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Tablet Reading Service For College Students

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Abstract

Using tablet PCs for reading and learning is a relatively new experience for students of all ages. While their use has become popular among youngsters, children from remote areas or disadvantaged families might need guidance in using devices and resources for experiencing tablet reading and learning. To support children's reading, college students planned reading activities with tablet PCs. Promotion of tablet reading activities among children in schools with limited resources is one of the innovative approaches to bridging the technology divide. In this paper, college students' participation in a mobile reading service is reported. Their reflections on the training and engagement in the volunteer services are analyzed. Modern technology creates opportunities to engage students from underserved communities in reading. Through the use of tablet devices, college students are provided with opportunities to plan and implement various applications for actual practice. Learning from these services is a valuable experience.

Keywords: mobile learning, service learning, reading advocacy, community engagement, tablet reading

1. Introduction

Promotion of mobile reading activities among children in diverse communities is one of the innovative approaches that allow college students to explore the use of modern technology and engage in helping encourage reading in underserved communities. For university students, learning experiences from community engagement serve to deepen the relevancy of knowledge acquisition, contribute to a better understanding of social responsibility, and advance the applicability as well as the societal benefits of higher education (Prentice, 2011).

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With the advancement of modern technology, college students are provided with opportunities to experience various integrations of technology into service practice. Students' service experiences, when perceived as being of high quality, may engender both a sense of duty and cultivate their attitudes toward social responsibility (Nanda & Scott, 2011). Innovative services can be explored with the use of mobile devices in the information society. Promotion of tablet reading activities for children in diverse communities is one of the approaches that allow college students to explore the use of modern technology and engage in helping encourage reading in underserved communities. Reading activities used by children can cover a series of adventures, allowing the children to employ multimodal experiences to explore diverse reading materials (Bowler et al., 2012).

Service learning is accepted as a teaching tool by many educational institutions, and has been widely used to connect with communities and to solve community problems (Bates, 2010). By integrating service learning into higher education, students are provided with experiential and contextual learning opportunities for professional, social, and civic involvement (Overall, 2010). They are also invited to deal with socio-cultural issues in the real world, and are offered opportunities to engage in problem-solving by being required to obtain knowledge of a specific context from their service activities and to deal with community challenges (Seider & Taylor, 2011). When university students engage in genuine collaborative activities, it is valuable not only for their educational process but also for their community partners (Baker & Murray, 2011).

Innovative approaches with tablet reading enrich both college students' service learning and children's mobile reading experiences. Since tablets are versatile, college students can integrate modern mobile technology in their service learning activities, inviting children to engage in a new form of reading. With the increasing number of children's digital literature collections and mobile applications currently available online, children require guidance to access various reading materials without the limitations of time and space (Hustin, 2011).

To foster college students' learning from online tutoring experiences, efforts by the organization team are critical to the success of implementation. Students need to expose themselves to the settings that address the real problems, and engage collaboratively in solving the problems. College students' engagement in service works provides opportunities for personal growth (Nanda & Scott, 2011). This study assessed both the team efforts to organize the service work and the college students' experiences during the process. Specifically, several major issues were explored: (1) what were the skills learned from serving, (2) how did the college students collaborate with others, and (3) what was the students' feedback from the service work?

2. Approach

The efforts made by Fu Jen Catholic University to introduce tablet reading to children in remote areas are analyzed. Volunteer students were recruited from the university. To achieve the intended purpose of the students' service experience, the skills needed for providing the services were first identified. These skills included the use of tablets, access to reading resources from the Internet, and strategies for guiding children to engage in digital reading. Regular training was provided to the volunteers on a weekly basis (total: 18 hours). The course content covered: (1) volunteer services, (2) the design of specific reading topics, (3) digital tools for concept mapping in reading (e.g., Xmind), (4) tools for producing reading instruction, (5) design for reading: content and extended activities or discussions, (6) use of application software (for worksheets and posters), (7) story guiding skills, (8) sharing by senior volunteers, (9) use of tablets, and (10) invited talks from experts (instructors for story telling). Questionnaires were responded to in each training period for formative evaluation purposes.

On-site team services were arranged once every 1-2 months. Prior to each on-site service, the allocation of the human resources among team members was planned by the volunteer students. Volunteer reading facilitators were assembled to rehearse and practice their service activities. The service skills included: (1) techniques for handling tablets, (2) the selection of reading resources for children, (3) the design of reading tasks for children (the design of questions for encouraging the exploration of reading contents), and (4) extended activities for reading with tablets. Data collected from the university students included their training and activity reports and reflections by the volunteers.

Qualitative research was used for collecting data in order to obtain in-depth information from the informants concerning their shared experiences. Various data resources were integrated into the inductive analysis, and different resources were used for triangulating the reported phenomena. University, training and activity reports (26) were

used for documenting their experiences in training and services for promoting tablet reading among children. Personal reflections were also gathered from volunteers in 2013 and 2014. "Volunteer 1-Student ID" is used to reference a specific volunteer's reflection in 2013, while "Volunteer 2-Student ID" is used for reflections from 2014.

3. Students' Responses

Engaging in the volunteer reading services allowed the students to develop skills in planning group work and collaboration with others, while dealing with the serviced groups also gave them the opportunity to practice oral expression and skills when guiding the children to read. Volunteer students participating in the service work experienced the value of learning by doing. They also learned skills from serving, and experienced the value of group collaboration. Through the reflection process during the service, the students could provide feedback.

3.1. Skills learned from serving

The skills needed for serving as a reading facilitator are diverse, including writing proposals for the reading activities, e-book design, use of application software, and practicing story-telling. On-going training throughout the whole semester was held on a weekly basis. Senior volunteers provided lessons for newly recruited members. Along with practical services at the learning sites, students learned skills needed for their future careers. *"I learned the skills of oral presentation and design of reading instruction with different tools"* (Volunteer 2-12). *"Each of these skills required much practice"* (Volunteer 30). *"Senior volunteers shared with us their valuable experiences of dealing with unexpected situations that might occur in serving"* (Volunteer 2-08). *"I learned the skills for communication with children"* (Volunteer 2-12). *"I learned to use the concept mapping tool (Xmind) for story-telling. This tool also helped structure stories for children by linking characters, objects, and sequencing events to form a story"* (Volunteer 2-23). *"Camtasia Studio, video editing software and other tools learned from training were useful for planning for different service occasions. Through these tools, we could use different approaches to guide children's reading interest."* (Volunteer 2-18). *"From my experiences of planning follow-up activities, I learned to be creative in designing the tablet reading activities"* (Volunteer 2-03). *"Important experiences for site services were learned, including the selection of stories, preparing materials to guide reading, rehearsing and obtaining feedback from the team"* (Volunteer 29). *"Some of the skills learned from the service work might not be included in our formal courses. Learning these skills and experiences was valuable and relevant to our future careers"* (Volunteer 2-07).

3.2. Collaborative team effort

To make reading more interesting for the children, the design of themes and extended reading activities to encourage children to read was planned by volunteer reading facilitators. This process entailed much effort for selecting electronic reading materials, making tags for easy access to the reading contents, planning exercises for "touching, tapping, tracking, and reading with tablets," arranging for follow-up reflections, and managing the allocation of manpower. Through planning and collaborative effort among volunteers, the students practiced the skills for performing the role of reading facilitator, and shared duties to accomplish their service goals. *"Collaborative effort among us (volunteers) was essential to successfully implement the tablet reading advocacy"* (Volunteer 1-9). *"Frequent discussion was needed to do the job successfully"* (Volunteer 1-15). *"I learned how to write instructional plans for different children's groups, and worked with other volunteers in a team to guide the children to read"* (Volunteer 2-04). *"I shared with others what I had learned and how I had learned to help children's reading"* (Volunteer-01). *"We needed to be aware of each detail in setting up the environment and to share the responsibilities for different activities"* (Volunteer 2-01). According to their on-site service experiences, the volunteers also shared their understanding of specific children who required special attention. *"John (not his real name) had potential reading and emotional problems, and we had to be aware that unexpected situations might come up during the group activities. Readjustment of work allocation might be needed to cope with different situations"* (Volunteer 1-23).

3.3. Feedback from service works

For these college students, joining the team to promote tablet reading was an inspiring experience. Volunteer students worked as a team and shared experiences with others of serving the children and guiding them to read with the tablet PCs. The students also had a sense of achievement and fulfillment from their services. *"I enjoyed seeing the smiles and satisfaction of the people we served. I feel I am needed by the community"* (Volunteer 2-16). *"The children enjoyed reading with tablet PCs. They felt they were learning from the new technology"* (Volunteer 2-23). *"Learning tablet reading with the children was exciting and inspiring"* (Volunteer 2-16).

Reflections from the tablet reading advocacy helped the volunteer service team review the service process and identify problems and improvements needed for the next service. By collaborating with the rural school teachers, the college students were able to plan the reading activities based on the children's needs. *"The duration of specific reading activities should be appropriately arranged in accordance with children's attention span"* (Volunteer 1-19). *"I considered the wonderful experiences learned from the reading services to be helpful for future professional development. The knowledge and skills learned from experiences could help cope with future career challenges"* (Volunteer 2-08). *"The most wonderful thing in serving for reading advocacy was the feeling of being needed by the groups we served. I enjoyed seeing the children's smiling faces"* (Volunteer 2-14). *"I was willing to take on new challenges, such as teaching children to read, and spreading the seeds for reading. Through these experiences, I found myself useful"* (Volunteer 2-11).

These observations show that the college students participating in reading advocacy experienced an innovative way of community engagement. In contrast to traditional means of promoting reading advocacy, the use of tablet reading devices also added potential interest for the college students who experienced new ways of planning to guide children's reading.

4. Discussion

In this study, in order to bridge the digital divide experienced by children in disadvantaged communities, the university recruited volunteers to provide services to make good use of tablet devices. From the students' service practices, they experienced skills training, communicating with others, planning, collaboration/duty allocation, and service reflections. Learning through experience in practical settings provides opportunities to encourage students' engagement in authentic activities, meet communities' needs, and enrich their lifelong social engagement (Bates, 2010; Baker, 2011). Well-organized, well-constructed and well-reinforced service-learning opportunities foster active engagement among participants within the community (Mottner, 2010). Prior research has indicated positive outcomes from volunteer support for reading mentors including personal development, personal insights, and satisfaction (Tracey et al., 2014). This study also found similar results for the volunteer students.

5. Conclusion

From the above observations, college students participating in reading advocacy have experienced an innovative way of community engagement. Differing from traditional promotion of reading advocacy, the use of tablet reading devices also added potential interest for the college students who experienced new ways of planning for guiding children's reading.

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