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Maria Robert Bou Zeid,

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Countering extremism through service learning: narratives learned from journalism students

Maria Robert Bou Zeid

Department of Media Studies, Notre Dame University – Louaize, Beirut, Lebanon

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the case of the Aspiration, Communication and Transformation campaign conducted by journalism students to counter extremism as a form of experiential learning in Lebanese higher educational context. It documents the views and experiences of students in a service learning (SL) project for redressing a timely social issue.

Design/methodology/approach – This study employed a descriptive case study methodology involving a portraiture naturalistic approach for data gathering. It conducted semi-structured interviews with three participating students to learn from their experiences in countering extremism. This was complemented by two interviews with the instructor in charge of the project and an external stakeholder.

Findings – Results emphasized the combination of applying the broadcast technical skills of the course to countering extremism in a volatile political context.

Research limitations/implications – The findings are only a mild reflection of countering extremism through SL since it focused on a single case study involving a limited number of participants. However, the study offered common sense conclusions having broader applicability.

Practical implications – This topic is of particular importance to higher educational institutions and communities working on countering extremism through education, particularly in contexts rife with violence and ideological indoctrination.

Social implications – This paper has social implications on promoting awareness about extremism as a challenging social debacle. It presents workable recommendations for fostering a stronger relationship between higher education institutions and communities to defy extremism. It shows the importance of connecting curricula to community needs.

Originality/value – This paper fills a gap in the literature pertaining to the role of higher education institutions in countering extremism through SL in Lebanon and the MENA region.

Keywords Experiential learning in Lebanon, Journalism education in Lebanon,
Service learning in Lebanon, Countering violent extremism, Preventing violent extremism

Paper type Case study

1. Introduction

It is a rare historical coincidence to observe that the security and well-being of countries seem threatened by a common challenge: violent extremism. The heinous terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington DC in 2001, deadly assaults in Europe, Africa and the Middle East demonstrate how violent extremism is spreading worldwide. Thus, due to the propagation of terror attacks and the increase in the number of violent extremist groups; countering violent extremism (CVE) has been heightened internationally as a strategy that focuses on curbing terrorist recruitment and indoctrination by building resilience among communities vulnerable to radicalization (Khan, 2015). Against this backdrop, educational institutions and civil society organizations are called upon to promote strategies to counter violent extremism.

There is a myriad of definitions of violent extremism, which reflect the complexity of this phenomenon. While there is no universally accepted definition of violent extremism, the latter is generally considered a broader term than terrorism. It embraces any act that attempts to thwart efforts toward stability, human rights and the rule of law (United Nations Report of the Secretary-General, 2015). In fact, the etymology of the term extremism comes from the Latin *extremis*, ultimate and the French *extremisme* referring to a standpoint regarding ideology,

intentions and actions corresponding to extreme views (Zinchenko, 2014). In concert with the etymology of extremism, the US FBI (2018) describes violent extremism as, "encouraging, condoning, justifying, or supporting the commission of a violent act to achieve political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals."

Virtually, all definitions focus on violence as a common attribute of extremist acts.

Based on a substantial body of research, push factors that lead youth to join violent extremist groups are poverty, low socio-economic conditions, political oppression and discrimination (Hassan, 2012); however, education can strengthen social cohesion and resilience to violent extremism (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2016).

Rooted in Dewey's (1951) Learning by Doing and Freire's (1977) praxis, i.e., reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed, authentic service learning (SL) (Herrington and Kervin, 2007), has been cited as one of the potent tools for challenging structural conditions that plague society. This paper is set to examine the process and outcome of a SL project conducted by journalism undergraduate students at Notre Dame University – Louaize (NDU) in Lebanon to challenge violent extremism through online platforms. The main dimension of the study is the role of SL as a tool for engaging the young with the community in efforts to counter extremism. This goes along with the vision of UNESCO on the role of education on this level calling stakeholders to identify concrete and comprehensive educational responses to such threats, and to adapt them to their particular context (UNESCO, 2016).

2. Objectives and purpose of the study
This study emphasizes the role of traditional institutions in shielding against extremism. It explores the role of education in challenging extremism through an engaging curriculum that resounds with an SL pedagogy. The core objective is thus to examine the link between learning outcomes and countering extremism as a challenging example of community needs.

3. Literature review
Over the last three decades or so, higher education leaders in the USA have called upon American colleges and universities to renew their civic missions and inculcate students with civic values to become active and engaged citizens upon graduation (Boyer, 1990). In the Arab Middle Eastern countries, the concept of SL in higher education is still novice and often confused with internships and practicum courses. More and more, higher education institutions in Lebanon are going through the curriculum or other conduits to characterize the role of higher education as a "public good" engaging in problem solving. For instance, the American University of Beirut established the Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service to facilitate change in marginalized landscapes and provide opportunities for transformative education (American University of Beirut (AUB) 2018). Robert Sigmon and William Ramsey gave the first formal definition of SL. They identified this pedagogy as the accomplishment of activities that combine human needs with educational growth (Giles and Eyler, 1994; Tai-Seale, 2000). For the sake of conceptual clarity, the focus of this paper is on civic responsibility and engagement that are at the core of SL. SL is defined as an educational experience where students participate in an organized endeavor that meets community needs. This should also boost their sense of civic responsibility. SL is further described as any activity that engages the student in active and collaborative learning which increases their dedication to future civic involvement (Markus et al., 1993; Bringle and Hatcher, 1995, 2000).

In this learning strategy, students play leadership roles in well-organized service experiences that meet the authentic needs of the community. Of particular relevance to these

necessities, comes the idea of countering or challenging extremism; a priority to reengage Lebanese youth in their communities far from political and sectarian fragmentation. This technique merges service in the community with intentional learning activities (Gemmel and Clayton, 2009). The combination creates a sense of civic responsibility. In this perspective, Bowman *et al.* (2010) and Bringle *et al.* (1997) argued that the more community concerns (such as extremism in our case) are incorporated in the classroom experience, the more satisfying and successful the experience will be. Several studies have found that community service learning (CSL) initiatives bringing students into direct contact with the recipients of the service have a greater impact upon students' civic attitudes than CSL programs involving more indirect forms of service (Kohls, 1996). Yet, there is still much to be learned about the effects of different types of service upon participating university students. While SL has been used to characterize a panoply of experiential learning activities, from volunteer and community service projects to field studies (Furco, 1996), often showing positive impact on the cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal development of students (Astin *et al.*, 2000), the bulk of SL experiences have been documented mostly in the western hemisphere. Despite burgeoning research on SL in western scholarship, little research on SL for CVE has been conducted so far in politically volatile and disputatious political contexts such as Lebanon. This study attempts to bridge this gap in the literature by focusing on the Aspiration, Communication, and Transformation (ACT) campaign-fall 2016 as a case study on SL where students had to apply class material and concepts on the challenging extremism cause in Lebanon. The project was in part a competition organized by EDVenture Partners-EVP and sponsored by Facebook and the US Department of State in the framework of the "Peer to Peer project (P2P)." The P2P program seeks to mobilize students from around the globe to come up with projects that counter extremism (EdVenture Partners, 2018).

4. The need to counter violent extremism through education

Lebanon is directly affected by the course of events in its neighboring, Syria. To contextualize, a brief description of Lebanon's country profile is helpful. Despite its small size (10,452 square km) and population (around 4m inhabitants), Lebanon has often been at the center of Middle Eastern conflicts due to its borders with Syria and Israel, and its uniquely complex multi-communal structure with 18 religious sects (Khashan, 1992). Lebanon is now facing a myriad of crises resulting from the uncurbed influx of refugees from Syria. The increase of the population compounds the country's already existing issues concerning poverty, economy, corruption, unemployment and provision of public services.

Lebanon also suffered from a number of deadly attacks executed by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Nusra front. To name but a few, the car bombing in the Ruwaiss neighborhood in Beirut on August 15, 2015, which resulted in 30 deaths and around 300 wounded. On August 23, 2015, two simultaneous car bombings exploded in the northern city of Tripoli leaving 47 dead and over 500 wounded.

And some northern areas in Lebanon have had a history of supplying extremist groups with arms and fighters. In an article published on November 26, 2014 in the Associated Press, "Lebanese fear Tripoli is ripe for ISIS group recruitment," Diaa Hadid (2014) described northern areas, especially Tripoli, as a focal point of recruitment for extremist groups, due to rising poverty and neglect by the central government.

These fighters are mainly youth at risk from marginalized backgrounds who fit the low socio-economic background profile alluded to earlier. Lebanon's internal political fragility and external vulnerability make educational initiatives such as the one under-study much needed.

Our purpose in this context is to shed light on SL as an educational tool to challenging extremism.

5. Background about the ACT project

The aim of this initiative was to develop and conduct a full-fledged campaign to counter extremism. Participating groups received an amount of $2,000 to design and implement a real-life campaign that has a determinate effect on their campus, community and country. The target as put in the executive summary of the ACT mission statement is to, "Act to impact and promote diversity from the country of diversity," through spreading awareness and empowering youth to do this on their own. The target audience is mainly youth who fall under the uncommitted populations and youth at risk in Lebanon.

6. Operational details and tactics of the campaign

Concerning the operational details of the project, the team used tactics similar to those of extremist groups (especially the ISIS) to counter their arguments and narratives. ACT produced around 50 videos that were posted mainly on Facebook and other social media platforms to motivate Lebanese youth to act against extremism. The choice of the figures featured in these promotional videos was pre-emptive in terms of diversity of fields and backgrounds in an attempt to reach different segments in the Lebanese society. To name but a few: Actor George Khabbaz, Comedian Jad Bou Karam, Miss Lebanon 2015 Valerie Abou Chacra, News Anchor Jessica Azar, Actor and Presenter Chadi Richa, Journalist Joana Azar, etc. The team, through these videos, engaged celebrities and influential key persons in "bankrupting" extremism as part of the ACT awareness campaign. The format was common with duration of 20–40 s given to each figure. The main common message was to promote diversity and refute extremism.

All the videos had the "ACT to Impact" slogan at their core. For instance, Actor Rodrigue Sleiman and Director Nadine Labaki (who recently won the Jury Prize in the Cannes film festival for her movie Capernaum) stated that we could defy extremism in all its aspects through arts and culture.

The ACT page on Facebook has, up to the moment of writing this paper, 3,299 likes and 3,312 followers.

ACT group also collaborated with local non-governmental organizations, mainly the Ruwad al Tanmiya organization based in Tripoli and that works on society empowerment through involving youth in the political and social arenas. In the framework of this partnership, ACT organized at the NDU main campus a series of workshops to train youth from Ruwad al Tanmiya to use social media sites for positive ends. This was essential as the pages and posts of these trainees can boost engagement and optimize the reach of the campaign in the vulnerable targeted area of Tripoli.

The SL components were evident in the project activities. Briefly, the students used on the academic level their broadcast and technical skills to produce visual materials.

7. Participating students – the team

The ACT team comprised seven journalism students from the Department of Media Studies at NDU. They identified themselves by saying, "Our weapon is the pen which is also a tool of communication." The apparatus of the students was social media platforms in general and Facebook in particular. The group won the first place in the Facebook Global Digital Challenge against around 100 universities from all over the world. The finals took place in Washington DC, where students presented details of their campaign.

The focus in this paper is not on winning an international competition but on the effects, this experience had on students.

8. ACT as a case of service learning

Extremism is a risky cause that needed more research than available for this paper, as CVE has become a discipline in itself. Still this topic was new to higher education institutions that started embarking on this new field from the SL door.

According to Kaye (2004), "if service learning is used in a way that connects classroom content, literature, and skills to community needs, students will apply academic, social, and personal skills to improve the community and grow as individuals, gain respect for peers, and increase civic participation," (p. 7). The P2P platform gave the participating students a chance to apply the course material of the Broadcast New Operations course (Communication Arts – COA 415) to the countering extremism cause while at the same time increasing their civic participation as agents of change.

9. Method

This paper employed a descriptive case study methodology involving a portraiture naturalistic approach for data gathering focusing on students' experiences and insights. The concentration was to explain how such projects could transform students into leaders working on social and political causes within the framework of learning outcomes. Portraiture is defined by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), as a way "to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural contexts, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences" (p. 3). The portraits were drawn through semi-structured interviews with students Eva Oueiss, Jessica Klat and Ri'bal Abou Zaki. Because this interviewing technique involves "prepared questioning guided by identified themes in a consistent and systematic manner interposed with probes designed to elicit more elaborate responses" (Qu and Dumay, 2011, p. 247), the researcher focused on the human and academic dimensions of the experience as documented by the participating students.

As for the case study methodology, it is suitable for studying individuals, institutions and programs (Yin, 2002; Stake, 1995) as is the case of SL for countering extremism in a Lebanese complex context. Further, although this case study benefitted from a theoretical literature review on SL, it avoided seeing the world thoroughly through the lens of extant ideas (Charmaz, 2006), since it focused on students' views and experiences learned from campaigning against extremism among socially and economically disadvantaged groups.

The data also triangulated with two additional in-depth interviews in an attempt to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. The first one was conducted via e-mail with Tony Sgro Founder and CEO of EdVenture Partners, which builds industry–education partnerships for economic and societal challenges by involving students, professors and professionals to tackle specifically with him the relationship between SL and the issue of extremism. Another interview was also conducted with Mr Naoum Abi Adam (Instructor in charge of the course) to probe into the teaching approach adopted in the ACT project as a case of SL.

The information gathered from the five interviews was intended to feed the analysis on the case study.

10. Procedure

The researcher used the semi-structured interviews six questions that revolve around the human and academic values gained by the students through their participation to make the link between learning outcomes and the activities conducted from an SL perspective. For instance, the second question was: "How can you make the link between the project (cause) and the course content?" The answers generated documented the experiences of the interviewed students based on the portraiture style. First, the students were asked to introduce the project in their own words, and then what did they learn on the academic level. The third question tackled the challenges and obstacles faced throughout the campaign. The last three questions focused on the essence of SL put in the frame of human gain and insight. For example, the last question was: "Besides the academic side, what did you learn on the human level?" A clear distinction was drawn between human and academic gain and this point is detailed in the results section. The semi-structured interviews with the students

were recorded after obtaining the clearance of the participants. The three interviewed students volunteered to take part in the study. They were made aware that the publication would disclose their names and backgrounds due to that naturalistic approach adopted by the researcher. However, it was made clear to them that the data gathered would be used only in the framework of this study as mentioned in the consent form. The informed consent signed by participants indicated that there were no direct benefits resulting from their participation except the aim of the principal investigator to contribute to knowledge in the area of countering extremism through education. The same applies to the interview with the project's instructor. The only exception was the interview conducted with Tony Sgro based in the United Sates, which was conducted by e-mail upon the request of the researcher.

11. Results
The results were generated from the portraits of three participating students to delve into their profiles and perceptions focusing on the challenges, the tasks and the perceived gains on the academic and human levels.

11.1 Eva Oueiss
The first portrait is the one of Eva Oueiss. Oueiss is a serious student with a general points average (GPA) of 3.95. She was in her senior year when she enrolled in the course.

According to Oueiss, "ACT is a student-based initiative that seeks to engage marginalized communities and ambitious youth to become life-long extremism fighters and ambassadors for peace and diversity."

As for the link between the cause and the learning outcomes, Oueiss found that "this campaign was a room and a hub to apply what we have learned theoretically. It is a concrete application of the theories where we have tangibly worked on developing communication skills and strategies suitable to such a challenging case. The course 'Broadcast News Operation' as its name suggests, stresses on production techniques. This was achieved through the application of the technical video production skills; we have created an interactive newsroom through the production of our videos. These online video campaigns aspire to break stereotypes."

Concerning the challenges, she stated: "[…] we faced many obstacles such as working in a team and coping with daily tasks while respecting due dates. It was not easy to reach youth at risk, but we did it through an intermediary, the Ruwad al Tanmiya organization, also for political and security reasons we were not able to visit refugee camps as was planned at the beginning of the campaign. The addition on the human level was immense and intense. For me it was my first trip ever [abroad], it was an inter-cultural/inter-faith journey by excellence. It is in brief a self-actualization experience."

To summarize, she assumed, "I believe that after this, we can be real agents of change in our community and society. I even gave a TED talk to inspire others. And yes everyone can make a change."

11.2 Jessica Klat
Klat is Journalism Student also minoring in Public Relations. When she joined NDU in fall 2014 she first declared a major in business marketing and then quickly switched to journalism, which she believed was a better fit for her. For Klat, this experience was simply groundwork or hands-on efforts to apply theoretical foundations and skills. She added, "[…] we learned to work under pressure and not to procrastinate. The whole experience was enriching not only the campaign but also the leadership program that we went to in the United States after winning the first place in the competition. In Lebanon, as we know we are not united, we are politically and religiously fragmented so countering extremism is a need. The challenges we faced were mainly meeting deadlines and working as a team.

I think we could have done more individually. We also had an international exposure and connections. The cause was multifaceted; it needed too much research and creativity. As for the course in particular, we were able to apply editing, lighting, and production skills. The videos we produced were of high calibre. It will always be there; it is sad it is over."

11.3 Ri'bal Abou Zaki

The third portrait is of a male student, Ri'bal Abou Zaki, Journalism Student who had changed two majors before moving to journalism, his main drive was to make a link between media and politics.

He said, "the idea was to counter extremism through social media; we created our own pages on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. We produced short videos with indirect subtle messages to face extremism through the support of public figures from different fields since people usually follow these figures." He went on to reveal that, "[…] this topic is extremely sensitive because it is usually limited to some groups such as ISIS, and when we talk about ISIS we mean death, that is why we had to find another angle that is more acceptable among the target audience. We focused more on the idea of diversity and acceptance since they hold positive connotations instead of referring to the negative aspects of the problem we are dealing with. This was done also purposefully since people became resistant to the topic of extremism in general."

Abou Zaki affirmed that he has made full use of his technical skills acquired in his years of study. Moreover, not all the students had the same working pace; some were faster than others in meeting deadlines and dealing with tasks. In addition, the topic was so sensitive, and we had to find a very delicate approach. On the personal level, the project taught me not to judge by appearances. I also gained self-confidence and presentation skills it was an experience and a challenge at the same time. The most enriching part was the trip to the USA on the human and networking levels.

12. Discussion

The discussion section is centered upon the educational value of SL. From the early 1900s until the present, educational philosophers, such as John Dewey, David Kolb and Paulo Freire, have been advocating for a move from the traditional to the experiential pedagogy. One method of accomplishing this move is for the curriculum to include an SL program.

In fact, the ACT experience took a deeper educational meaning since it was applied on a social and political cause, which is countering extremism. When asked if SL to countering extremism is more challenging than in other fields, Sgro stated that his company, EdVenture provides universities with a selection of client-focused SL prospects. The campaigns that are product based, i.e., automobiles, mobile phones, clothing, are three dimensional in nature as students see, touch, feel and then create campaigns that encourage other youth to eventually purchase goods. Preventing violence and extremism is inexplicit as it can be lurking anywhere and everywhere.

The project as well served the mission of NDU which accents diversity, … and concern for the common good.

12.1 Service learning and course outcomes

When it comes to learning outcomes and as cited in the course description of the COA 415 class: "This course trains students in the process of directing news in all its phases such as equipment operation and crew management" (NDU, 2018).

This was fulfilled through the different videos that the students have produced and worked on.

When it comes to the teaching methodology, the emphasis was on the individual and group assignments including various multimedia products.

According to Abi Adam, the application of class materials was similar to a technical workshop where students applied the editing, production, illustration and content creation skills. This was a fulfillment of the COA 415 course learning outcomes. And this was also revealed by the three students who agreed that they had the chance to practice their technical skills.

12.2 Service learning for journalistic skills

SL gives academia a public-spirited meaning. This was crucial for journalism and future journalists. Students majoring in journalism should realize the importance of their role toward their societies and communities. They are the ones who will be responsible for voicing people's concerns and problems in order to breaking stereotypes and they started with themselves. This is what Abu Zaki described as "not judging by appearance."

This project embodies individual's active participation in social life which is the main characteristic of social responsibility (Zhang, 2012). This last point emphasizes the importance of ethics as the deep-hearted value of such initiatives. Skills and knowledge are important, but ethics are central. Students learned to adhere to civility and moral values. Most importantly, they were trained to respect deadlines and to work in a team.

Drawing on these three portraits, it was demonstrated that participants learned to work under pressure and in teams while respecting deadlines, an important soft skill for journalists and media professionals in general. The hands-on experience where students applied the journalistic technical skills in our fast-changing media landscape was as described by the interviewed students enriching on the professional and human levels and this was brought up by Abu Zaki when he said "I had […] to shoot, direct, present, and edit a whole report or promotional video."

This was also best expressed by Tony Sgro as:

> I deeply believe that service learning is the bridge between cognitive knowledge (textbook learning) and hands on, project-based learning. Service learning allows students to bring to life what they learn through classic pedagogical approaches. Roll up your sleeves and actually "do something" to solve problems.

> Actually, the primary reason I started EdVenture Partners 28 years ago was to provide young people with an opportunity to learn by doing. Knowing just a lucky few are able to secure an internship, my idea was to bring the internship into the classroom so more students would have the opportunity to have a real client, who has real problems, who provides real resources to do something but also expects real results.

12.3 SL Programs in relation with academic performance and soft skills

The results of the interviews also conform to the findings of Astin *et al.* (2000) who argued that service participation showed substantial positive impact on many pillars such as academic performance (GPA, writing skills and critical thinking skills), values and skills (interpersonal skills, leadership, etc.). Oueiss, Klat and Abou Zaki all talked about their gain in terms of interpersonal and soft skills. Klat stressed tremendously on the leadership skills she felt she gained. They also raised how they were able to improve their communication skills especially presentation skills.

The findings support for the results of the same study and show that more than four out of five SL students felt that their experience "made a difference" and that they were learning from their service experience (Astin *et al.*, 2000). Sgro briefly described the outcome as:

> Experience. Confidence. Pride. Work to show during job interviews. Deep friendships for doing life changing work. Ability to prioritize time. Team work. Scheduling of different processes that come together in the final product. Ability to take what is learned and apply it. Global connections. Understanding of critical social impact solutions. Memories.

12.4 The societal impact of SL programs on defying extremism
Back to Freire's theory, the implementation of SL activities can contribute to social transformation. Freire's theory leads to the belief that countering extremism SL programs in educational institutions can become avenues for social change to address social, political, economic and cultural injustices (Freire, 1970, 1994; Giles and Eyler, 1994; Kendrick, 1996; Anderson *et al.*, 2001). As Oueiss put it: "we can be real agents of change."

While most researchers are concentrating on the causes of violent extremism, the literature on the correlation between SL and this phenomenon is still scarce, indicating the importance of the ACT campaign as a pilot of what can be done.

Despite, the perceived positive impact of the ACT project on the participating students, one should shed the light on the limitations of SL.

12.5 Limitations of service learning
SL should not have to bear the burden of being the social justice standard bearer. To do so would be to set up an impossible causal linkage between service learning and social betterment (Butin, 2006).

Such endeavors may not have immediate visible affects that can be measured, but the impact may accumulate over time. The ACT campaign and similar projects cannot stop extremism or the recruitment of fighters coming from marginalized backgrounds, but it will remain a liberation practice in higher education. After all, education can be the only means for preventative (proactive) measures vs the reactive measures of governments and the international community (Ghosh *et al.,* 2017).

12.6 Challenges and insights to develop similar programs
The considerable spread of SL during the last decade reflects how higher education is moving into a "scholarship of engagement" (Boyer, 1990; Shulman, 2004 as cited in Butin, 2006). A scholarship of engagement links theory and practice, cognitive and affective learning and institutions with communities (Butin, 2006).

The international symposium on "Teaching about Extremism, Terror and Trauma," held between September 25 and 27, 2017 concluded that educational initiatives to counter radicalization and extremism educational policies shall link extremism and violence to different forms of injustice (low socio-economic conditions in the case of Lebanon) (Ayaz and Arshad-Ayaz, 2017).

Thus far, as the idea of SL moves into the academic mainstream, SL projects to defy counter extremism are still in the piloting stage with uncertain footsteps. The efforts are vast, but the outcomes may be promising. The issue is more than going viral on social media, generating clicks, views and shares; attention shall be given to guaranteeing recognized results and longevity.

13. Concluding remarks
The results of this study have implications for research on curricula design in the context of experiential learning in journalism and other disciplines where students are inducted into the pedagogy of inquiry and deliberation while meeting the community needs. Thus, the study emphasizes the role of higher education in promoting civic responsibility among students to pave the way for more studies in the field of SL in Lebanon and the wider MENA region.

In a nutshell, SL can be considered as a tool to provide youth with values, awareness and skills to exchange, communicate and overcome social and cultural barriers (UNESCO, 2016).

The impact of the campaign and the experience as a whole is beyond the Facebook likes it generated. We can look at it as a pilot project that helped to set a culture of SL to defy extremism on a local and regional scale. It is a cornerstone to build larger and longer projects. It paved the

way for other local initiatives to counter extremism creating a sort of positive contagion effect raising the standards of competition. For example, Haigazian University (2018) students from the Faculty of Business Administration and Economics won the third place among 82 universities for their "Rise Lebanon" campaign to combat religious hatred and extremism at the finals of the same competition but in the fall 2017 edition.

Briefly, such initiatives are leading practices that engage the community in students' education. It helps to integrate the academic course content and the community placement in one entity (Bowman *et al.*, 2010; Bringle *et al.*, 1997).

Education can be the transitional tool to move from countering to preventing violent extremism approaches. Ghosh *et al.* (2017, p. 120) described this as a long-term approach as:

> […] shaped by both curriculum content and teaching methodology that fosters critical thinking and ethical behavior, which also imply changes in teacher education programs. Most importantly, students must see the relevance of what they learn, and be able to develop a critical understanding of the world.

The students who were part of the countering extremism ACT campaign tried to make a change in an era where extremism and violence are on the rise.

Education in all its forms can be one of many tools to counter all forms of extremism and radicalization. In our information-based societies, education is not anymore about information; it is mainly about preparing life-long ethical learners and professionals who are politically educated and critical global citizens (Davies, 2009).

As Sgro put it:

> I believe the power of student innovation can really make the world a better place.

14. Limitations

A limitation in this case study lies in the lack of generalizability since it focused on a limited number of participants in a single case study. Despite this inherent limitation of case studies, it did not preclude the researcher from making common sense conclusions having broader applicability.

The portraits used in this study can only identify the strengths of SL projects in making positive changes in students' lives. They do not offer reliable valid data about this change. Moreover, the level of subjectivity is high in this naturalistic, non-experimental research design. The researcher can empathize with the characters and this may affect the distance toward them. There is also a margin of bias since the researcher was one of the mentors of the participants in the ACT campaign.

This paper serves as a reflection on the importance of connecting learning outcomes to social problems especially controversial ones like countering extremism. Despite the limitations of the study, it is worth realizing that SL is a constructive approach that builds on course content to optimize the learning experience, while providing support to the society.

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About the author

Dr Maria Robert Bou Zeid is Assistant Professor and Chairperson at the Department of Media Studies, Notre Dame University – Louaize (NDU). She is also Executive Director of the Arab Studies Institute (ASI) – Beirut Office. She received the Doctorate Degree in Media Studies from Université Paris II, Assas, Paris, and the DES Degree in Journalism from the Lebanese University in collaboration with the French Press Institute – IFP and the Center for the Formation and Perfecting of Journalists – CFPJ, Paris. She has also an extensive professional experience in the field of production and broadcast journalism. She was the key note speaker of the 47èmes assises de la presse francophone in Yerevan-Tsaghkadzor in October 2018. Dr Maria Robert Bou Zeid can be contacted at: mbouzeid@ndu.edu.lb