Exploring Cultural Competence through the 'Humans of Malaysia Project

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Abstract
The field of High Impact Education Practices (HIEPs) advocates the use of Community-based Learning (CBL), an immersive pedagogical method that has shown promising results. This project investigates the practical application of CBL within a Social Psychology course, facilitated through the innovative "Humans of Malaysia Project." In this venture, students were required to integrate with various communities, adopting roles as amateur street photographers. This experiential learning method provided students with a platform to apply essential social psychology concepts such as intergroup relations, contact theory, attribution, and attitude change in authentic, real-world environments. The strategic application of structured interviews and the sharing of experiences via social media platforms enhanced students' understanding of underprivileged communities. The process served to bridge the existing divide between the theoretical teachings of academia and the reality of the general public by creating a holistic learning experience. One noteworthy outcome of this project was the significant elicitation of empathy from the students, and a consequent reduction in prejudice and stereotypes towards unfamiliar social groups. This fostered interpersonal skills, cultural competence, and a heightened sense of social responsibility among the participants. The project also yielded direct, impactful results in the form of funds raised for individuals encountered during the interviews, demonstrating the tangible social impact of this teaching strategy. In conclusion, the implementation of CBL through the "Humans of Malaysia Project" showcased the transformative potential of experiential learning methods. The project played an instrumental role in shaping students' attitudes and fostering community connections, thereby establishing CBL as a valuable and effective strategy within HIEPs.
Keywords: Community-based Learning, Social Psychology, High Impact Education Practices, Intergroup Relations, Cultural Competence

Introduction

Community-based learning (CBL) is an innovative pedagogical approach that has garnered significant attention in recent years. Rooted in the ethos of experiential learning, CBL endeavours to merge academic content with community engagement, allowing students to apply their classroom knowledge in real-world contexts. Embracing this concept is increasingly valued in teaching and learning at universities worldwide (O'Connor & McEwen, 2021). This growing recognition indicates that a substantial portion of full-time faculty have integrated CBL into their courses and have identified specific learning outcomes for community engagement (Joseph & Said, 2020). This holistic approach ensures not just theoretical understanding but also practical applicability of the knowledge gained, aligning with the high-impact educational practices designed to link classroom theories with real-life applications (Andrande et al., 2022).

The efficacy of CBL is further underscored by its alignment with High Impact Education Practices (HIEPs). According to Xhomara et al (2023), students' involvement and investment in their learning process significantly improve their overall learning outcomes. Incorporating CBL within courses, particularly in disciplines like Social Psychology can bridge the often-cited gap between theoretical knowledge and its pragmatic application (Moll, 2019). One noteworthy endeavour that embodies the principles of CBL is the "Humans of Malaysia Project." Inspired by similar undertakings that capture the diverse tapestry of human stories from various parts of the world, this project engaged students in the role of amateur street photographers. The objective was not just to capture evocative images but to engage in structured interviews that delve deep into the life stories and experiences of the subjects (Stanton, 2013).

Such immersive engagements equipped students with a platform to apply essential Social Psychology concepts that bridge the chasm between classroom teachings and the real-world experiences of diverse communities (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Concepts such as intergroup relations, contact theory, and attribution, which are often relegated to the confines of academic textbooks, came alive for the students, fostering a genuine understanding of these theories in action. The strategic use of social media platforms further amplified the impact of the project. By sharing stories and experiences, students could engage with a broader audience and foster a larger dialogue about underprivileged communities, thereby challenging and changing preconceived notions and stereotypes (Goering et al., 2022).

Empathy, often highlighted as a cornerstone of cultural competence emerged as a significant outcome of the project. Students, through their interactions were not just passive observers but active participants in the narratives they were documenting. This elicited a profound sense of empathy that cultivates interpersonal skills and a heightened sense of social responsibility. In light of these considerations, this article seeks to delve into the transformative potential of CBL as exemplified by the "Humans of Malaysia Project." By chronicling the journey of these students and analyzing the tangible and intangible outcomes of the initiative, we aim to reinforce the importance of community engagement in pedagogical practices.

Intergroup Contact in Combating Intergroup Prejudice

Intergroup contact theory, proposed by Allport (1954), has been a cornerstone in understanding how interpersonal interactions can facilitate positive changes in intergroup attitudes. Allport argued that under appropriate conditions, interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce intergroup prejudice. Later empirical studies reinforced

this theory, indicating that direct contact between members of opposing groups can lead to more positive intergroup attitudes and behaviors (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

The mechanics behind this reduction in prejudice are manifold. Direct intergroup interactions, when characterized by equality, cooperation, and common goals, can lead to increased knowledge about the out-group, correction of misconceptions, and reduction in anxiety about intergroup interactions (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). These mechanisms play pivotal roles in increasing intergroup trust, as individuals begin to see members of the out-group as individuals rather than stereotyped representations (Dixon et al., 2005; Dovidio et al., 2018). However, the positive outcomes of intergroup contact are not limited to direct experiences alone. Extended contact, wherein individuals become aware of in-group members having positive relationships with out-group members, has also been demonstrated to reduce prejudice (Zhou et al., 2019). This is particularly relevant in increasingly interconnected societies where direct contact might be limited, but knowledge of positive intergroup relations is pervasive.

Furthermore, the conditions under which contact occurs can significantly impact the efficacy of intergroup interactions in prejudice reduction. Shared goals, interdependence, and support from institutional authorities are factors that have been identified to maximize the positive outcomes of intergroup contact (Dovidio et al., 2003; Di Bernardo et al., 2022). Moreover, intergroup contact not only reduces prejudice but also fosters other positive outcomes like enhanced empathy and perspective-taking. Interacting with members of different groups provides individuals with a window into their experiences, challenges, and narratives, thereby promoting understanding and reducing biases (Vorauer & Sasaki, 2009).

Community Based Learning through Humans of Malaysia Project
The "Humans of New York" initiative, conceptualized by Brandon Stanton, has been a transformative project which it captures the tales and portraits of everyday individuals in New York City (Stanton, 2013). By humanizing the experiences of diverse individuals, it has catalyzed a movement of empathy, understanding, and solidarity. Drawing inspiration from this, the "Humans of Malaysia" project extends this ethos to the Malaysian context. Similar endeavours globally have demonstrated that such projects foster increased empathy, cultural competence, and social responsibility among participants and audiences alike (Palmer, 2016). Engaging in conversations with individuals from varied backgrounds provides participants a first-hand understanding of diverse life experiences and promote empathy (Zembylas, 2007). Moreover, by interacting with people from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, participants refine their cultural competence. They develop an ability to interact effectively with individuals from diverse backgrounds, recognizing, and respecting differences, and appreciating commonalities (Deardorff, 2006; Ilie, 2019). Such projects also instil a heightened sense of social responsibility. Participants, by virtue of their interactions are often exposed to the challenges faced by underrepresented or marginalized communities. This awareness often translates into a desire to effect positive change either through advocacy or direct intervention (Astin et al., 2000; Alam, 2022). On top of this, the element of gratefulness emerges as a recurrent theme. As participants delve into myriad life stories, they often reflect upon their privileges and blessings. By juxtaposing their experiences with those they encounter, many express a heightened sense of gratitude for their circumstances, fostering a more positive and appreciative outlook towards life.

Method

1. Pre-test and Identification of Groups

To ensure the systematic approach of this study, participants were initially grouped into teams with each team comprising three partners. Their task was to engage as amateur street photographers within various communities across Malaysia.

To hone in on the project's main objective of understanding diverse perspectives, these groups were asked to identify three entities - which could be individuals, couples, families, or even whole communities - that they deemed different from themselves or perceived as outliers within societal norms. The willingness of these entities to have their photographs taken and answer some probing questions was a requisite criterion for selection.

Before initiating their street interviews and photography sessions, participants were assessed on six critical psychosocial dimensions: empathy, connectedness, gratefulness, stereotype, intergroup prejudice, and intergroup anxiety. This pre-test served as a baseline to gauge the influence of the ensuing experiential learning on these measures.

2. Interview and Photographing Procedure

Post identification, the groups set out to capture the essence of their selected entities through photographs and interviews. Each photograph taken was expected to be accompanied by a caption which would succinctly encapsulate the interaction. More often than not, these captions manifested as quotes from the photographed subjects. Following the quote, a brief description about the subject was necessary to provide context to the audience.

or the street interviews, a set of sample questions was provided to guide the interactions, although participants were free to craft their own questions as well. Some of these standardized questions included probes like, "What is the meaning of life?", "When was the saddest moment of your life?", "What is the biggest struggle you face?", and "If you could give one piece of advice to a large group of people, what would it be?". These questions were designed to evoke deep and introspective responses from the subjects, thereby enriching the understanding of the students.

3. Post-test and Public Display on the 'Humans of Malaysia Project' Facebook Page

Following the fieldwork, the participants were once again assessed on the same five dimensions - empathy, connectedness, gratefulness, stereotype, and prejudice. This post-test was designed to capture any shifts or developments in these areas as a consequence of the participants' immersion in the project.

Simultaneously, the selected photographs along with their captions were uploaded onto a dedicated Facebook page titled "Humans of Malaysia Project". This public platform facilitated a broader engagement, allowing not just the participants, but also the wider community to delve into the diverse narratives and experiences captured by the project. This virtual gallery served not just as a display of work, but as a medium for storytelling, fostering a wider sense of empathy and understanding within the community.

Result and Discussion

The implementation and experience of the Humans of Malaysia Project was anticipated to bring about notable changes in students' psychosocial attributes. To measure this, a comparative analysis of pre- and post-test results involving approximately 65 students was conducted. Figure 1 shows the pre-test and pro-test results.
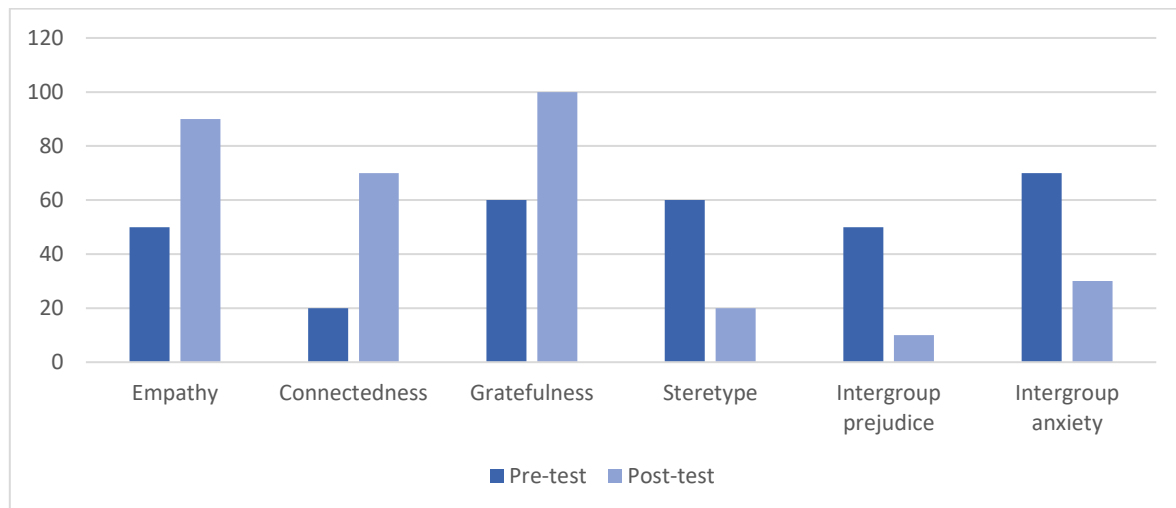
Figure 1 Result of pre-test and post-test

Pre-Test Findings

At the commencement of the project, an initial assessment revealed certain trends in students' perceptions and feelings. Empathy was recorded at 50%, suggesting that only half of the students displayed a significant understanding or shared feeling with others. Connectedness, which denotes a feeling of belonging and understanding, was at a relatively low 20%, indicating that a majority of the students felt disconnected or alienated from diverse social groups. Gratefulness stood at 60%, pointing towards a moderate level of appreciation amongst the participants.

Perhaps most concerning were the figures on stereotype, intergroup prejudice, and intergroup anxiety. A significant 60% of students harboured stereotypical views, another 50% displayed tendencies towards intergroup prejudice, and a substantial 70% of students exhibited intergroup anxiety, indicating feelings of unease or apprehension when considering interactions with unfamiliar social groups.

Post-Test Findings

Upon the conclusion of the project, a re-assessment brought forth some striking transformations. The post-test displayed a commendable leap in the empathy quotient, with a substantial 90% of students exhibiting heightened understanding and shared feelings with others. The sense of connectedness too witnessed a surge, rising to 70%. This suggested that the project played a pivotal role in bridging the understanding gap and fostering feelings of community. Gratefulness scores touched the zenith, with a perfect 100% of the participants acknowledging heightened levels of appreciation.

The project's impact was further underscored by the drastic reductions in stereotypes, prejudice, and intergroup anxiety. Stereotypical views plummeted to a mere 20%, instances of intergroup prejudice reduced to a nominal 10%, and intergroup anxiety was significantly diminished to 20%. This profound shift in perceptions and feelings demonstrates the transformative potential of the Humans of Malaysia Project in reshaping perceptions, dispelling unfounded biases, and mitigating apprehensions towards diverse social interactions.

Discussion

One of the primary objectives of the project was to enrich students' learning experiences by drawing links between patterns of social relationships in social groups and the wider society

(Allport, 1954). The significant shift in measures like empathy, connectedness, and reduction in stereotypes, intergroup prejudice and intergroup anxiety post the project testifies to its success in this realm. Students were able to move beyond textbook definitions and truly understand the intricacies of societal fabric through direct exposure. Moreover, in today's globalized world, understanding diversity is paramount. The project aimed at honing students' critical skills and thinking about society's diversity (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). By encouraging them to step out, interact with, and document stories of people from varied backgrounds, it was ensured that students didn't just learn about diversity but also reflected critically on their biases, preconceived notions, and societal structures.

It was vital for students to not just learn about Social Psychology but also apply these concepts in real-world scenarios (McKeachie, 2002). The project's design ensured just that. By playing the role of amateur street photographers and interviewers, students had a hands-on experience of applying techniques learned in class. Additionally, the project's design was rooted in the theory of intergroup contact, which posits that direct interaction between groups can lead to increased understanding and reduction of prejudice (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The practical exposure provided to the students affirmed this theory, underscoring the importance of social contact in breaking barriers and fostering understanding.

Beyond the academic objectives, the project also brought forward some invaluable lessons in unity, humanity, and societal concerns. Through self-experience, students understood the importance of unity and humanity, reflecting the values integral to harmonious societal functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The stories captured and shared provided a vivid tapestry of life in Malaysia, helping not just the students but also the wider public to appreciate the diverse narratives that shape the nation. Moreover, the project underscored the significance of being attuned to societal plights, thereby fostering a sense of social responsibility among students.

Implications and Significance of the Study
The "Humans of Malaysia Project" exemplifies the significance of joint ventures and collaborative networks in academic and societal undertakings. By partnering with various entities such as industries, communities, NGOs, and notably with the Family Empowerment (FAME), universities can facilitate comprehensive learning experiences that extend beyond the confines of traditional classroom settings (Furco, 1996). The creation of the Humans of Malaysia Project Photobook serves as a tangible testament to such collaborations, and the initiative to construct a module or teaching guideline for CBL-based courses underlines the project's long-term vision and its potential scalability.

For the community, this project has the potent ability to bring them closer to university students. By fostering a sense of togetherness and mutual understanding, it challenges and diminishes the often-perceived boundaries between academic institutions and the larger community (Jacoby, 2014; Jokikokko, 2021). This bridge facilitates a symbiotic relationship, enriching both the students and the community members. Moreover, from a student's perspective, the implications are multifaceted. Not only does the project provide a platform for interaction and discourse on prevalent community issues, but it also enables students to tangibly reach out and make a difference (Eyler & Giles, 1999). The real-world experiences amplify their grasp on theoretical concepts, transforming abstract ideas into relatable scenarios. Moreover, students undergo holistic growth, with enhanced critical thinking, creativity, and a reflective perspective on the diverse society around them. Most critically, the

project serves as a potent antidote to prejudice, replacing it with empathy and fostering positive intergroup contact.

Educators and lecturers stand to benefit immensely from the project's framework. It paves the way for a more dynamic and interactive teaching approach, enabling educators to harness the diversity and richness of community-based teaching and learning methods (Butin, 2010). This approach resonates more profoundly with students, making the learning process more immersive and impactful. On a broader scale, this project holds implications for the nation. By embodying the ethos of "University for Society (U4S)", it underscores the pivotal role academic institutions can play in societal betterment (Andrande & Westover, 2020). Universities are not just centers of learning but also hubs of social change, and initiatives like the "Humans of Malaysia Project" reiterate this mission.

Conclusion

The "Humans of Malaysia Project", when integrated into the Social Psychology course framework, provided a compelling case for the transformative potential of Community-based Learning (CBL). This innovative approach, drawing inspiration from the globally recognized "Humans of New York" initiative, illuminated the profound impacts of experiential learning methodologies, especially when aligned with High Impact Education Practices (HIEPs). One of the most salient outcomes of the project was the marked shift in student perspectives towards marginalized and diverse societal groups. Pre- and post-tests conclusively illustrated substantial reductions in stereotypes, intergroup prejudices, and anxiety, coupled with enhanced feelings of empathy, connectedness, and gratitude. Such outcomes not only reflect the students' deeper comprehension of complex social psychology concepts but also underscore the broader societal and community implications of the project.

Furthermore, the project served as a bridge between theoretical academic knowledge and the realities of the community, emphasizing the role universities can play in societal betterment. By engaging students directly with community members and promoting a narrative of unity, humanity, and empathy, the project spotlighted the real-life application of academic knowledge. The successful partnership with various community, industry, and non-governmental stakeholders showcased the benefits of collaborative educational ventures. It laid down a replicable blueprint for educators looking to infuse community-based initiatives into their curriculum, thus enriching students' educational experiences while simultaneously benefiting the community. In essence, the "Humans of Malaysia Project" stands as a testament to the profound potential of intertwining academia with real-world community experiences. It calls for a broader adoption of such immersive pedagogical methods, ensuring that students not only learn about the world but actively contribute to shaping it for the better.

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