

Beyond Classrooms: How Project-Based Learning Fosters the Development of Emotional Competencies

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ABSTRACT

This research paper seeks to examine how project-based learning provides students with social and emotional development in general, and how it helps form one's fundamental emotional competencies in particular. The paper starts with an overview of the project-based learning practice and highlights its positive impacts on the cognitive skills of project participants. Because students' emotional abilities – along with their cognitive aptitudes – are often instilled as a direct result of project implementation, the paper contends that the key takeaway of project-based learning is the acquired emotional literacy of students. This research paper uses a descriptive research design, and the section of the paper which presents an analysis of collected data through a self-administered questionnaire, developed in line with the related literature, supports its central thesis: As a key academic instrument, project-based learning fosters the development of one's emotional competencies, which include self-awareness, empathy, as well as social skills in communication and teamwork. As this type of learning helps students to recognize and develop feelings about themselves, their peers, as well as the community they serve, or the society they are part of, project-based learning is validated as a highly effective teaching method, which continues to uphold its relevance despite a rapidly changing educational landscape. The paper also argues that given the breadth and depth of changes in education that we witness nowadays, the emphasis on the acquisition of emotional competencies, either through project-based learning or other forms of academic practices, will remain a relevant topic of scholarly discussions for years to come.

Keywords: Project-Based Learning, Emotional Intelligence, Emotional Competence, Self-Awareness, Empathy, Social Skills, Communication, Teamwork, Leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Over recent years, project-based learning has attracted widespread academic attention for several reasons. A growing mismatch between skills acquisition provided by tertiary education institutions and skills required by employers occurring as a direct result of technological advancement, disruptions, and automation of processes – hallmarks of a rapidly changing global economy – appears to be one of them. As the limitations of traditional tertiary education are laid bare, producing employable graduates who possess knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes is a major challenge for the global academic community in today's society (Sviatko, 2020).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in search of fresh innovation, institutions of higher education in both developed and developing countries are compelled to rethink their academic portfolios. In order to meet the challenge of the day, long-established academic strategies undergo major overhauls, existing teaching practices are revised, and a variety of new teaching methods are introduced. Thus, to facilitate learning in the classroom and beyond – and to equip students with desirable skills – project-based learning has become a point of reference for many institutions of higher learning – and for good reason.

The practicality of this medium of learning, as we will reveal later, is evident. Neuroscientists have long argued that learning – in its all forms – programs the brain, as learning experiences change the functional circuitry that is used to process and remember a given learning event (Klemm, 2020). In other words, any form of learning leaves a lasting footprint on linear, analytical, and logical thinking as well as on emotional and intuitive impulses. Particularly due to its ability to instill a wide range of cognitive skills, and because of its potential to bring forth key emotional capacities, project-based learning has become one of those teaching methods educators often find themselves gravitating towards.

Industry, too, appears to authenticate its relevance, especially when graduates' skills become a topic of job interviews. In a world, where a majority of companies (76 %) are using skills-based hiring to fill open roles, and with more than half (55 %) using role-specific skills tests to vet candidates – with soft skills like leadership and communication featuring among the most in-demand skills employers seek (Smith, 2023), project-based learning is expected to retain its importance.

Some top executives echo such views when they state that being a good listener, finding empathy, understanding emotions, communicating effectively, treating people well, and bringing out the best is important in every aspect of life, including business (Stillman, 2023). We will show that project-based learning is a suitable vehicle for instilling such qualities. In addition, thanks to the emulation of the management process and its key elements which include planning, organizing, division of labor, and leading, project-based learning plays a vital role in bridging the gap between academia and industry.

Learners, too, need to be considered in our calculus. Having witnessed the implementation of dozens of community projects which involved hundreds of students, it is not far-fetched to say that the students themselves find project-based learning appealing. This is mainly because of its student-centered essence.

On top of this, project-based learning breaks the monotony of daily academic routine which is a common experience of students throughout their studies. Simply put, project-based learning allows students to venture beyond the lecture halls and academic premises they find themselves spending a great part of their academic lives.

Such a change in the physical environment often provokes other social changes. This, however, does not imply that learning itself becomes less conducive; quite the contrary. We need to take into account that the learning experience is not exclusively confined to classroom settings, and that project-based learning offers students more than the ability to upgrade their skills. Particularly when students are situated in a completely new environment, interesting things begin to happen. Curiosity takes center stage; communication intensifies; proactivity emerges; commitment becomes clearer; self-awareness, along with social awareness, becomes greater.

We simply have to remember that education and learning in any of its forms should – and usually does – lead to introspection, and this, in turn, allows learners to reevaluate their circumstances that extend beyond the cognitive or emotional domains. Projects involving students coming from affluent neighborhoods who conduct community service for marginalized communities in suburban or rural areas may leave long-lasting impressions. Projects which see healthy young people serving physically disabled groups may encourage the former to reconsider their priorities, make changes in their diets, or pursue a more active lifestyle. Projects which bring prison inmates and troubled teenagers together can help the latter to find their moral compass and regain control over their lives. It would be very interesting to name all the domains of one's intelligence that are affected by project-based learning; it seems that along with the mental, emotional, and physical domains, moral intelligence spheres can certainly be affected too.

An objective in the presented research paper is, however, more modest. The purpose of this research paper is to show how project-based learning fosters the development of one's emotional competencies, which include self-awareness, empathy, as well as social skills in communication and teamwork. Moreover, this research paper will show that project-based learning results in the acquisition of emotional literacy in its participants. Lastly, project-based learning is validated as a highly effective teaching method, which continues to uphold its relevance despite a rapidly changing educational landscape. As the paper's initial section indicates, it is the project-based learning practice occurring outside of the classroom, especially the one taking on the form of a community service project – that will become the focal point of our attention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In its simplest way, defined as learning by doing, project-based learning is not a new concept. Project-based learning, or the earliest references of it, can be traced back to ancient times, with philosophers such as Confucius and Socrates being widely regarded as early proponents of learning by doing concepts (Boss, 2011).

Broadly speaking, project-based learning or project-based instruction is a student-centered teaching method that encourages learning through engaging with real-world curriculum questions or challenges. Its overriding goal is to encourage students to engage with a question or challenge that requires concentration and nuanced problem-solving skills. Students should be able to apply the skills and knowledge they have developed in class. Yet at the same time, they can also take their own approaches and initiatives (Melvin, 2022).

Thus, students' ability to engage with a question or challenge underscores the practical applicability of project-based learning and justifies its integration into the curriculums of a wide range of educational institutions globally – from primary and secondary institutions to tertiary ones. At the same time, project-based learning is an interdisciplinary teaching method, with science, math, economics, and humanities being among the most common subjects employing this technique (Vega, 2012).

As Laurienti (2023) points out, project-based learning is not a one-size-fits-all approach and therefore needs to be adapted to meet the needs of the curriculum, as well as that of the students. He also offers twelve real-world examples of project-based learning which include: one-to-one computing projects, collaborative classroom projects, research projects, STEM projects, arts projects, community service projects, technology projects, field trips, internships, mock trials, student-led conferences, and class debates.

Typically, project-based learning takes students through the following phases or steps. 1. Identifying a problem; 2. Agreeing on or devising a solution and potential solution path to the problem; 3. Designing and developing a prototype of the solution; 4. Refining the solution based on feedback from experts, instructors, or peers (Boston University Center for Teaching & Learning, n.d.).

While evaluating project-based learning through the lenses of instructors, Bell (2010) states that by deploying this teaching method, teachers adopt the role of facilitators. By acquiring this role, Shankar (2010) argues, teachers should be comfortable with relinquishing authority and exerting indirect control – thus redefining the essential relationship between teachers and students. Consequently, project-based learning can be viewed as a great tool for helping students to develop autonomy and independence (Perkins, 2021).

In their study, Yuliani and Lengkanawati (2017) showed that project-based learning promotes learning autonomy, especially in the area of self-instruction and self-direction in each stage of project-based activity, namely in the planning, implementation, and monitoring process. Apart from autonomy, project-based learning allows access and equity in the classroom for all students (Larson, 2020). According to Abdo (2020), other main benefits of project-based learning include deepening and enriching student learning and promoting lifelong learning. It also

prepares students to develop skills for a highly technological society. Aside from engagement, which allows students to be drivers of their own learning, accountability, too, emerges as another significant benefit, since project-based learning permits students to take greater responsibility for their own learning.

In addition, Lee, Huh, and Reigeluth (2015) state that project-based learning promotes the development of collaboration skills, critical thinking, creative thinking, complex problem-solving, and encourages the transfer of learning, and positive attitudes towards tasks. This view is echoed by other researchers who recognize critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, innovation, and communication as key skills students develop as a result of project-based learning (Baird, n.d.).

Understandably, the nature of the academic subject employing this method, as well as the specifics of a particular project-based learning activity, determine the skills that each project participant ultimately develops. If STEM academic subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) are largely credited for the development of cognitive skills, such as problem-solving, critical analysis, and independent thinking, but also for technical skills such as digital literacy (Department of Education, n.d.), project-based learning undertakings, occurring as an integral part of social science subjects, are known to have a positive impact on a slightly different set of students' abilities – especially when taking the form of community service projects.

As Laurienti (2023) explains, the community service project, defined as a project aiming to engage students in the community, allows students to learn about the needs of the community and how they can help. Additionally, community service projects can help students develop empathy and compassion for others.

Such reflections appear to support the wider conclusions of Goleman (1995) who states that learning does not take place in isolation from one's feelings. Being emotionally literate is as important for learning as instruction in math or reading. Thus, the notion of proposing project-based learning, particularly in its community service form, to foster the development of emotional competencies in conjunction with cognitive abilities, is not flawed.

The main problem encountered here – perhaps with the exception of communication – is that project-based learning, which fosters emotional competencies, does not represent the area that would be researched as extensively as the domain of cognitive skills. Quantifying emotions may be unthinkable from the standpoint of some scientific subjects. In social science subjects, which typically analyze social relations, however, emotions remain at the center of academic attention since they represent a powerful driver of human behavior. As empathy typically falls into the domain of emotional intelligence, we are called to shed some light on how empathy and other key emotional competencies come into being.

Emotional capacities, according to some, are not given; with the right learning, they can be improved (Goleman, 1995). Goleman (1998) contends that unlike IQ – which changes little after our teen years – emotional intelligence seems to be largely learned, and it continues to develop as we go through life and learn from our experiences.

While our emotional intelligence determines our potential for learning, our emotional competence shows how much of that potential we have mastered in ways that translate into on-the-job capabilities. To be adept at an emotional competence like teamwork requires an underlying ability in emotional intelligence (EI) fundamentals, specifically social awareness and relationship management (Goleman, 1995).

Goleman (1998) names five fundamental emotional competencies: social awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. More specifically, self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation are recognized as personal competencies, and these determine how we manage ourselves personally. The remaining two – empathy and social skills – are deemed social competencies, and they determine how we handle relationships.

For our research purpose, we draw our attention to self-awareness, empathy, and social skills. Goleman (1998) argues that emotional presence begins with self-awareness. This is defined as knowing one's internal states, preferences, resources, and intuitions. Aside from emotions, self-awareness also encapsulates a strong sense of one's capabilities. Self-awareness is defined as a prerequisite for empathy. Empathy, which represents part of social competence, is described as the awareness of others' feelings, needs, and concerns, and taking an active interest in their concerns. Moreover, it encompasses sensing others' development needs and bolstering their abilities. Lastly, social skills are defined as adeptness at inducing desirable responses in others, and they include elements of communication – listening openly and sending convincing messages, as well as team capabilities – creating group synergy in pursuing collective goals. Social skills, too, constitute part of social competencies.

The Leadership Philosophy Community Service Project

From the 21st to the 25th of June 2023, 240 students of CamEd Business School, located in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, completed their community service projects. This marked the culmination of a month-long effort, during which students had to identify a marginalized community in the country and develop an effective strategy on how to address the specific needs of that community.

The community service project was organized as an integral part of Leadership Philosophy, an academic subject which students study during the first year of their university degree. The instructional design incorporated a participative decision-making model, as a result of which students were presented with a choice: either they address the needs of the selected community through their own community project, or they team up with an already established organization to use its existing infrastructure in order to implement the project.

Divided into five groups based on their class allocation, students opted for the first choice – a decision consistent with the ones made by student groups in previous academic years. Their mission was to raise money through donations in order to facilitate the provision of school supplies for five different primary schools located in rural areas of the country.

The five schools where the community service projects were completed are as follows: Prey Kmeng Primary School in Kompong Speu Province; Chra

Nourm Primary School in Kampong Cham Province; River of Lives Primary School in Kandal Province, Thmor Da Primary School in Kampong Cham Province; Prek Svay Primary School in Kandal Province. The community service projects included hundreds of pupils. In Chra Nourm Primary School alone, up to 600 pupils received much-needed school supplies.

From an academic perspective, the community service model was integrated into the foundation year curriculum, and by its implementation, the academic subject's (Leadership Philosophy) two key learning outcomes were set to be achieved – developing skills through project-based learning and operating effectively in a team. As indicated in the paper's introduction, the purpose of this research paper is to examine how a project-based learning practice – which adopts the form of a community service project – can foster the development of students' emotional competencies which include self-awareness, empathy, as well as social skills in the form of communication and teamwork.

METHODOLOGY

The research paper uses a descriptive research design, centered on a survey developed in line with the related literature. The research data was collected through a self-administered questionnaire, delivered in paper-and-pen format in June 2023, within forty-eight hours after the completion of the community service projects. In total, 240 full-time students participated in the survey. The questionnaire was presented in both English and in the Khmer (Cambodian) language. The data was evaluated in August 2023.

The questionnaire consists of two main parts: 1. Demographic characteristics of students which refer to age and gender; 2. Characteristics related to key emotional competencies of students such as self-awareness, teamwork, communication, and empathy – all of which were defined in the previous section. The demographic characteristics are displayed in Table 1. As Table 1 shows, of the total number of 240 participants, the majority of respondents were female (155; 64.6 %). By contrast, a mere 85 of the participants were male (35.4 %). It is important to note that the survey's gender ratio mirrors the overall gender composition of the class group. In terms of the ages of participants, 18-year-olds were the largest cohort (46.7 %), followed by the 19-year-olds (37.9 %), and the 20-year-old group (8.3 %). Lastly, 17 respondents were 17 years old (7.1 %).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Leadership Philosophy Community Service Project

Characteristics	Frequency (n=240)	Percentage
Gender		
Male	85	35.4%
Female	155	64.6%
Age (years)		
17	17	7.1%
18	112	46.7%
19	91	37.9%
20	20	8.3%
Academic Year		
Year 1	240	100%
Academic Status		
Full-Time Students	240	100%

When it came to the characteristics related to key emotional competencies, the survey’s instructions asked the students to indicate to what extent they identified themselves with a particular statement. In total, the questionnaire presented four statements.

The first emotional competence – self-awareness – was evaluated through the survey’s first statement: “Overall, the community service project helped me to recognize the fact that my actions make a difference in other people’s lives.” The second emotional competence – teamwork – was evaluated through the survey’s second statement: “Overall, the community service project helped me to improve my ability to work in a team.” The third emotional competence – communication – was assessed through the survey’s third statement: “Overall, the community service project helped me to improve my communication skills.” Finally, the last emotional competence – empathy – was evaluated in the survey’s fourth statement: “Overall, the community service project helped me to see things from other people’s perspectives.”

The participants were instructed to choose only one option per statement on the following scale: Strongly Agree; Agree; Neutral; Disagree; Strongly Disagree. A soft copy of the questionnaire is provided in the paper’s appendix.

FINDINGS

As Figure 1 displays, the overwhelming majority of students either strongly agreed (66 %) or agreed (29 %) with the statement assessing the first emotional competence, which was self-awareness. The survey documented that 4% of respondents chose the neutral option, and only 1% of them disagreed with the statement put forth by the survey. None of them (0 %) strongly disagreed with the statement.

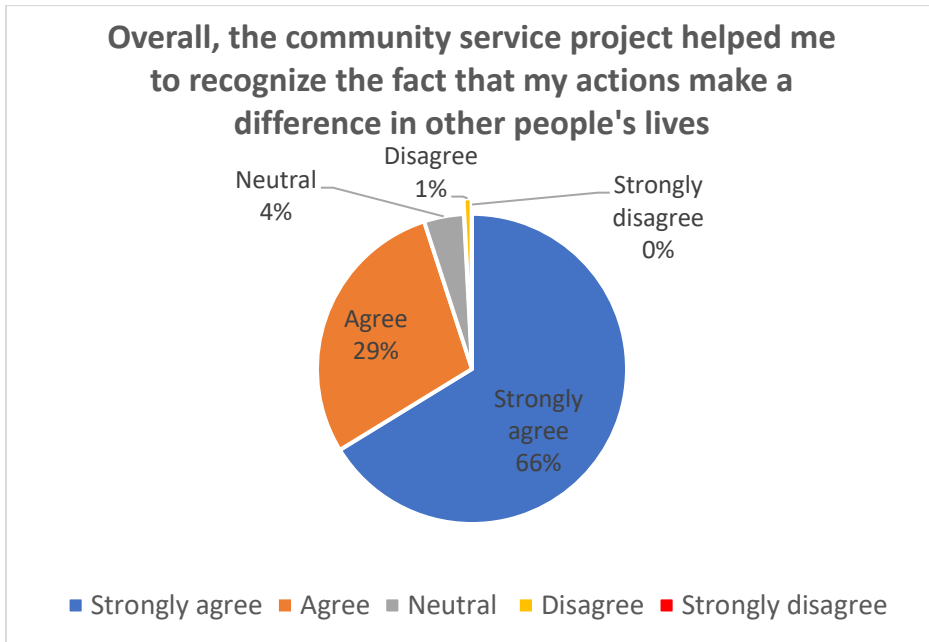


Figure 1 Emotional competence - Self-awareness

According to the participants' responses, as Figure 2 demonstrates, their ability to work in a team was also improved as a result of the community service project. The survey revealed that 59 % of respondents strongly agreed, while 37 % agreed with the statement. Only 4% of respondents said that the community service project had a neutral effect on their ability to work in a team. Lastly, none of the students disagreed (0 %) or strongly disagreed (0 %) with the statement assessing the emotional competence of working within a team.

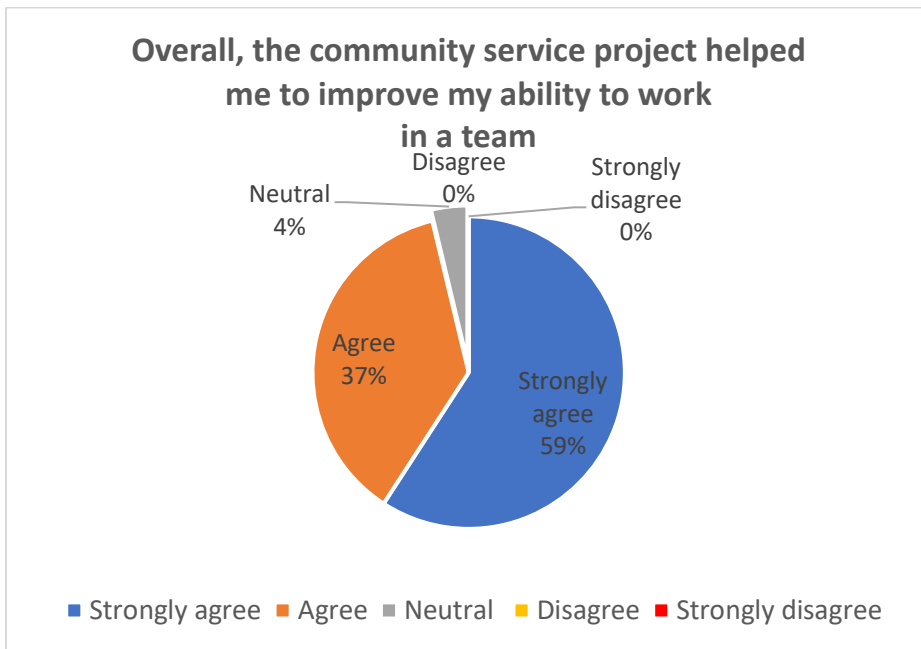


Figure 2 Emotional Competence - Teamwork

Figure 3 shows, the vast majority of students indicated that the community service project helped them to improve their communication skills, which was the third emotional competence assessed by the survey: 59% of them strongly agreed, while 34% agreed with the statement. A mere 7% of respondents selected the neutral option, and notably, none of the students disagreed (0%) or strongly disagreed (0%) with the statement.

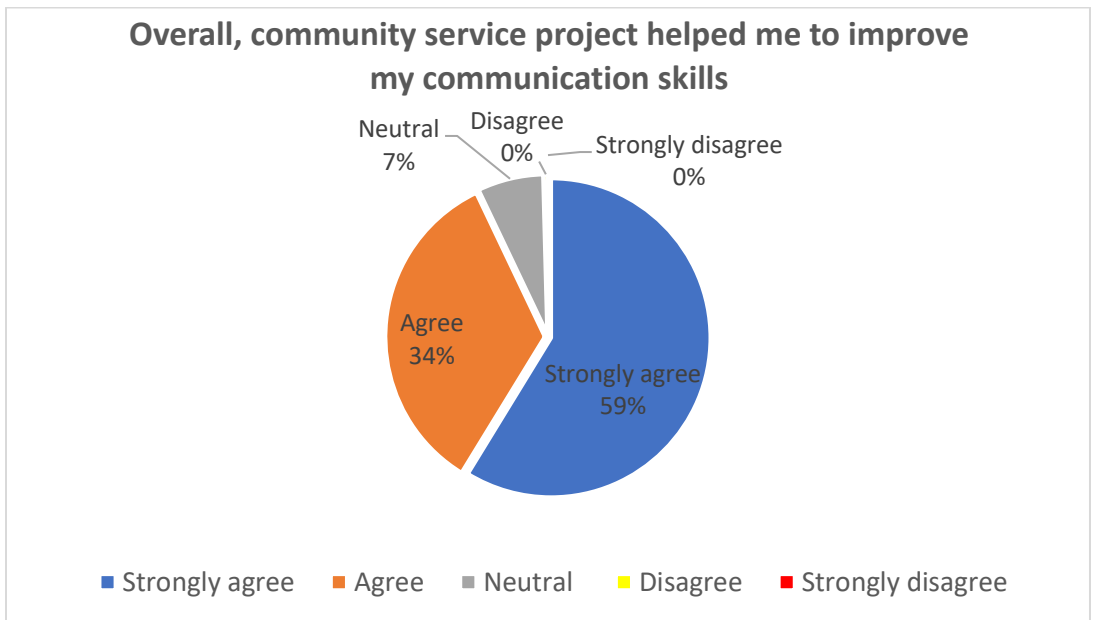


Figure 3 Emotional Competence - Communication

Finally, when it came to empathy – the last emotional competence evaluated by the survey – Figure 4 documents that 65 % of respondents strongly agreed and a further 31 % of respondents agreed with the survey's fourth statement. The number of respondents who said that the project had a neutral effect on their ability to see things from other people's perspectives was 4%. Once again, the number of those who disagreed or strongly disagreed was 0%.

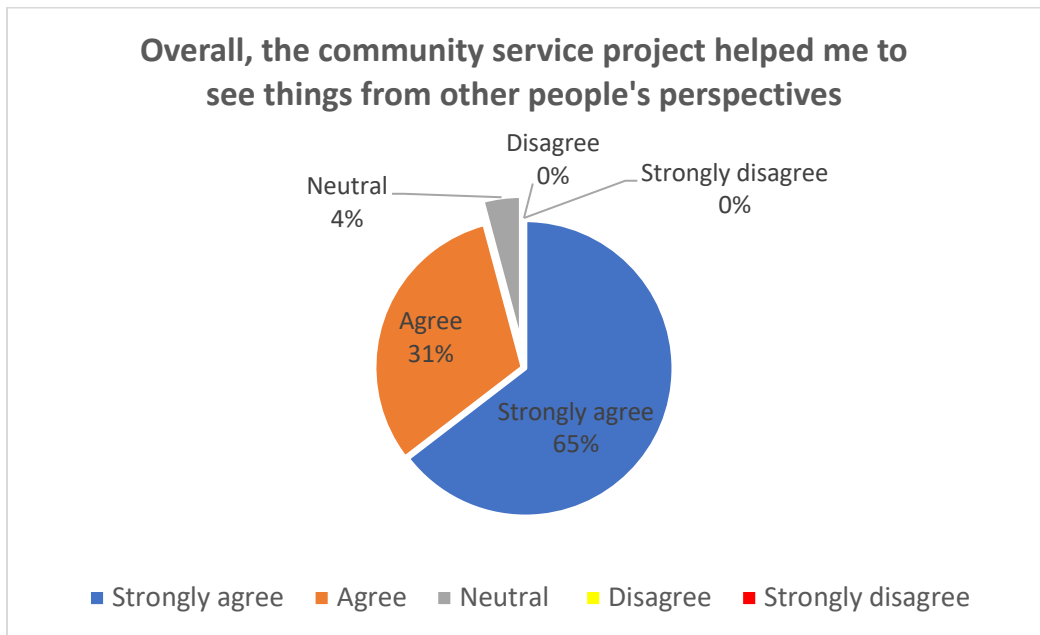


Figure 4 Emotional Competence – Empathy

One of the indirect outcomes of the five community service projects that CamEd Business School students carried out in June 2023 as part of the Leadership Philosophy academic course was the collection of valuable data, which can deepen our understanding of how community service project fosters the development of emotional competencies.

As presented in Figures 1 – 4, the finding indicates that there are no significant differences in the students' responses across the evaluated emotional competencies. Both self-awareness as well as empathy record the highest 'strongly agree' responses: 66 % and 65 % respectively, with teamwork and communication both scoring 59 % in the 'strongly agree' category. 'Agree' responses vary from 29 % to 37 %. The number of respondents who feel 'neutral' remains low – 4 % in three out of four evaluated emotional competencies – with the exception of communication, which was 7 %. Interestingly, only 1 % of respondents 'disagree' with the statement evaluating self-awareness, while 'disagree' responses in the remaining three emotional competencies are 0%. Finally, 'strongly disagree' responses receive the lowest score of all: 0 %.

Combining 'strongly agree' with 'agree' responses, and given the fact that 'strongly disagree' as well as 'disagree' responses are near zero, as displayed in Figure 5, the research finding documents an overall highly positive effect of the community service project on the development of emotional competencies in the project participants.

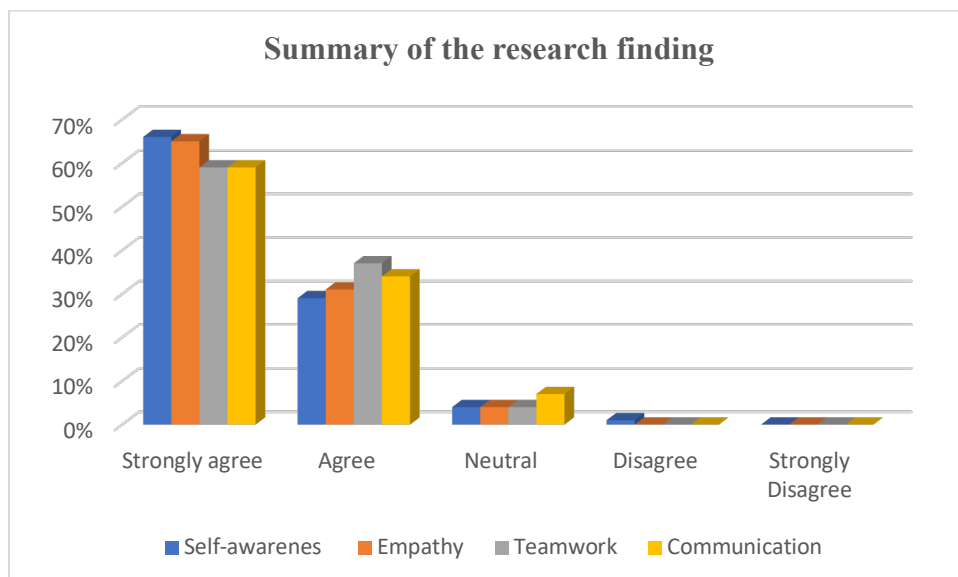


Figure 5 Summary of the research findings

Based on this key finding, we can conclude that project-based learning – particularly in its community service form – fosters the development of one’s emotional competencies, namely those which include self-awareness, empathy, as well as social skills in communication and teamwork. Combining formal research data with informal observation, we can say this type of learning helps students to recognize and develop feelings about themselves, their peers, the community they serve, or their society at large. The successful implementation of community service projects can be said to result in the acquired emotional literacy of its participants.

Moreover, this research finding validates project-based learning as a highly effective teaching method. Having witnessed the positive effects of this method, we can also state that this form of social and emotional learning is particularly important for students living in a country whose social fabric has either been torn by past political upheavals or continues to be plagued by prevalent socio-economic problems such as poverty. Thus, at a bare minimum, this teaching method is a well-equipped vehicle for instilling basic emotional competencies as well as their further development. When considering its maximum potential, project-based learning appears to be capable of mitigating some of a country’s crucial socio-economic problems.

LIMITATIONS

Understandably, this research paper has limitations. The survey involved only 240 respondents, so this is by no means a meta-study, whose conclusions can be applied to each and every single type of project-based learning practice. Moreover, as the survey data stems from the students' responses, it is important to remember that self-report tools are subject to bias. Also, the study involved only Year 1 students. As a result, the findings do not apply to students in other years at CamEd Business School, and similarly cannot be generalized to part-time students as well as those in post-graduate or non-degree programs. Lastly, considering wider societal, cultural, and religious factors, the study may produce different outcomes if applied to different demographics.

CONCLUSION

Since its earliest references in ancient times, project-based learning continues to enjoy considerable attention from modern-day scholars and theoreticians who repeatedly arrive at the same conclusions drawn by ancient thinkers some two and half thousand years ago. Despite centuries of change, this teaching method retains its academic relevance and is able to work in conjunction with more recently introduced techniques – much to the benefit of learners.

Particularly because of its ability to bring forth a wide variety of cognitive skills and emotional competencies, project-based learning has managed to position itself as an integral part of the twenty-first-century academic portfolio of educational institutions worldwide. Lastly, project-based learning can also be considered a determining instrument when it comes to preserving and advancing students' social and emotional abilities in the age of omnipresent digitalization.

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APPENDIX

Leadership Philosophy Community Service Project Survey

Age:

Gender:

Instructions: Please indicate (✓) whether you agree or disagree with each statement listed below. Choose only one option per each statement.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. Overall, the community service project helped me to recognize the fact that my actions make a difference in other people's lives.					
2. Overall, the community service project helped me to improve my ability to work in a team.					
3. Overall, the community service project helped me to improve my communication skills.					
4. Overall, the community service project helped me to see things from other people's perspectives.					