Effects of service-learning in a University in Taiwan

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Abstract

‘Service-Learning’ integrates academic courses into the community so that students understand the relevance of their studies and become more engaged. This paper inquires whether the American system of Service-Learning is appropriate for use in a university in Taiwan, with its different cultural background. Students were assigned to work in small teams together with carers for disabled elderly people in an institution. Results showed their academic studies acquired more meaning and relevance when brought into context by practical work within the community. Service-Learning students break down isolation between the community and academics.

Keywords: service learning, community, elderly people, reflection, curriculum;

1. Introduction

The concept of ‘Service-Learning’ derives from Dewey’s original notion of “learning by doing” which was popular among educationists in the sixties and seventies in USA (Becker 2000). By the 1980s many universities over the USA had united in specifying community service as part of their curriculum. In 1993 the US Federal Government established ‘The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS)’ to coordinate volunteer work, and to set up the Learn and Serve America programme, which would promote service-learning activities, would link universities with the community. The curriculum was thus designed to encourage and empower students to emerge as better community members. Its purpose has been to improve what people learnt and how they learnt it. The traditional ‘community service’ in USA was now actively transformed into a more specific and carefully defined ‘service-learning’ as part of the core curriculum (Young et al. 2007; Moely et al. 2002; Bringle & Hatcher 2000).

Taiwan have started to promote the ‘service and learning’ module and introduced it into the curriculum of different subjects in 1990s. However, the ‘service’ proportion is smaller than the ‘learning’ proportion, when

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compared with that in some foreign universities (in USA especially) which emphasize more highly the service element (Ho 2009, Fong 2003). Our research aims to find out what effects participation in a Service-Learning course may have today in Taiwan, in the context of experiences reported from USA. This paper reports an assessment of a Service-Learning Program in a university in South Taiwan. We were interested to see whether similar advantages could be shown.

2. Service-Learning in higher education

It is held that to take part in community projects can establish a sense of identity with others in society, and to perform ‘service in learning’ as an active part of life should be a lifelong activity, not something forced onto students, but as a cultivated part of their maturing characters (Leung 2010, Bnerjee & Hussfus 2007). This differs from the traditional practice of sitting in the classroom studying books and waiting till school career has finished before encountering society. It differs also from the old fashioned volunteer ‘gap year’ approach which, valuable as it may well be, has often been piecemeal, haphazard, unmonitored and temporary (Einfeeld & Collins 2008; Jones & Hill 2001; Wiechman 1996).

By contrast, service learning aims at responsible use of one’s talents lifelong in the service of the community, in a way that relates to one’s academic subject. Service-Learning is a teaching and learning method which aims to bring the community concept into the classroom. It is a mode of education through experience. Students learn by taking part in service for those in need in society. During the process of service students will gain and develop learning skills and establish a sense of community responsibility to prepare psychologically and cognitively to play their full part in society. This will also help them in their careers (McKay & Rozee 2004; Abes et al. 2002).

It is particularly important in Taiwan because traditional Chinese pedagogy has emphasized competitive performance in academic achievement in the narrow sense, of distinction in a series of formal examinations. Consequently students are in danger of becoming disengaged from the community and may disdain or avoid community-integrated whole-person education while pursuing elitist goals with narrow individual specialized expertise (Bowman et al. 2010; Kielsmeier et al. 2004).

2.1. Service-Learning in higher education in Taiwan

In 1990s the Ministry of Education adopted the American formulation in which service and learning may be combined in different proportions. In 1995 The Taiwanese Government Education Reform Committee started to promote closer cooperation between the school and society, and to outline policies to facilitate this and to reinforce liaison between school and community (Leung 2010). They stress that the nature and achievement of a good life should be at the centre of the teaching curriculum. Students are encouraged to engage with their community and undertake community service, while at the same time they are enabled to formulate and realise for themselves their own personal values as adults (Ho 2009, Fong 2003).

The students are learning from those with whom they are interacting, about their concerns, their difficulties, their own solutions. Fong (2003) found that in Taiwan university students taking part in service learning programmes had fourfold aims: 1) to use their professional knowledge; 2) to have concern for the community; 3) to define and realise their personal goals; 4) to improve interpersonal relationships. Satisfaction was felt during the process and in the results of the service learning work. Students participating felt a development of altruism alongside their natural egotism. They in general wanted to gain more knowledge and skills for themselves as individuals (Bowman et al. 2010; Simons & Cleary 2008; Moely et al. 2002).

This study explores how Taiwanese students can benefit from Service-Learning. It goes on to reflect how this experience may improve the student’s relationship with society and social reality, which otherwise is vulnerable to elitism, alienation or mismatch between academia and real life (the ivory tower effect).

3. Participation method

We used participation qualitative research methods. When students came back after each session they had to write up their diary records promptly, and detailing basic information. The main part of the report is their reflections
according to this information, and to say how they performed their functions and what was the result, also to reflect on the impact on themselves.

We evaluate the effects of the course at the end of term. The open-ended questionnaires related to specific points: 1) Who are your clients? 2) How do you feel during your work with clients and co-workers? 3) What have you done during this interaction? 4) What effects has this work had in your life? 5) Would you be interested to do more work in Service-Learning courses? And why?

As part of a ‘Community Service’ course, 28 third year students in a Department of Health Administration studied ‘Health Service in the Community’. We made preparation for the program first by providing some professional knowledge of care for elderly people. Then during community service we reviewed students’ interpersonal skills and helped them through self recognition and self criticism to develop more sensitive interactive skills. The syllabus contained an induction and training period over 10 weeks (2 hours per week) explained details of what the course would involve in practice. Then the practice of health service involved a total of 12 hours work over 6 weeks with elderly residents who required assistance from carers in an institution.

4. Reflection

On completion of the course students felt they had learned a great deal that was of value. Their anxiety was much reduced. In general the response to this combination between service and learning was appreciated.

4.1. Relationships

Relationship with elderly patients was improved. Students felt more sympathetic and more comfortable with elderly disabled people. Although they still had some reservations about their ability to talk easily and meaningfully with the elderly, they felt that some barriers were starting to break down.

“Elderly people look quite blank when you meet them first. I just tried simple conversation. You have to persist but not push it. Or I just sit quietly and find they may start talking by themselves.” (X24)

One student noted she had developed the ability to be careful and gentle, having formerly thought old people were nagging and rude, and a nuisance. Now on the contrary she noted old people are also lonely and appreciate company. Students were accepting elderly people more than before.

“At first sight of patients drooling and with difficulty feeding there was a feeling of distaste, but this changed to sympathy after practice with helping them to eat... I began to feel I should take time to contact my own grandparents and talk with them...I used to hate the traditional concept of Chinese filial piety. Initially I never wanted to have anything to do with old people. I hated the smell of old people... I told my mother who was in her 50s that it was time for her to arrange a home for herself and not expect me to look after her... But after this course I felt I could appreciate and accept old people. And I was able to get close to them and not run away from them”. (X3)

4.2. Co-operation

The necessity for teamwork developed closer ties among most students and revealed previously unnoticed facets of characters. They discovered that work could only be completed through co-operation. Students commented:

“It encouraged me to continue singing with the old folks when my co-workers gave me some warm applause.” (X15)

“At beginning, we found we needed 6 people just to complete one nappy change decently. In the course of discovering how best to solve the problem, we found out each other’s strength and weaknesses and how best to use of them. In this way we got to know each other better.” (X6)
4.3. Skill

Practical skills required more attention. After the practice students had more confidence in caring the elderly.

“I learnt how to push a wheelchair and to avoid awkward movements, to save energy and strength and reduce risk.” (X7)

One said once she had to help an old man with a paroxysm of coughing. She also had to learn to change nappies on adults, and feed fruit to those who could not eat without help. She said:

“I can do this confidently and safely now, changing nappies and patting the back when food goes down the wrong way.” (X18)

Some said they had learnt much from the oral life histories, for example the experience of escaping from communist mainland China in the 1940s, or how the aspirations of females to study were thwarted in previous generations.

“Enthusiasm and patient listening was the most important skill. We had to try our best to listen. I found their lifetime stories very interesting". (X1)

“We try to collect a repertoire of stories to produce if conversation flags” (X9).

4.4. Emotion

Students felt they had acquired an increased appreciation of their own health, appreciated more their own youth and opportunity to study, their own relatively good fortune. They became happy themselves when they saw elderly residents laughing and relaxed.

“I felt much happier than before because I felt needed, and my life had more meaning”. (X9)

“I felt more satisfied and happy, finding I was able to care gently for others, and so had come to appreciate life more fully. Initially, seeing people with tubes going into them had been a disturbing experience for me.” (X10)

“In hospital seeing how to look after mentally sick and other patients and observing and becoming involved with their interactions, I was stimulated to pay more attention to my own health.” (X22)

“We should always have enthusiasm. We must be grateful, and treat sick old people as equals”. (X11)

“Everyone has a valuable existence. If you can help the disabled you improve their life and your own, so why not do it?” (X19)

Students varied in the amount they felt they had gained. While most were positive, two had not learnt very much. Three said they had not improved much in leading entertainment activities, as their personality was not extravert and this was not a part of the work which suited them. One student commented he was already familiar with all these matters. However, he had already worked part time for a year in a similar job in an institution.

5. Conclusion

Service-Learning is a version of whole person education, where the aim is not only to gain academic knowledge, but also to learn how to interact with people in the community by becoming involved with them. In Taiwan Service-Learning course joins community service and academic learning through reflection and continuous development. Students previously learnt passively, but now had chance to develop ability spontaneously to create new knowledge and skills, seeing relevance. They become more enthusiastic about their studies, finding them now to be more relevant and useful.

Students prepare earlier to be part of their local community with a sense that their abilities are valuable. The community incidentally may be helped by extra pairs of hands, an influx of fresh young people not bound in the old
familiar routines. Elderly people tend to welcome the students as grandchildren as they push them into the gardens, take photographs, bustle in and out. The community can access resources from the academic side, and not only in terms of knowledge and personnel. Face to face interaction with students as co-workers improves rapport, helps the atmosphere, and breaks down isolation.

Students in general increased their self-esteem and improved their interpersonal relationships. They come to have more respect for each other and more responsibility for the elderly. Appreciation occurs on both sides, with mutual respect and mutual learning, with reciprocity between community and school. Further, teachers could observe students and improve their own teaching skills, designing and refining the syllabus according to student feedback. Most of our students claimed that what they had chiefly learnt from the course was communication skill and empathy. Hence, designs for future Service-Learning courses may put more emphasis on communication and interpersonal skills.

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