

Promoting Positive Development of Migrant Children in Hangzhou: Pioneering Experience and Preliminary Evaluation Findings

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ABSTRACT

The present paper described the first-year implementation (2014/15 academic year) of a service-learning program that aims to nurture university students' generic competencies, positive values and social responsibilities and to promote positive development of migrant children in Hangzhou, China. Evaluative findings on PolyU students' performance in the service trip and the effectiveness of the program on university students' holistic development were also reported. Based on 140 observation assessment forms completed by trained observers, it was found that PolyU students performed very well throughout the service. The percentages of positive responses (rated as "good" or "very good") ranged from 88.97% to 100% across the 13 items, indicating high quality of service provided by our students and good social outcomes. Qualitative findings showed that students had meaningful gains after the programme in multiple aspects including 1) an increased level of empathy towards others and passion in helping people in need, 2) deeper self-understanding and understanding of the population they served, 3) Improved problem-solving and decision-making skills, 4) enhanced interpersonal skills, and 5) a stronger sense of responsibility and citizenship. Implications of the findings and future research directions are discussed.

Key words: Service learning, migrant children, program evaluation, university student

INTRODUCTION

Service learning as an experiential teaching and learning pedagogy has been increasingly adopted in university education worldwide to promote both students' growth and the common good of the community (Jacoby, 2014). Through applying knowledge and skills to service settings and guided self-reflection, students are provided with opportunities to train their real-world skills, develop civic responsibility, and effect positive changes to the society (Eyler & Giles, 1999). In the United States, a wealth of research has documented the benefits of service learning programs to different stakeholders in various aspects. Important evidence supporting service learning as a high-impact educational practice has also been provided (e.g., Eyler et al., 2001; Clayton, Bringle, & Hatcher, 2013).

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In contrast, systematic investigation on the effectiveness of service learning programs is insufficient in Asia, where service learning remains a relatively new concept (Xing & Ma, 2010). Regarding the service learning subjects at PolyU, favorable findings on students' learning gains have been reported mainly on an aggregated basis through students' self-reported ratings of their learning experience (e.g., Office of Service Learning, 2015; Shek, Yu, Wu, & Chai, 2014; Shek, Yu, Wu, & Ng, 2015). As different service learning subjects have different designs and foci, it would be valuable to examine the implementation quality and effectiveness of an individual course, and to identify and address the related challenges. The present study would share the preliminary evaluative findings of a subject entitled "Promotion of Child and Adolescents Development" offered in the 2014/15 academic year.

Since the 2012/13 academic year in order to nurture competent professionals with a heart to serve, students studying in the four-year undergraduate degree programme at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) are required to complete one 3-credit service learning subject during their studies as part of the General University Requirements (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 2013). Different departments are encouraged to propose subjects that fulfill the service learning requirements. The subject "Promotion of Child and Adolescent Development" is one of the first batch of service learning subjects approved by the University. A focus of the subject is to nurture students' generic competence, positive values, social responsibility, and sense of care and compassion toward people in need through designing and providing direct services for children and adolescents living in underprivileged conditions.

Due to the positive feedbacks from both the participating students and the collaborators, the number of students enrolled in this subject has increased every year. To cater the expanded needs of students, a new service learning site, the Hangzhou Shuren Primary School, which exclusively serves children of migrant workers, was set up in 2015. Based on knowledge and skills learned in the lectures and workshops, students designed and implemented a five-day summer camp for migrant children in the school with three major themes: resilience, aspiration, and competence. While the program was implemented smoothly and welcomed by different stakeholders, it is important to understand the quality of service the students provided and the influence of the subject on the learning, personal, and social outcomes for the participating students. The present study has three major aims: 1) to describe the first-time implementation of the service learning program in Hangzhou; 2) based on observations by trained observers, to evaluate students' performance during their service; 3) to examine the students' perceived gains from the subject based on their reflective writing.

METHODS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Participants were 37 students who enrolled in the subject APSS2S05 and selected Hangzhou as their service site. First, all the students were required to participate in a survey developed by the Office of Service Learning upon completion of the subject. The questionnaire consisted of five general items regarding students' personal information, 22 items on self-reported soft skills (interpersonal effectiveness, teamwork, social responsibility, and problem-solving) and understanding towards the community they serve, as well as 12 items on students' learning experience. All items were rated on a five-point Likert Scale.

Second, the students were asked to write a reflective journal based on their experiences in terms of one's ability in integrating the knowledge into practice; one's roles,

responsibilities, and contributions as a professional and citizen; one's own strengths and potentials; and one's perceived gains. To evaluate students' direct service, 10 graduate students majoring in psychology, education, and clinical medicine were recruited from Zhejiang University to work as observers in the class. Before the service started, the observers took part in a training workshop that familiarized them about the major contents of the course, purpose of provided service, and how to assess students' performance using the standard observation form developed by the research team. One observer stayed in one class for a whole day and observed all service sessions provided in the class. For each session, the observer completed a 13-item assessment form on the performance of the student who taught the class, assessing the student's service attitude, sense of responsibility, awareness of needs, sense of care, cultural sensitivity, teamwork and problem solving skills, communication skills with service targets, teaching skills, ability to apply the discipline-related knowledge, reflective attitude, punctuality, and overall performance.

Descriptive analyses were conducted on observers' ratings to provide evidence on the quality of students' service. To examine students' perceived gains from the subject, students' reflective journals and their responses to the online survey regarding learning experiences were analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the five-day summer camp, 37 students offered for eight classes of migrant children a total of 90 teaching sessions in four major areas – living English, interesting science, personal development, and healthy living. Under the supervision of subject teachers, detailed lesson plans for every session were developed by students before the summer camp. Each student was responsible for acting as the class instructor for two different sessions in two classes while the other group members served as teaching assistants. All sessions were implemented according to the lesson plans. A student-organized closing ceremony that summarized the achievements of the summer camp was also successfully held on the last day of the camp. All students attended the service punctually and devotedly. No lateness or absence was noted. Overall, the service was implemented very smoothly. It was noted that good preparation and smooth collaboration among different parties were integral to the successful delivery of service in this new site.

A total of 140 observers' assessment forms were collected and the ratings showed that students' performed very well throughout the service. For all 140 sessions being rated, the percentages of positive responses (rated as "good" or "very good") ranged from 88.97% to 100% across the 13 items. In particular, students' "service attitude" was rated as good or very good in all sessions. In 97.12% and 94.29% of the sessions, PolyU students' "sense of responsibility" and "sense of care" were rated positively. Students' reflective attitudes, teaching skills, communication skills with service targets, and reflective attitudes also received high ratings in more than 90% of the sessions. These findings indicate the high quality of service provided by our students and good social outcomes.

Qualitative analysis of students' reflective journals showed that students had meaningful learning gains after the service practicum, including 1) an increased level of empathy towards others and passion in helping people in need, 2) deeper self-understanding and understanding of the population they served, 3) Improved problem-solving and decision-making skills, 4) enhanced interpersonal skills, and 5) a stronger sense of responsibility and citizenship. The findings echo the quantitative results obtained from the online survey. These positive changes and experiences reported by students are likely to be due to their direct contact with the service recipients and systematic reflection in different

stages of the service learning program guided by teachers.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the service learning subject “Promotion of Child and Adolescents Development” in Hangzhou can be regarded as successful. The findings add to the limited literature that provides scientific evidence on the effectiveness of service learning programs. They also demonstrate the usefulness of including different informants in program evaluation. One limitation is the lack of information from the service recipients and community collaborators. Second, paired-samples t-tests shall be used in the future to compare students’ performance at pre- and post-tests. Third, more standardized evaluation tools with relatively consistent items for different stakeholders (such as community partners, service providers, and recipients) should be developed and employed in further evaluation studies. Finally, we need a large sample to make the findings more generalizable.

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