

Instilling Service Learning to Undergraduate Business Students: A Case Study Approach to Understanding Business-Related Concepts with the Use of Kiva

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Abstract

Higher education continues to place an emphasis on service-learning, specifically within business and management sciences (Kenworthy-U'Ren & Peterson, 2005). A local academic business organization at a small institution chose to embark on a service-learning endeavor. The purpose of this study was for business majors, active in Phi Beta Lambda (PBL), and their advisors/professors to further investigate microlending and other business-related concepts through the use of service learning. Service was provided to the campus community, area high school Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) students, and to the borrowers of their Kiva loans. The research, qualitative in nature, employed case study methodology. Themes emerged in academic, personal, and civic dimensions as a result of analysis of student responses to guided questionnaires.

Keywords: civic engagement, Kiva, microlending, service learning

1. Introduction

Keeping consistent with the mission of the National Future Business Leaders of America-Phi Beta Lambda (FBLA-PBL), service is a component that many chapters embrace. As many are aware, FBLA-PBL prepares high school and college-aged students for their futures through service, education, and progress (fb-la-pbl.org, 2015). Competitive events at the state and national level are a component of this that receive much recognition and attention from students. Specifically, there is a competition for chapters to enter based upon various community service endeavors their local chapters have participated in. If recognized at the state level (placing first or second place within each state), the community service project is eligible for presentation at the National Leadership Conference. The three professors working with the student organization on this project maintain an interest in the possibility of transforming a traditional community service project where, arguably, the community is the sole recipient of the action, into a service-learning event where both the community and students benefit. To examine this transformation, students of the Peru State College chapter of Phi Beta Lambda undertook a service-learning event with the use of microlending, specifically through Kiva. It is worth noting the size of the institution somewhat limits the potential of results at times. On a yearly basis, there are approximately 25 members that join this academic organization. As such, with various interests, not all students participate in every activity. In various capacities, seven students fully participated in this specific service-learning endeavor.

The far-reaching aspect of such an event is that various levels of communities were able to benefit. Wanting to benefit others outside our organization as well as serve as a learning experience for the students, these PBL members first started working on a local scale by mentoring a nearby high school FBLA chapter. Students were able to “learn” together by combing through the wealth of microfinance information, determining what is most useful and relevant to their current emphasis of study. Specifically, students (both FBLA and PBL) learned in-depth details about Kiva and its current standing as a microlending site of choice. Furthermore, college students were able to provide more financial, entrepreneurial, economic, and international business insight to the high school students as they had experienced advanced level of instruction in these areas. As an end result, both the PBL chapter and FBLA chapter utilized Kiva to make microloans to entrepreneurs across the globe.

Reaching out to the youth was a great start for a service-learning endeavor. The local PBL chapter also sought out to inform the campus community about microlending and the specific organization of Kiva as well. Peru

State College PBL members hosted an information booth on the college campus for a week during the Spring semester allowing individuals to stop by, watch Kiva “how it works” videos, review various informational flyers and pamphlets, ask questions about microlending, entrepreneurship, international business, economics, Kiva, etc. When creating materials for the booth, the campus audience was taken into consideration. Knowing college students have a tendency to quickly walk by these type of booth set-ups, materials needed to be eye-catching and newsworthy, and students leading the booth must be gregarious to gain attention of those passing by. Pictures and infographics proved to be the most enticing to share a wealth of information in a timely manner. Additionally, having technology available at the booth to continually loop a video proved successful.

In addition to the informational sessions with FBLA and the college campus, the students also set aside additional time as part of the service-learning event to specifically raise funds to be dispersed through Kiva. When the fundraising solicitation occurred, PBL students utilized, in a sense, their personal selling and persuasive speaking techniques to attract Kiva supporters. The end result was a total of \$510.00 being raised, allowing the local college students to become microfinance lenders to those in need. This money goes to the end user or beneficiary of the service-learning event: the various entrepreneurs being served by Kiva.

The benefit to the students was to explore the academic concepts of microlending, entrepreneurship, economics, and international business. Much time and dedication was required of students in order to make all portions of the service-learning endeavor a success. Meeting with local high school students, raising money, serving as an information booth for the campus community, and researching aspects of microlending and Kiva, in general, all required an immense amount of time.

2. Literature Review

2.1 History of MicroLending

Microfinance is a relatively new and innovative financial apparatus generally serving low-income and the very poor promoting social justice. According to Mago (2014), “microfinance improves the well-being of the participants through job creation, increasing income and building assets (wealth)” (p. 10). Microlending and microfinancing are similar in that the populations served by Microfinance Institutions (MFI) are primarily low-income earners unable to leverage the traditional credit markets for business or personal loans.

Microcredit is defined as “the extension of small loans to very poor people”, and it experienced a significant resurgence until the world economic recession of 2008-2009 (Dichter, 2007, p. 2). Traditional financial services, those from established banks, credit unions, and savings banks have customarily focused on creditworthiness and ability to repay without regard for social responsibility or charitable lending. While traditional banking systems of Europe and the United States “were crucially important for the overall growth record of these economies” little concern for the plight of the very poor is in evidence by established banking and financial institutions (Cull, Davis, Lamoreaux, & Rosenthal, 2006, p. 3020).

Whether lending charities, social philanthropy, religious dominated donations, or in-kind trades of goods for capital, small-scale financing has a checkered history with wide variations in purposes. Not all lending to the poor has been with altruistic motives and as a result, some low-income people experience exorbitant interest rates, deceptive practices, and even organized crime (Hollis & Sweetman, 2001). In developed countries, governments generally act to regulate, standardize, and enforce the rule of law with respect to providing capital to creditors by business and consumer. Such advocacy of regulatory systems is not available in many developing countries (Yunus, 2007).

2.2 Kiva

The concept of Kiva began in 2004 with two co-founders: Matt Flannery and Jessica Jackley. By 2005, the husband and wife duo officially started the “online lending platform that allows individuals in the developed world to loan to small business people in the developing world” (Flannery, 2007, p. 31). Within one year, loans were being made, and seven entrepreneurs had fully been funded for their ventures. Kiva officially was founded as a non-profit in October 2005. From 2005 to present day, a multitude of success stories can be found. With the increased interest in microfinance, Kiva was not only the first, but has proven to be the most successful to date. Kiva, whose mission is to “connect people through lending to alleviate poverty” has provided over 976,000 loans valued at over \$777 million (kiva.org, 2015).

Kiva’s success has been acknowledged in multiple ways: *Financial Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, The Oprah Winfrey Show, *New York Times*, *Fortune*, and *Business Week* have all given notice to the rising star lending source. The sense of community and feeling of being part of a network has been demonstrated by the Kiva

lenders. They have started their own websites and discussion boards, and some have even traveled across the globe to meet those who received their loan.

Kiva lenders basically vote with their wallets, and a loan through the Kiva website is exactly that: simply a loan. Those lending the money expect repayment; however, there is not presently an interest rate for their return on investment. The debate is still out whether this may change in the future.

Key facts and statistics regarding Kiva are numerous and very intriguing. "Every business on the site thus far has been funded at an average rate of 2.2 days per business, but with significant variance" (Flannery, 2007, p. 50). As Flannery (2007) notes, lenders show some favoritism toward certain types of borrowers: "Africans first, women first, and agriculture first. A female African fruit seller? Funded in hours. Nicaraguan retail stand? Funded in days. A Bulgarian taxi driver? Funded in weeks" (p. 50).

Simply by going to the kiva.org website, someone can become a microfinance lender. The website features a multitude of pictures of interested borrowers across the globe. Various reasons for wanting to borrow money can be found. For example, featured on the Kiva website (kiva.org, 2015) Batjargal Namsrai from Mongolia is seeking a loan of \$2425 to purchase additional quantities of used clothing.

Batjargal is 35 years old and lives with his wife and two sons in a "ger", a Mongolian traditional nomadic housing tent, in Hovd province, Mongolia. His sons, age 10 and 12, attend local secondary school. He manages meat sales and used clothing trading businesses with the help of his wife.

Batjargal himself is responsible for selling meat and meat products and his wife is responsible for selling used clothing. He started his meat trading business in 2003 and gained much experience. His business was quite successful which allowed him to start up the used clothing trading business in 2010. Even with one year of business operations, he has managed to stabilize his business and became well-known amongst his customers.

Now he earns a daily profit of 10,000-15,000 MNT from his meat sales business and a monthly profit of 300,000 MNT from his used clothing business. He is a polite man who says, "I am planning to continue my businesses in the future". He is requesting a 3,000,000 MNT loan to purchase more used clothes for his business (kiva.org, 2015).

The website goes into further detail about the loan as well. It shows 20 percent has already been raised, repayment terms, repayment schedule, information about the field partner, data about the country, and even profile details regarding those who have already lent money to this borrower.

Once the lender chooses to loan to Batjargal Namsrai or someone else, the amount of the loan can be determined. For as little as \$25, one can take part in the microlending venture. PayPal assists with the transaction, free of charge to Kiva, a donation of their services to the microfinance platform. Money is then transferred to Kiva, and Kiva disburses it to the field partner, "an established microfinance institution that on-loans the money to the borrower" (Lawsy, 2008, p. 1531). Once the borrower repays the loan, the original lender can choose to withdraw the money from Kiva or essentially reloan it and keep the microfinance wheel in motion.

An influx of interest in social entrepreneurship continues to occur in our world. Within the realm of social entrepreneurship education, Kiva attempts to alleviate social ill while yet allowing business concepts to be addressed in an authentic context. Within academia, Kiva truly addresses a multitude of business facets: finance, entrepreneurship, economics, international business, etc., and the opportunities for action and reflection potentially remain untapped to the fullest. "In and of itself, Kiva exemplifies social entrepreneurial development that is cross cultural, global in nature, and links the global to the local as the center for growth" (James & Schmitz, 2011, p. 4).

2.3 Service-Learning

Service learning is: a teaching method, which combines community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility. Service-learning programs involve students in organized community service that addresses local needs, while developing their academic skills, sense of civic responsibility, and commitment to the community (Campus Compact, 2000, p. 17).

Pearce, Grafman, Colledge and Legg (2008) further note how well established service learning has become in academia: service learning has a positive impact on students' academic learning and moral development, improves students' ability to apply what they have learned in the "real world", and improves academic outcomes as demonstrated complexity of understanding, problem analysis, critical thinking, and cognitive development (p. 207).

It was also determined through meta-analysis regarding the effects of service-learning (Yorio & Ye, 2012) that the pedagogical tool had a positive effect on understanding of social issues, personal insight, and cognitive development.

Kenworthy-U'Ren (2008) asserts the rise of service-learning within academics, specifically in business, is due to the public catastrophes and unethical practices among prominent United States business leaders. This sentiment is echoed by VanSandt (2005) who finds American confidence shaken by corporate scandal. Additionally, Corporate America is said to be "looking to restore its tarnished reputation" (Merritt, 2002, p. 65). As Kenworthy-U'Ren alludes (2008), these lapses have allowed for opportunities to teach students the ethical underpinnings of life. When service-learning experiences are provided for students in the business sector, students gain much knowledge about the world in which they live, and they are provided with a basis for better economic decision making (McGoldrick, Battle, & Gallagher, 2000). Mungaray, Ramirez-Urquidy, Taxis, Ledezma and Ramirez (2008) all believe in the value of service-learning within business as well. As they state, "service-learning programs with the participation of college students can play an important role both in supporting disadvantaged microenterprises and in providing meaningful learning experiences to students" (p. 19).

Steinke and Fitch (2007) note that over two decades of research has demonstrated high-quality service learning enhances learning. Desplaces, Steinberg, Coleman and Kenworthy-U'Ren (2006) also argue that one thing is certain regarding the intersection between business and service-learning: "it is making a positive difference for students, institutions, and communities" (p. 66).

3. Methods

The case study approach in qualitative research is useful in presenting detailed accounts and focusing on a process rather than outcomes. Yin (2003) posits that the case study method is the preferred strategy when "how" or "why" questions are posed. Data collection includes asking questions, listening actively, adapting to unforeseen circumstances, grasping the issues, and having the ability to identify any personal bias.

To lead the data collection efforts, guided reflections were utilized; guided reflection is critical to the success of a service-learning endeavor. Eyler, Giles and Schmiede (as cited in Ash & Clayton, 2004) determined reflection is the "necessary link that integrates service and learning into a mutually reinforcing relationship" (p. 139). In an effort to provide students with a rigorous reflection opportunity, the general phases necessary include the following: description of an experience; analysis of academic, personal, and civic learning; and, articulation of learning outcomes. The articulation aspect is further detailed within Figure 1. When articulation of learning takes place, it essentially brings the service-learning activity to a close in the academic setting and establishes a foundation for the students to carry the results further to future learning and experiences in a critical thinking capacity.

Critical thought continues to receive increased emphasis in higher education, and at this specific institution it is no different. To allow facilitation of critical thinking in such an endeavor, standards or expectations should be provided to the students. Over the course of the academic year while service-learning was taking place, the PBL students had guidance from their advisor and professors.

At the conclusion of the service-learning experience, the researchers provided post-service questions to each of the students involved in the Kiva project (See Appendix A). The intent was to assess student learning as a result of the specific service-learning project students took part in. While the assessments are not for a grade for PBL members as a typical experience may be assessed within a classroom setting, the students in such an academic organization tend to realize the importance of "performing" to their best ability. By then utilizing the case study approach, the researchers/professors could then analyze the results.

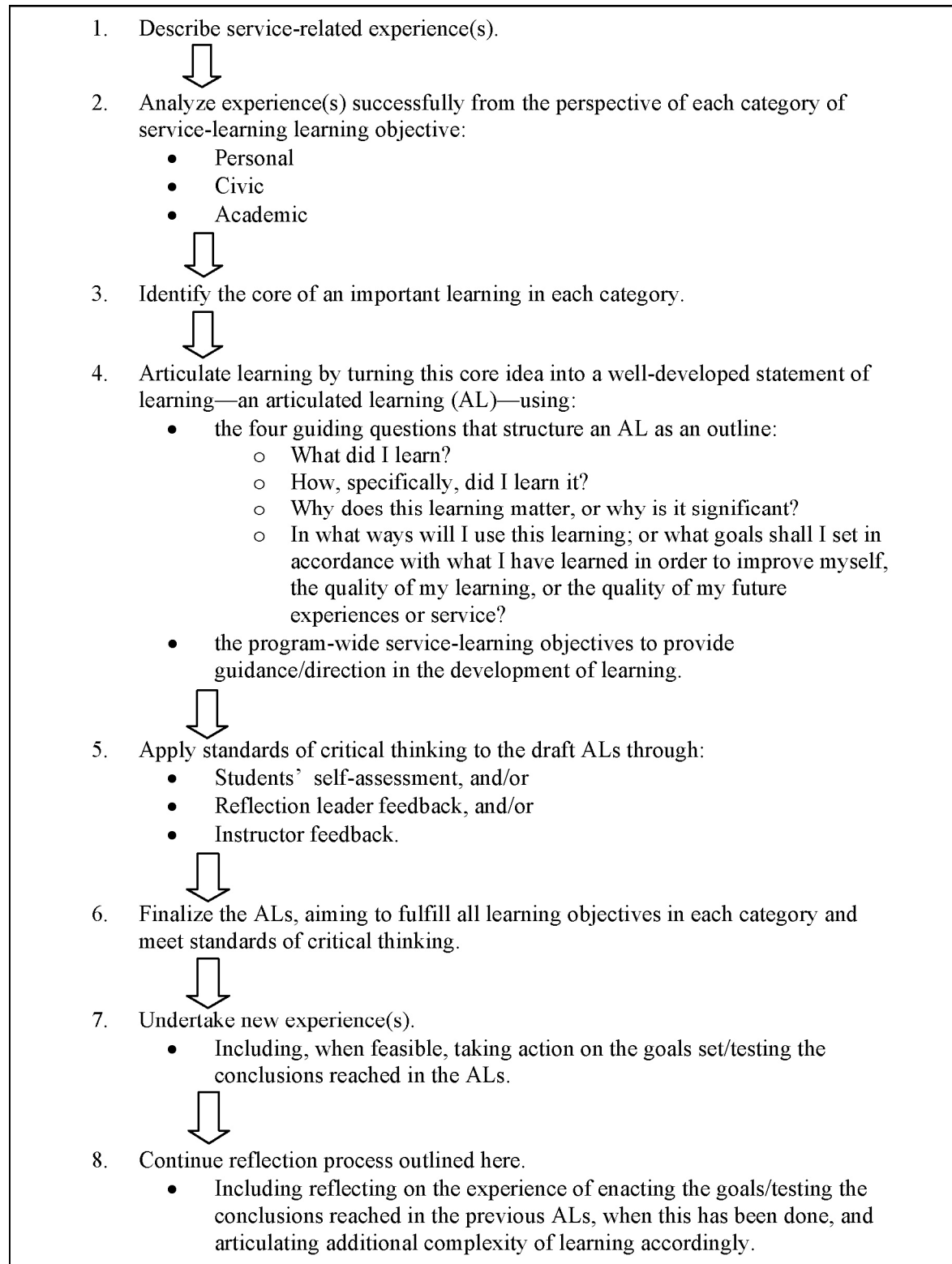


Figure 1. Overview of the process of articulating learning as applied to service learning (Ash & Clayton)

4. Results

True to the tenants of qualitative research, student responses to the guided questionnaires were collected and sorted to determine Key Words In Context (KWIC). To assist in triangulation, the authors examined the responses separately to determine emergent themes. As an added benefit to the data collection of electronic documents, the authors were afforded an opportunity to cut and paste student responses under distinct headings and color-code each. Four of the seven students provided post-service responses. Unfortunately, three students had graduated and chose not to partake in the follow up. As mentioned previously, the ability to obtain a large n-value is nonexistent at such a small institution with an even smaller PBL membership. Even so, the authors strongly accept the challenge they can create opportunities for students, regardless of their background, that will better their potential and the world in which they live (Ryan, Grotrian-Ryan, Buesing, & Henry, 2014); the use of case study methodology allows such instances to be reported.

4.1 Academic Dimension

Student responses clearly identified a correlation between the service-learning project and the relevant academic coursework. Two respondents identified accounting as a course concept “related to microlending in the context of (the) Kiva service learning related activity” while three identified business finance as a course concept related to the activity. Three individual responses identified microeconomics, finite math, and organizational ethics. All four respondents further identified “microlending” or “loans/lending” as a course concept relevant to the endeavor and one identified it as “an ethical endeavor rather than just a business transaction”.

While identifying a course concept related to microlending is a key construct in critical thinking, the authors sought to further explore critical thought by asking how the service-learning experience was able to assist in better understanding course concepts. Three of the four students clearly identified that an ability to “visually (display)” or “see” how microlending could “boost the economy” from the Kiva website via a “video that enables students to better understand the Kiva process” while helping “them understand the general microlending steps”.

Following the identification of course concepts, students were then asked to “analyze” these “course concepts in light of what” was “experienced in the Kiva activity”. Specifically, the authors sought to determine if the respondents were able to determine “specific ways” the course concepts were “the same and/or different”. To this question three of the four students clearly identified that the course concept and their Kiva experience were “the same” (n = 2) or “what I expected” (n = 1). The fourth respondent identified that the experience helped them to further “understand why exchange rates from economics are important” because “people in other countries require a lot less money to start a business”. As a potential follow-up to this question, students were further asked to identify “complexities in the concept that (they) had not been aware of before”. While one student answered “none” and another felt that they had answered the question previously, two elaborated that “giving loans”, ensuring an ability to “pay it back”, and “how the profits are passed onto the initial provider of the capital and the middleman bank” were course concepts that they had not considered previously.

Finally, students were asked to “synthesize and evaluate course concepts based upon what (they had) experienced in (the) service-learning activity”. Specifically, the authors sought to determine if the course concepts needed revision and, if so, in what way. Unanimous response (n = 4) was that course concepts need no revision. It was further noted that one student felt Kiva served to “clarify in a real-life format what is already understood in a text-based format” and another stated that microlending “needs to be researched more in depth” as it is a “generally new practice” and instructors should “be more thorough”, implying that the instruction rather than the concept needs revision.

4.2 Personal Dimension

Once the respondents had been asked to critically examine an understanding of course concepts following the service-learning experience, the researchers sought to instill personal reflection through the guided questions, “Identify and describe an awareness about a personal characteristic that has been enhanced by reflection on your Kiva service-learning activity” and “Apply this awareness in the context of your Kiva activity and to other areas of your life now or in the near future”. It is through these questions that the respondents were prompted to inquire in “what ways will I use this learning; or what goals shall I set in accordance with what I have learned in order to improve myself, the quality of my learning, or the quality of my future experiences or service?”

A range of responses to the question regarding “an awareness about a personal characteristic that has been enhanced” included discovering a potential progression from “a new way of giving” to raising “a lot of awareness of how others lived”, to enhancing “sensitiveness”, to ultimately “empathy”. In turn, when students

were asked to “Apply this awareness to other areas or (their) life” a similar progression was found where respondents stated they “will try to learn more and try not to be biased”, to Kiva being “an organization that (they) will probably invest in”, to “(helping) me be more aware of how people have needs” to ultimately helping to “further understand that people all have very different lifestyles and not necessarily because of the choices they have made”.

While the personal dimension of the study warrants further investigation, it should be noted that all four respondents participated in a previous study regarding character development through service-learning with empathy identified as a key construct. As a result, these responses potentially display bias, yet at the same time could possibly serve to exemplify longitudinal attitudes with regards to an ability to “put yourself in another person’s shoes”.

4.3 Civic Dimension

The final dimension of the guided reflection questions were concerned with the “approach Kiva takes, or could have taken”, “the appropriateness of the approach and (necessary steps) to make any needed improvements”, and an “(evaluation of) Kiva’s role as an agent(s) of systematic change”. These last few guided questions follow a progression whereby students analyzed the service-learning endeavor subjectively (academically and personally) before being finally asked to view the endeavor objectively and link learning to applicability on a societal level.

While all four respondents were able to identify and describe the approach that Kiva takes, two elaborated that Kiva “should consider microlending for those who are less fortunate in the United States” and how Kiva “could have had a bigger impact on our community”. This notion was reiterated in a subsequent response regarding the “appropriateness of the approach taken and steps necessary to make any needed improvements in Kiva’s approach”. While one student had never heard of Kiva prior to the service-learning experience, and one found Kiva’s approach appropriate, a third suggested that “With the hard recession that the United States has continued to battle, Kiva should consider lending to those who need a second chance to get out of our recession slump”. This would again seem to indicate that even though the students understood the academic concept, and realized personal growth via an ability to think of the needs of others, they were more concerned with United States citizens than with a global economy.

The final question under the realm of the Civic Dimension asked students to “Evaluate Kiva’s role as an agent(s) of systematic change”. It was here that students provided the most objective response with all four being able to reiterate the ultimate goal of Kiva as a lender providing an opportunity to “borrow and pay back money and grow businesses” and “with the lended money Kiva has been providing the less fortunate are able to change their way of life”.

When taken holistically, these responses illustrate that the students participating in the service-learning endeavor are indeed able to articulate learning by addressing three of the four guiding questions: What did I learn? How did I learn it? and Why does this learning matter? Where the disparity seems to exist is with the fourth articulated learning question: in what ways will I use this learning?

5. Conclusion

Academically, respondents felt that Kiva had no need to revise the structure of the microlending program. They further elaborated that they could see PBL promoting “the benefits of Kiva” and that “PBL could take a bigger role in Kiva and take the initiative to offer our services to different professors on campus that teach microlending”. This exemplifies an academic dimension wherein students set goals in accordance with what they have learned in order to improve themselves, the quality of their learning, and the quality of their future experience and service (AL guiding question number four).

Writing within the personal dimension, students successfully communicated articulated learning by reiterating what it was they had learned as a result of the service-learning, how they learned it, and why it was significant. The increased sensitivity and awareness that occurred as a result of the service-learning further demonstrated that the students “will try to learn more about other people from other areas” and that being “part of an organization such as Kiva will help (them) be more aware of how people have needs and seek ways to help meet those needs”.

Worthy of further investigation is the notion that under the Civic Domain students did not view Kiva’s role as one whose focus should specifically be on developing nations. Instead, the respondents replied with a sociocentric restraint that focused more on the needs of American citizens rather than as a global community. While it could be argued that the students participating the service-learning endeavor achieved higher levels of critical thinking as a result of the guiding questions in both the Academic and Personal Dimensions, critical

thought also requires than an individual "...recognize the power, and potential danger of sociocentric thought" (Paul & Elder, 2005, p. 41). What's more, individuals "...actively resist this tendency, seeing themselves, not simply as citizens of a particular country, but as citizens of the world as well" (Paul & Elder, 2005, p. 41).

Given this particular knowledge, it becomes important that students were provided an opportunity for self-assessment as well as instructor feedback. The particular difficulty with a continuation of the articulated learning and critical thinking exercise as demonstrated here is that, of the four respondents, three graduated soon after completion of the service-learning study. This illustrates a decisive need for service-learning, an introduction to articulated learning, and critical thinking that commences early in the student's academic career if success is to be obtained. This is not to imply that a longitudinal study would not be beneficial following student graduation, but rather that a longitudinal study is desirable to continue to assess critical thought incrementally throughout a student's post-graduate years.

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Appendix A

Student Reflection/Questionnaire Regarding Kiva Service-Learning Project

Academic Dimension

1) *Identify and describe course concepts related to microlending in the context of your Kiva service learning related activity.*

- For example, list the course concept along with your specific course name and/or number (such as loans—BUS 231 Accounting and BUS 339 Business Finance) and describe what happened in the service learning experience that relates to this course concept.

2) *Apply course concepts in the context of this Kiva activity.*

- How does the Kiva service-learning experience help you better understand the course concept(s)?

3) *Analyze course concepts in light of what you have experienced in the Kiva activity.*

- In what specific ways are the concept (or your prior understanding of it) and the experience the same and/or different?
- What complexities do you see now in the concept that you had not been aware of before?

4) *Synthesize and evaluate course concepts based upon what you have experienced in your Kiva service-learning activity.*

- Does the concept (or your prior understanding of it) need to be revised and if so, in what specific ways? Provide evidence for your conclusion.
- If revision is necessary, what factors do you think have contributed to the inadequacy in the concept as presented or in your prior understanding of it? (e.g., bias/assumptions/agendas/lack of information on the part of the academic professors or on your part.)
- Based on the analysis above, what should/might PBL and/or Kiva do differently in the future for these endeavors and what are the challenges that they might face as they do so?

Personal Dimension

1) *Identify and describe an awareness about a personal characteristic that has been enhanced by reflection on your Kiva service-learning activity.*

2) *Apply this awareness in the context of your Kiva activity and to other areas of your life now or in the future. Describe in detail.*

Civic Dimension

- 1) *Identify and describe the approach Kiva takes or, looking back on it, could have taken.*
- 2) *Analyze the appropriateness of the approach taken and the steps necessary to make any needed improvements in Kiva's approach.*
- 3) *Evaluate Kiva's role as an agent(s) of systemic change.*

Adapted from Ash & Clayton, 2004.

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