondents, can be easily adapted to different languages in both oral and written form, produce data that can be easily analysed using a variety of standard quantitative techniques, and allow for straightforward outcome comparisons in instrument administrations across both time and location. It is our hope that this preliminary research will encourage other academics engaged in CBGL work to incorporate the voices of community members more fully into their assessment strategies.

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