

Out-of-Classroom Learning: Revisiting Value and Impact

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ABSTRACT

This special issue addresses the significance, challenges, and transformative potential of out-of-classroom learning for holistic student development in higher education, with particular attention to the global South. It includes six articles from regions such as South Africa and Mauritius, covering diverse contexts and disciplines, from engineering and teacher education to music, psychotherapy and student-led initiatives. Together, these contributions examine the impact of experiential, co-curricular, and community-based learning on student engagement, belonging, well-being and academic success, especially in resource-constrained and post-pandemic settings. Framed within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, the issue underscores that intentional, relationship-rich, and context-sensitive out-of-classroom experiences are vital to fostering equitable, meaningful and sustained student development.

The concept and implementation of out-of-classroom learning have been established for more than a century (Dewey, 1938). It encompasses activities that students participate in beyond the formal curriculum, yet are considered vital for holistic development. In the context of higher education, especially within institutions in the global South, where socioeconomic and infrastructural disparities often shape educational access, out-of-classroom activities range from structured experiences—such as internships, community engagement, and experiential field trips integrated into courses—to semi-structured opportunities, including interest groups, clubs, and societies, which are conventionally referred to as co-curricular and co-academic activities.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, safe distancing measures were implemented at most, if not all, higher education institutions. As a result, out-of-classroom activities and interactions either ceased altogether or were moved online. Some activities later adopted a hybrid format as restrictions eased. In contrast to out-of-classroom activities, significant attention was given to ensuring the continuity of formal lessons during the pandemic. This situation prompted us to reflect on the value proposition of out-of-classroom learning. In this special issue, we explore and offer insights into several key questions: What is the significance of out-of-classroom learning within the context of holistic student development in higher education? How have issues of accessibility, mobility, and equality influenced opportunities for and the implementation of out-of-classroom learning? To what extent has out-of-classroom learning impacted student learning and success?

This special issue opens with a study by Versfeld, Mapaling, and Maape, which offers broad insights into these questions. The study focused on the experiences and perceptions of first-year engineering students at a South African university on the extent to which study groups, peer tutoring, mentorship programmes, and extra-curricular activities influenced their academic success, considering underlying factors such as well-being and sense of belonging. Their findings affirm that limited access to social, psychological, and academic support during the COVID-19 pandemic poses risks of academic exclusion, which in turn impacts student success. Most compellingly, their data reveal that despite the availability of various interventions, there remains a significant gap in meeting students' actual needs for time management, organisational skills, and mental health support.

The next two papers, by Kriger and Albertyn, and Harrop-Allin respectively, examine the impact of experiential learning on student learning and motivation in the performing arts and music, particularly within resource-constrained contexts. Kriger and Albertyn survey 530 pre-service

teachers across four years of study, finding increased enjoyment, stronger cultural connections, and deeper knowledge of jazz and theatre as reported by their respondents. By the end of the course, many participants—including those who were not performing arts or music majors—expressed motivation to integrate the arts into their future teaching.

Separately, Harrop-Allin's analysis of eight years of data provides robust evidence supporting community music as a transformative element within a conventional music degree. Employing a service-learning approach, students engaged with diverse communities to create and learn about music collaboratively. Harrop-Allin's findings reveal that such learning extends beyond music itself, encompassing themes of social justice, inequality, power dynamics, identity, and political nuance. Ultimately, Harrop-Allin argues that music education and leadership are fundamentally about connecting with communities and fostering responsible citizenship, empowering students to use their musicianship to benefit others.

Another noteworthy study is that of Tshibangu, who compares the campus life experiences of students attending classes during the day with those attending in the evenings. His research highlights significant discrepancies in resources and opportunities available to each group—including access to co-curricular activities, internships, professional networking opportunities, social engagement with other students, career and academic counselling, and support systems related to mobility, safety, and well-being. The stark differences revealed in Tshibangu's study strongly underscore the critical role that out-of-classroom opportunities play in student learning, motivation, and success.

Concluding the special issue are two peer-reviewed reflective pieces that provide deeper insights into specific out-of-classroom learning activities. Shabalala and Uren discuss the ad hoc group supervision sessions they implemented as part of students' professional training in psychotherapy. Employing collaborative autoethnography and reflexive thematic analysis, they identify three key observations: first, the significance of the out-of-classroom supervision space, where they advocate for the use of Ubuntu pedagogy; second, the emergence of collegiality and a sense of belonging; and third, the development of connectedness within the out-of-classroom environment—elements central to effective psychotherapy supervision.

Finally, Roopchund and Seedat's student-led "Game Day" initiative, designed to alleviate student isolation and promote social reintegration on campus after the COVID-19 lockdown, demonstrates

that resource-friendly activities can effectively strengthen students' sense of belonging, motivation, and social engagement.

If there is a unifying theme across out-of-classroom learning, it is the importance of relationships that foster engagement, connection, and a sense of belonging. As Felten and Lambert (2020) argue, meaningful relationships rarely develop by chance; rather, they must be intentionally cultivated within a relationship-rich environment. They further emphasize that relationships, relational instead of transactional, among students and between students and both faculty and non-faculty staff are crucial for learning, belonging, persistence, and holistic development.

In addition to fostering strong and meaningful relationships, this special issue underscores the importance of institutional support in providing spaces, resources (particularly in resource-constrained contexts), professional development opportunities, and recognition for those involved in informal curricular spaces. Framed within the broader landscape of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), this special issue reaffirms that learning does not occur solely within the four walls of a classroom. SoTL's emphasis on reflective, evidence-informed teaching aligns closely with the intentional design and evaluation of out-of-classroom learning practices. As such, these articles not only address holistic student development, but also contribute to a deeper understanding of what constitutes meaningful, relational, and context-sensitive pedagogy, especially in the global South. Taken together, the articles and reflections in this special issue highlight the multifaceted value of out-of-classroom learning for holistic student development. Sustained commitment from both individuals and institutions is essential to ensure these opportunities continue to support student engagement, well-being, and success.

References

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