

Students' Perceived Changes and Benefits in a Mandatory Service Learning Course

YAMMY CHAK, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

DANIEL T. L. SHEK, D, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

BETTY P.W. MOK, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

XIAOYAN HAN, East China Normal University

JASON F. CHEN, Wujing Education Bureau

JILEI ZHANG, Zizhu Primary School Affiliated to East China Normal University

QING XIAO, Starfish Saver Social Work Service Centre

HAO JIANG, Starfish Saver Social Work Service Centre

ABSTRACT

By engaging in a more comprehensive reflection of the service-learning experiences, students taking Service-Learning subjects at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University are expected to develop a more positive personal understanding and self-identity, stronger critical thinking ability and social awareness. The purpose of this paper is to examine the perceived changes and benefits from the perspective of more than 80 students, who had taken a 3-credit SL subject entitled "Promotion of Children and Adolescent Development" and provided 40 hours of service for more than 300 migrant children in Shanghai. Overall, both quantitative and qualitative findings showed that the students benefited from this 2- semester course. A number of perceived changes were recognized, including the enhancement of their interpersonal effectiveness, team building, problem solving ability and social responsibilities. The findings also demonstrate the advantage of having mandatory SL subject requirement.

Key Words: service-learning, reflection, perceived changes, mandatory requirement

1. INTRODUCTION

The number of service-learning (SL) courses offered in higher education is increasing globally. It has been well documented that the service-learning pedagogy goes beyond the traditional classroom teaching to enable students to combine subject matter knowledge and a set of complementary skills, to serve the community and obtain a fuller understanding of the society. Based on the growing body of research, SL can also positively promote student learning, positive values as well as personal growth through experiential and reflective learning (Astin et al., 2000; Warren, 2012).

Yammy L. Y. Chak, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, Email: yammy.chak@polyu.edu.hk; Daniel T. L. Shek, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, Email: daniel.shek@polyu.edu.hk; Betty P. W. Mok, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, Email: pwmok@polyu.edu.hk; Xiaoyan Han, East China Normal University, Shanghai, P.R. China, Email: irentommy@163.com; Jason F. Chen, Wujing Education Bureau, Shanghai, P.R. China, Email: 272777492@qq.com; Jilei Zhang, Zizhu Primary School Affiliated to East China Normal University, Shanghai, P.R. China, Email: erfuxiaozp@126.com; Qing Xiao, Starfish Saver Social Work Service Centre, Shanghai, P.R.China, Email: maomao590605@hotmail.com.

1.1 Mandatory Service-Learning

There is an active debate concerning SL courses in university should be a mandatory requirement. It is assumed that voluntary service-learning could increase the likelihood that students will contribute with a higher degree of intrinsic motivation and enthusiasm, but reluctance or even resentment of students should lead to undesirable service. Nonetheless, since SL is proven as a powerful pedagogy for promoting student learning and development, it is believed that the advantage of including those who are least motivated (initially less-inclined to take part in volunteer or community service) exposed to mandatory service-learning can enable them to “taste” and realize the intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits in their involvement.

The major argument against mandatory SL is that those being forced to join the required SL courses, their future intentions to volunteer would be negatively affected, especially when the purpose and rationale of the requirement were not clearly explained (Dienhart et al., 2016). However, there is evidence showing that students who take part in compulsory SL courses continue to volunteer at greater levels (Nicholls & Schimmel, 2012). In addition, students’ previous experiences in service involvement will influence their interest in future service involvement in a positive way (Moely & Ilustre, 2011). From the discussion, the crucial factor for future intentions to volunteer is whether the students can find their meaning, motivation and satisfaction fulfilled in the service experiences, not simply about “compulsory” versus “voluntary”. Basically, if students are not aware of the rationales of the mandatory learning, or they cannot identify personal fulfilment or benefits of their service experiences, negative outcomes could be observed. To this end, Nicholls and Schimmel (2012) concluded in their study that perceived attitude change towards service and satisfaction is the main driver for future volunteering intentions. As long as the SL is well designed, explained and implemented, and the students have a clear understanding on why they need to “learn to serve”, mandating SL should not be that problematic. In this regard, to promote reflection in service-learning can facilitate better SL implementation and outcome.

1.2 Learning through Purposeful and Continuous Reflection

Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory suggested that learning from experience follows a cycle. In particular, reflective observation is essential in the four-stage process. The foundation of service-learning stems from experiential approach, in which purposeful reflection about concrete service experiences can enable students to make connections to their past or current learning from different perspectives and to make judgments as well as drawing meaning to guide their future behavior.

Reid (1993) defined reflection as “a process of reviewing an experience of practice in order to describe, analyze, evaluate and so inform learning about practice” (p. 306). Eyler and Giles (1999) emphasized the importance of having reflection in service-learning as it is the hyphen that links service to learning. Incorporating purposeful and continuous verbal and/or written reflection after having concrete service experiences can stimulate students’ cognitive processing and facilitate them to consolidate their experiences, internalize learning and generate new insights or even transformation (Eyler & Giles, 1999, Kolbs, 1984). In this regards, the 2-semester SL course entitled “Promotion of Children and Adolescent Development” intentionally gives emphasis to “learning through reflection” and treats continuous reflection as a vehicle of transformation.

This SL course under study was offered in the academic year 2013-2014. It was an offshore project and the service took place in Shanghai. All students enrolled were required to plan and conduct a 5-day summer camp (40 hours) for more than 300 migrant children in Shanghai. The subject aimed at (1) introducing different psychosocial perspectives on children and youth development as well as the needs and challenges of their living in underprivileged circumstances; (2) cultivating the positive values and strengths orientation among university students; (3) enhancing the competencies of students in the areas of problem-solving, decision making, communication and team work; (4) nurturing students' sense of social responsibility, social awareness and promote prosocial behaviors; and (5) nurturing students' sense of care and compassion. A total of 87 students enrolled in this subject. Structured reflective activities and assignments (both verbal and written) were arranged before, during, after completion of the service delivery and at the end of the course.

2. METHOD AND DATA ANALYSES

A total of 87 students participated in this subject across two semesters in the 2013-14 academic year. These students came from different disciplines including accounting, marketing, hotel management, nursing, and engineering. In order to gauge students' perceptions of their learning experience, all enrolled students were invited to (i) complete the pre-and-post surveys developed by OSL of PolyU, and (ii) write several reflective journals on what they had learnt from the service and the course.

For the pre-and-post survey questionnaire, it aims to examine students' overall learning and development from the beginning to the end of the course. It consists of 4 parts. It started with some general information (Part 1), and followed by 20 generic/soft skills questions (Q1 to Q22 in Part 2) to analyze students' generic competencies. Part 3 of the post-project survey consists of 12 questions. Students are asked to rate their self-perceptions of their performances on a Likert-scale of 1 to 5. In Part 4, students are asked to give their comments and suggestions for improvement on the SL subject. A total of 84 questionnaires were received and the response rate was 96.6%. The data collected were analyzed by the SPSS.

For the qualitative data, it was one of the reflective assignments. Students were required to write reflective journals with around 1000 words on their service experiences. They were required to reflect on: (i) their ability in integrating the knowledge into practice; (ii) their roles, responsibility and contribution as a professional and as a citizen; (iii) their own strengths and potentials; (iv) their passion in helping the underprivileged children and adolescents; (v) their problem-solving and decision-making capacities, and (vi) their social competence and interpersonal skills in collaboration with others. A general qualitative orientation was adopted in this study. The collected data was analyzed by using the general techniques proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). First, 86 reflective papers were read once and relevant raw codes were developed from students' work. Then, the codes were further categorized to different patterns. Lastly, the categories of codes were revealed to broader themes.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Characteristics of the Students and their Reasons of taking the subject

It is shown that most of the students had prior experience in voluntary service (92.9%). Concerning the reasons for taking the course, 86.9% of the respondents reflected that "they would like to gain more experiential learning experience outside the classroom" and the majority of them "believe it will broaden my horizon on understanding the life

of the underprivileged people inside or outside Hong Kong”. Interestingly, 78.6% of respondents reflected that they took the course because of other reasons. Based on the teachers’ understanding and observation, roughly one-third of the students joined the course because this course was an offshore project and they wanted to fulfill the University requirement.

3.2 Changes in Generic/Soft Skills after completion of the course

Table 1 shows the student changes in four different domains upon completion of the SL subject. Overall speaking, the results show a statistically significant enhancement in the four generic competencies measured, i.e. interpersonal effectiveness, teamwork, problem-solving and social responsibility.

3.3 Overall Evaluation of Students’ Learning Experience

Table 2 below is about the students’ self-perceptions of their performances and learning experience. Generally, the findings revealed that the perception of the students were highly positive. In terms of learning experience, the majority of students reflected that they learned better from the service project than traditional classroom learning mode. Almost all of them treasured the learning experience throughout the service project (96.4%). In addition, the students agreed that they should have the responsibility to serve the community (97.6%). With particular reference to the future intention to serve

94% of the students stated that they would continue their involvement in community services and 90.5%

of the students reflected that they are willing to participate in SL activities in the future and there is only

1 student (1.2%) disagreed that he/she will have further SL participation.

3.4 Qualitative data from the reflective journals

With reference to students’ reflection, the findings are consistent with the quantitative evaluation. Three observations can be highlighted. First, the content of all journals collected can be defined as positive and encouraging. All students mentioned their own self-evaluation, the perceived benefits and changes in the reflection journals. Second, students have stated that SL course is important to their personal growth and development. Most of the students reported that their “Team Building” have been improved chiefly. In addition, they reflected that there is enhancement in the areas of “Interpersonal Communication”, “Social Responsibility” and “Problem-Solving” after they have participated in the SL course and delivered the service in Shanghai. Third, a number of cases have shown that the mindsets of students towards SL course have changed positively after they participated in the service.

Students had experienced positive changes in team building, as many of them mentioned that they could learn to be a good team player. One university student noted that it was a great chance to train his collaboration with others as they needed to make decision rapidly under some unexpected situation. In addition, one student reflected that “I realize that we must cooperate. We need to be interdependent when working as a team”. One undergraduate claimed that he has learnt that if they want to succeed as a team, each one of them should play their role accordingly. In addition, another student shared that “When a primary student vomited during lesson, one of us went to the teacher in-charge and called for help, one helped to take care of the primary students and the remaining group of us helped to pacify the crowd. We did not have to communicate but all of us knew our own positions and helped to manage the class. I can feel that every group member is part of the team and I appreciate our efforts and

cooperation". To sum up, students believed that smooth and close collaboration within the group made them feel proud and became parts of the team.

A group of students reported that effective communication is necessary to communicate well with others. For example, one student has claimed that "The cooperation between teammates and meeting different people also enhance my confidence and interpersonal skills in collaboration with others". Another student has realized that her interpersonal and communication skills were greatly improved, as she learnt to listen attentively and try to put herself into others' shoes before making any comments. She also realized that she needs to have continuous improvement on her communication skills with her family to reduce arguments. One of the undergraduate claimed that he learned the skills to communicate with the primary children and listen to their feelings. He mentioned that primary kids learned from them and they also learned from the kids. It showed that through service-learning, university students had learnt how to communicate with people from different age group and background.

In addition, SL course has given a chance for students to get involved in the community. Students have quoted that "Some of the people we served were living in a poor environment and allocated with few resources. This leads me to think about the quality of life of the underprivileged group in Hong Kong. Many people may hesitate to help them, including myself. However, now my passion in assisting is growing. If I have chances, I may try to serve the needy in Hong Kong as well". Another student has reflected that SL course has enhanced her awareness towards the minorities in the society. She thinks that the contribution is just a beginning of her journey and would like to do more in the future. Obviously, SL is not only a course but also helping students to reflect their roles in the society and their responsibilities in the community.

Many students have spotted that there were several challenges when they were being the role as a "teacher" to manage the class and the kids. A student said "I tried to incorporate both simple and difficult words in my PowerPoint, so that the more capable students would not feel boring, while the kids with lower English levels could learn something new. I thought that this practice has improved my problem-solving skills, to deal with situation that did not go with what I had been expected or planned". Students also realized the importance of having contingency plans as there were unexpected incidents happened and they learnt to eliminate the chance of being panic and making mistakes under stress. These experiences could help students to think further and enhance their problem solving skills in the process.

Other than the benefits mentioned, a number of cases have shown that the mindsets of students towards a SL course have changed in a positive way after they participated in the service. One of the students has claimed that he didn't have passion to serve the children at first so he did not have any expectation from the course. However, after the service, he positively changed his attitude because he could unexpectedly learn something important from the children, but not only contributing in one direction. Another wrote that "in my past experience, the general way to deal with group assignments within a team was dividing the workload into equal pieces and finally combining the individual parts together. From this service, I had learnt not only dividing the burden, but more vitally, was to share each other's burden". Thus, SL experience has positively changed students' perceptions towards the course, a mandatory one.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the positive qualitative and quantitative feedback, it has shown that the SL exposure was helpful to cultivate students' positive values, strengthen their intrapersonal as well as interpersonal competence and nurture stronger sense of social responsibility among the students enrolled. In particular, the findings clearly showed that students benefited from the SL experience as constructive self-perceived growth and changes were significantly observed.

The results also shed some light on the effectiveness of the mandatory service-learning and the importance of incorporating reflection in the process. Although the current study did not directly investigate the effectiveness of mandatory SL, the results reflected that this SL experience did not undermine the future intention of the students to serve the community or to participate in SL. With reference to the qualitative results, there is good impact on those who are least inclined to take part in the course. For some students who did not have any prior experience in voluntary service, they eventually realized the benefits of SL activities and be contented about their participation and personal changes. Despite the fact that the SL requirement is structured, experience itself cannot produce learning. Bringle and Hatcher (1999) stated that "experience becomes educative when critical reflective thought creates new meaning and leads to growth and the ability to take informed actions" (p. 180). Thus, provision of purposeful and continuous reflective activities and assignments is essential as students are given the chances to evaluate and reflect on their own attitudes towards learning, the values and life. In addition, reflective activities could help orienting the students to the same philosophical and practical emphasis of the SL project. These reflective tasks could also develop a positive culture with shared vision and ownership. Therefore, learning through reflection should be treated as the crucial component to strengthen the power of service-learning pedagogy.

Despite the positive findings observed in the present study, there are limitations that need to be addressed. First, the current evaluation was solely based on the data of the self-rated assessment and self-reflection, without having control group for objective comparison. Second, as only one class of students (around 85 students) were involved in the study, the views and data collected may not represent the whole picture of university's condition and thus its generalizability is restricted. It is suggested that future research should be carried out in order to provide stronger evidence for the impacts and causal-relationship of implementing mandatory service-learning subjects in university. Despite these limitations, the present study successfully used both qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate what students have gained after taking a SL subject. These findings also demonstrate the advantage of having mandatory SL subject that attempts to promote the student development and cultivate their civic responsibility. Obviously, learning through reflection helped to promote a more positive attitude and healthier personal development in students.

REFERENCES

- Astin, A. W., Vogelgesang, L. J., Ikeda, E. K., & Yee, J. A. (2000). How service-learning affects students. Los Angeles, CA: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California.
- Bingle, R. G., & Hatcher, J. A. (1999). Reflection in service learning: Making meaning of experience. *Educational Horizons*, 77(4), 179-85.
- Dienhart, C., Maruyama, G., Snyder, M., Furco, A., McKay, M. S., Hirt, L., & Huesman, R. Jr. (2016). The impacts of mandatory service on students in service-learning classes. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 156(3), 305–309.
- Eyler, J., & Giles, D. E. (1999). Where’s the learning in service learning? San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Moely, B. E., & Ilustre, V. (2011). University students’ views of a public service graduation requirement. *Michigan Journal of Community Service-learning*, 17(2), 43–58.
- Nicholls, J., & Schimmel, K. (2012). Match/mismatch of the college business student service-learning experiences: Drivers of perceived attitude change, satisfaction, and future volunteering intentions. *Journal of Higher Education Theory & Practice*, 12(6), 91–99.
- Reid, B. (1993). “But we’re doing it already!” Exploring a response to the concept of reflective practice in order to improve its facilitation. *Nurse Education Today*, 13, 305–309.
- Warren, J. L. (2012). Does service-learning increase student learning?: A meta-analysis. *Michigan Journal of Community Service-learning*, Spring, 56–61.

Generic/soft skills	Students’ SL Learning Status	Mean scores	Differences in mean scores	Sig. 2-tailed	Effect size
Interpersonal Effectiveness	Pre-SL	19.81	1.620	<.001	0.694
	Post-SL	21.43			
Teamwork	Pre-SL	20.48	1.360	<.001	0.540
	Post-SL	21.84			
Problem-solving	Pre-SL	19.59	1.420	<.001	0.528
	Post-SL	21.01			
Social Responsibility	Pre-SL	20.27	1.240	<.001	0.495
	Post-SL	21.51			

Table 1. Changes in Generic/Soft Skills after completion of the course (N=84)

After completing the SL subject,	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Strongly agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly disagree (1)
I applied the professional knowledge/skills that I learnt from class at the service-learning project/trip.	84	4.15	0.591	26.2%	63.1%	10.7%	0.0%	0.0%
I will continue my involvement in community services.	84	4.31	0.580	36.9%	57.1%	6.0%	0.0%	0.0%
I feel that the work I did through service-learning benefited the community.	84	4.36	0.573	40.5%	54.8%	4.8%	0.0%	0.0%
Service-learning helped me become more aware of the needs in the community.	84	4.45	0.648	52.4%	41.7%	4.8%	1.2%	0.0%
I believe that I have a responsibility to serve the community	84	4.51	0.549	53.6%	44.0%	2.4%	0.0%	0.0%
I think I can make a difference in the community.	84	4.25	0.618	34.5%	56.0%	9.5%	0.0%	0.0%
I treasured the learning experience throughout the service project.	84	4.60	0.562	63.1%	33.3%	3.6%	0.0%	0.0%
The service project was well prepared and organized.	84	4.42	0.625	47.6%	47.6%	3.6%	1.2%	0.0%
Generally speaking, I learn better from the service project than traditional classroom learning mode.	84	4.50	0.631	56.0%	39.3%	3.6%	1.2%	0.0%
I will participate in service-learning activities in the future.	84	4.37	0.690	47.6%	42.9%	8.3%	1.2%	0.0%
I can get enough support from the NGO in carrying out the project	84	4.08	0.698	28.6%	51.2%	20.2%	0.0%	0.0%
I can get enough support from the PolyU staff in carrying out the project.	84	4.43	0.566	46.4%	50.0%	3.6%	0.0%	0.0%

* Total percentage of each statement may not equal to 100%. The difference is due to rounding.

Table 2. Students' Self-perceptions of their Performances and Learning Experience