
THE EFFECTS OF SERVICE-LEARNING ON STUDENT OUTCOMES: A CASE STUDY OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN HONG KONG

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Abstract

Service-learning is now used widely across different academic disciplines throughout the world. As a pedagogical approach, service-learning is about creating opportunities for students to apply knowledge they learn in the classroom to serving disadvantaged groups in society. Such a linking of academic study with community service is seen as ideally suited to achieving both the personal and academic goals of students and the broader goals of civic commitment and social justice in communities. This paper describes the design of a local service-learning program that we have implemented at Chung Chi College of The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Survey data collected from 129 university students participating in the program illustrate the impacts of service-learning on student outcomes. The results show that the majority of the students have benefited in two aspects. First, by developing personal autonomy through real world experiences, the program develops within students a recognition of and faith in their potential. It enhances their ability to be self-assured, to assume new responsibilities, and to achieve individual growth. Second, students move onto becoming responsible citizens and active agents of social change. As they learn to care for different deprived groups in the community, they are assuming meaningful roles and responding to real issues in ways that have long-lasting impacts on their own lives. Recommendations, based on the shortcomings we have witnessed and the changes we have implemented, are also made.

Keywords: Assessment of student outcomes in service-learning, Credit-bearing service-learning, Direct services for the community

Introduction

Service-learning is now used widely across different academic disciplines throughout the world. As a pedagogical approach, service-learning is about creating opportunities for students to apply knowledge they learn in the classroom to serving disadvantaged groups in society (Ibrahim, 2010; Ngai, 2009). This linking of academic study with community service is seen as ideally suited to achieving both the personal and academic goals of students and the broader goals of civic commitment and social justice in communities (Chisholm, 2002; Squillace, 2014). Previous research indicates that service-learning provides opportunities for students to link their personal goals with academic study and to apply what they are learning to actual situations within the community (Lai & Xu, 2013). By integrating academic material from the classroom with service activities in the community, the relevance and application

value of class content becomes more readily evident (Huisman & Edwards, 2011). What is experienced through action will also be learned more vividly than what is merely read or heard in a teacher's classroom presentation (Shapiro, 2002).

Given the beneficial effects of service-learning on students' intellectual growth, personal development, and social commitment, this paper provides a description of a local service-learning program that we implemented at Chung Chi College of The Chinese University of Hong Kong as well as a descriptive evaluation of the program. The discussion also focuses on recommendations for service-learning based on the students' evaluations and our experiences.

The Service-Learning Program

This service-learning program runs in the form of a 3-unit college level general education course for students going into their final year and includes academic study on the campus and community service in non-governmental organizations. Concerning community service, students work in small teams, with four students to one team, in projects of non-governmental organizations for about 120 hours during the summer. The students provide services to people in need, such as children and youth in disadvantaged circumstances, senior citizens in deprived communities, chronic patients, and ethnic minority families. As to academic study, students present in regular class sessions what they have learned from their service. This is followed by comments from the instructor, classmates, and agency staff to facilitate discussion and critical reflection on problems and needs of deprived groups, existing social services and their limitations, and essential knowledge and skills in serving the needy. Each small service team is required to write a report of at least 5,000 words in length on their learning and reflection from community service and class discussion.

The course assessment scheme involves inputs from agency supervisors and our course instructor. In particular, agency supervisors give 25 percent of course marks. This part of course assessment is based on students' performance in their service-learning placements, including punctuality, adherence to administrative procedures, working relationships with service targets and agency staff, and readiness to assume responsibilities. The other part of assessment accounts for 75 percent of course marks and is based on students' performance in academic study. Specifically, students were rated according to their performance in: (1) the project proposal which delineates the objectives, service targets, contents and logistics of their service; (2) regular class sessions in which students present and reflect on what they have learned from their service; and (3) the final report which consolidates their learning from community service and class discussion (see Table 1).

Table 1. Assessment Scheme

Item	Percentage	Graded By
Participation in Pre-Service Meetings and Trainings	10%	Course Instructor
Service Proposal	15%	Course Instructor
Community Service	25%	Agency Supervisor
Reflective Journals and Meetings	15%	Course Instructor
Classroom Presentation	15%	Course Instructor
Participation in Class Discussion	10%	Course Instructor
Report	10%	Course Instructor

Research Methods

Sampling and Data Collection Procedures

The present study involved a survey design with data being collected through a structured questionnaire. The target population was students participating in the service-learning program. Due to the small number of student participants, we decided to survey all the participating students to ensure a more reliable analysis of students' feedback on the program. The questionnaire was administered in a single class session at the end of the program.

Students were invited to complete the questionnaire anonymously and then return it to our project coordinator. Out of 140 students who completed the program during the aforementioned academic years, 129 returned their completed questionnaires. The response rate of around 92 percent was considered satisfactory. All the returned questionnaires were complete and could be used for data analysis.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in this study included 39 closed-ended questions and three open-ended questions. Among them, 25 closed-ended questions and three open-ended questions evaluate issues ranging from the impact of service-learning to what students liked least about the program. For each of the closed-ended questions, students responded to a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) to assess the following seven constructs: classroom discussion, teacher support, satisfaction with program arrangement, service experience, agency support, relationship with service users and service-learning outcomes. We averaged the scores across the questions measuring each construct to produce one score and used Cronbach's alpha to assess the internal reliability of the items. Six questions such as "I enjoy the service process" measured service experience ($\alpha = .648$); three items questions "Fellow students are conscientious in classroom discussion" assessed classroom discussion ($\alpha = .675$); three questions such as "The instructor provides helpful guidance to us in presentations and discussions" measured teacher support ($\alpha = .595$); two questions, viz., "My relationship with service users is good" assessed relationship with service users ($\alpha = .711$); three questions such as "Supervisors at the service agency provide adequate supervision" measured agency support ($\alpha = .880$); and seven questions including "The program enables me to understand myself better" and "The program enables me to see social problems in a new way" assessed service-learning outcomes ($\alpha = .778$). Lastly, a single question, "I am satisfied with the arrangement of the service-learning program," measured satisfaction with program arrangement (see Table 2).

Table 2. Reliabilities of Measures and Descriptive Statistics of the Seven Constructs

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	Standard Deviation	% \geq 4
Classroom Discussion	.675	3.967	.539	65.9
Teacher Support	.595	4.039	.479	63.6
Satisfaction with Program Arrangement	NA	4.032	.521	89.1
Service Experience	.648	4.019	.411	64.3
Agency Support	.880	4.052	.691	72.1
Relationship with Service Users	.711	4.291	.558	91.5
Service-learning Outcomes	.778	4.091	.410	72.9

Notes: N=129; Students rated items measuring each construct by using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree); a score of 4 or more was considered a positive endorsement of the item.

Results

Most of the participants in the service-learning program were going into their final year of study and were first-time participants in the program, with 58 percent being female. Moreover, the participants came from different faculties including arts (28.4%), social science (17.7%), medicine (14.9%), science (13.5%), engineering (12.1%), business administration (7.8%), education (4.3%), and law (1.4%).

Descriptive statistics for each of the seven constructs appear in Table 3. Over 90% of the student participants believed that they established a good relationship with the service users, around 89% were satisfied with the program arrangement, over 72% found that the program enhanced their personal growth and social commitment, and over 72% reported that they were well supported by the service agency in the program. Students also reported positive experience in classroom discussion (65.9%), support from their teacher (63.6%), and service experience (64.3%).

Students' responses to the three open-ended questions were enlightening. Using qualitative research strategies (see Rubin & Babbie, 2014), we examined these responses for converging themes. The first question asked about the most satisfying aspect of the program. The responses could be categorized into several themes. First, students treasured the chance of working directly with the service users which allowed them to gain deeper understanding of different social issues and the needs of underprivileged groups: "We gained better understanding of the service users by stepping out of the classroom to express our care about the society. Through direct interactions, it helped us dispel prejudices towards the service users and allowed us to learn from each other" and "Through the program, I was able to apply my major subject's knowledge into the service setting." Other students indicated that they felt well supported by the service agencies and the College during the service period: "The supervisors often provide us feedback and autonomy in planning activities for the service users" and "The College and teachers provided adequate support towards students participating in service-learning program." Finally, some students highlighted that working with students from different disciplines and other community stakeholders allowed them to think in multiple perspectives: "I learnt from my teammates and other groups on how to critically reflect on various social issues" and "It is a valuable experience to work with people from different social backgrounds in organizing activities."

The second question asked students about their greatest gain from the program. Students responded that their gains were mainly on three aspects, namely interpersonal relationship, self-understanding and empowerment, and social awareness. A number of students mentioned that working in teams with students from different backgrounds strengthened their interpersonal skills. Another large group of responses indicated that they gained better understanding towards themselves and felt empowered through service-learning: "I gained better understanding towards myself and also gained new perspectives in understanding social issues," "I realized my strengths and weaknesses throughout the program," "I had great satisfaction in serving the people in need", and "The service allowed me to gain knowledge and experience beyond books and lectures." Students also indicated that they became more socially aware after their service-learning experience: "The program inspires me to care for the underprivileged people in our community more" and "I gained better understanding on the difficulties that the vulnerable groups are facing."

The final question invited students to suggest improvements on the service-learning program. Students' feedback focused on program logistics, mainly on class scheduling and financial subsidies available for program implementation. Some students wished to have more support on their learning: "More information of the service agencies can be introduced before service," "Service agencies should be well briefed on the program's objective and the difference

between service-learning placement and internship”, and “More instructions and guidelines can be provided on social research methodology.”

In sum, the students’ evaluations provided the overall impression that the service-learning program was valuable. However, from a research perspective the data can only be interpreted descriptively. The absence of a pretest makes it impossible to assess change over time, and the lack of a control group precludes any causal conclusions. For example, students participating in the program may differ from other students in a variety of ways (e.g., more committed to service, more engaged academically). Thus, it is impossible to conclude whether service-learning itself had an impact on the students or whether this group of students would be more likely to endorse the value of service, for example, regardless of the experience (Lai & Xu, 2013). Although causal conclusions cannot be drawn from this study, the descriptive ratings are consistent with those obtained in other descriptive and experimental studies (Astin et al., 2000). Additional research, particularly well-controlled experiments, is needed to further support the notion that service-learning yields positive outcomes.

Recommendations

In addition to providing a preliminary evaluation of service-learning, students’ responses reveal some of the challenges of incorporating this kind of program into higher education. Also, having offered a service-learning program to students for more than ten years, we feel prepared to make some recommendations based on the shortcomings we have witnessed and the changes we have implemented.

Project Logistics

First, and perhaps most obvious, well-organized and relevant placements are imperative. Our College is privileged to have a full-time service-learning coordinator who identifies many of the initial placements from a pool of agencies indicating an interest in student volunteers. The coordinator then contacts the agencies to discuss with them differences between volunteer service and service-learning (see McCarthy, 2002; Ngai et al., 2010) and to discuss the specific needs of the agency and activities in which students will be involved. Next, we review the placements, ruling out those that we believe are less relevant (e.g., assisting in office routines or one-shot mass activities) or that require a long time commitment (e.g., Big Brothers/Sisters Scheme). Each of the remaining agencies ensures that students will experience direct interaction with service users and adequate staff supervision that will be beneficial to their learning.

Next, facilitating connections between the students and the agencies is necessary. To tell the students, many of whom are in their second year and new to the community, to secure a placement will be overwhelming. Two structures are in place to help students make these connections. First, we provide a list of placements from which students can choose several possibilities that fit with their interests. Afterward, we match them with relevant agencies, and arrange agency visits wherein students, agency staff, and the coordinator discuss service possibilities and students’ learning needs, which then are written down into a mutually agreed service-learning proposal. Second, to promote the spirit of community service on our campus and to further our relationship with participating agencies, we present annually certificates and souvenirs respectively to students and agencies concerned at our College Friday Assembly that usually gathers over 1,000 students and professors. In this public honors ceremony, student participants share their service experience, excitement and sense of fulfillment with the whole audience. Furthermore, there is a luncheon reception after the ceremony to thank collaborating agencies for past support, and to give agency staff the opportunity to meet and talk with our students and professors. Such meetings sometimes create new service-learning possibilities for other students in subsequent academic years.

Students' Concerns

Realizing that students are busy, and many have commitments outside University, creating reasonable requirements for service duration and scheduling will enhance their service-learning experience. Indeed, when students responded to what they liked least about the program, many commented that the demands on their time are multiple and that scheduling service with the agency was sometimes difficult. For these reasons, we make service-learning an elective course. Additionally, we require a minimum of 120 hours of service, flexibly scheduled, across six weeks during the summer break. Students welcome this arrangement because it, on one hand, enables them to concentrate in community service after term tests and examinations, and on the other, assures that the service is substantive and truly useful to the community.

Faculty must also be sensitive to students' reactions to what they may encounter. Interacting with a child from an abusive background, talking to a juvenile cautioned by the police, or getting to know a senior citizen living under deprived living conditions offers a powerful learning opportunity. Many of these opportunities, however, are completely foreign to the students' range of experiences and may invoke a variety of feelings and responses. Indeed, some students expressed their frustration about not being able to do more for service users, a painful yet real-life lesson about working in community agencies. We encourage students to talk with us or with their agency supervisors about questions and concerns. Small and large group discussions (conducted with a reminder about confidentiality) can also help students go through these experiences. Reflection, as noted by many commentators (Huisman & Edwards, 2011; McCarthy, 2002), is a critical part of the service-learning process.

Conclusion

A widely recognized effective pedagogical approach is the integration of active, hands-on, experiential learning with the intellectual rigor of the academic classroom (Chisholm, 2002; Squillace, 2014). Additionally, emphasizing education to develop the whole person, character as well as intellect, has received increased attention (Ngai, 2009). Given these, we suggest that fostering appreciation of the call of service-learning is an important and laudable goal for educators. Although further empirical work is needed to clearly assess its benefits (Astin et al., 2000; Lai & Xu, 2013), we contend that service-learning has the capacity to renew a commitment to the common good as well as to individual advancement among students. As such, students going through university education are prepared not only to enter the workforce, but also to have connections to the community that will have long-lasting impacts on their own lives.

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