

In Search of Meaning: Novice Teachers' Perceptions on a Service-Learning Subject through Narrative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

In a recent decade, there is a bloom of service-learning courses in the universities in Hong Kong. Although studies about students' benefits from service-learning is plentiful, there is scarce research investigating the university teachers' perception upon service-learning in the course of teaching, especially novice faculty members. Many university teachers are invited to teach service-learning yet their voice and views on the gains, benefits or difficulties are sparingly addressed. The narrative inquiry approach is adopted in the present study to investigate the unique views of the novice faculty members teaching service-learning. Novice teachers from a service-learning subject implemented in The Hong Kong Polytechnic University are invited for the present study. In-depth interviews have been conducted to gauge teachers' perceptions upon the experiences of teaching this service-learning subject. Results showed that the novice teachers (1) have seized the "calling" of teaching service-learning; (2) perceived teaching service-learning as a reaction to institutional privatization and (3) urged eagerly for the mentorship.

Key Words: service-learning, novice faculty members, teachers' perceptions, meaning, experience

INTRODUCTION

Most of the faculty members are well-experienced in teaching traditional courses of their own disciplinary knowledge in the classroom. The novice faculty members will unavoidably be exposed to this "traditional teaching norm" when they enter the field. With the increasing concern of the civic responsibility of the higher education, quite a number of university lecturers and professors are invited to teach service-learning subjects. There are some studies showing that junior faculty members are more "comfortable" and "welcome" with the service-learning approach. However, Boyle-Baise and Efiom (2000, p.224) claimed that teaching service-learning is the "first exposure" level, a place where the faculty members have "never dealt with before". Faculty members are struggling to overcome the difficulties as they confront the "strangeness" yet need to act as role models to the students to deal with all the pluralistic situations.

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Groundwater-Smith (1992) claimed that there are many complexities of professional demands when teachers are guiding the students in the service-learning course. Teachers need to have a wide range of vision when children are doing the services in the community (Wade, 1997). Teachers need to have problem solving ability once emergency case existed. This would be exceptionally challenging to the novice faculty members. Some scholars have shown that great motivation has failed to provoke teachers to implement service-learning course successfully as there are numerous of changes from the community parties (Erasmus 2007). Thus, it will affect teachers' motivation in teaching service-learning course as it will increase their burden in solving varieties of problem aroused by different parties in addition to their present workload, especially younger and green faculty members. Despite these difficulties, university teachers value the impact of service-learning as one important pedagogy to motivate students to reflect upon the social needs and their role in the society. The "co-walk experience" with students to contribute to the communities encourages university teachers to continue this service-learning journey.

Narrative inquiry has been perceived as the "extraordinary pedagogy in education" as "education is interwoven with living and with the possibility of retelling our life stories" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p.246). By understanding the lived, retold and relived stories of experiences, the inquirer is able to better understand the temporal and contextualized experiences the participants have shared. Huber et al. (2013, p.213) reiterated that "narrative inquiry opens possibilities for shifting stories, and therefore, lives, connects us with the knowing of many people whose thinking in relation with story, narrative, experience, and lives shapes our thinking and living as narrative inquirer". Therefore, a strong collaborative feature of narrative research has been emerged through interactions of the inquirer and the participants.

METHODS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Narrative research analysis and representation serves as the framework of data analysis of the present study. The three-dimensional space approach of Clandinin and Connelly (1998), that is the interaction (personal and social); continuity (past, present and future) and situation (physical places or the storyteller's places), is adopted as the analytic framework. Themes emerged from the shared stories will be articulated. As the inquirer is one of the teaching faculty members of the service-learning subject, the novice teachers' interwoven experiences were learnt, in addition to the interviews, with other narrative approaches including class-based and service-based participant observations, and ongoing conversations with the participants (Creswell, 2013).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Serval major themes have been drawn from the stories of the interviewed novice teachers.

3.1 Spirituality Development of Novice Faculty Members

The participants understood that the teaching of the service-learning subject is an "assignment of workload" and they were "assigned" to teach in their freshly developed career in the university setting. The participants yet valued the opportunity of and saw meaning in teaching service-learning. The experiences were perceived as the "co-walk experience" with the students to grow together. This connectedness kindles their passion in being instructors of this service-learning subject and of the department they serve. One of the participants mentioned specifically that the social responsibility was one of the dominant "basis" in social sciences and education disciplines and she saw the

“calling of commitment” in teaching service-learning.

3.2 Teaching Service-learning As A Reaction To “Institutional Privatization” (Petry & Halbert, 2013, p. 443)

The participants have observed that there is an increasing emphasis on qualifications or development of expertise of university graduates instead of arising students’ awareness of the needs of the society in recent years. They agreed that the importance of teaching students of civic responsibility through service-learning. As novice university teachers, the participants understood the “limited influence” to change their green-ness. However, they perceived teaching service-learning as a “reaction” to assisting students to better understand their civic responsibility and their roles in younger children and adolescents.

3.3 The Urge for Mentorship

The participants have encountered numerous challenges in teaching service-learning, Professional and personal development as trust and the “equity” given by their novice identities.

CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY AND PRACTICE

There are scarce studies investigating teachers’ perceptions upon their experiences in teaching service-learning, especially the novice faculty members. The present study offers an opportunity to better understand novice teachers’ understanding and teaching experiences of service-learning through storytelling. In addition, using the narrative inquiry in the present study highlights (1) the processes in the novice teachers’ perception on their teaching lives; (2) the different perceptions upon the teaching of service-learning that relate to their life experiences, and (3) the unique and general features of the novice faculty members’ lives in teaching service-learning (Creswell, 2013).

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