Learning through Reflection: Students’ Service Learning Experiences in Cambodia

PHYLLIS PANG, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
CYNTHIA WU, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

ABSTRACT

Service-learning (SL) is denoted as learning to master and apply skill in a real-life situation meeting community need (Groh, et al, 2011). The SL subject titled “Healthy Life-style Challenges in Developing Community” developed by School of Nursing of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University arms to team up students from different faculty. They are required complete 40 hours of direct service to service recipients by conducting need assessment with respect to healthy lifestyle. Based on the results of the assessment, tailor-made health promotion plans would be delivered to the service recipients on the returned visit. Students’ learning is assessed by their performance on service delivery on attitudes, skills and knowledge in interpersonal skills as well as the professional competence. Students are required to submit reflective journals at pre-trip and post-trip period. This paper aims to highlight the themes of students learning as emerged from students’ reflective journals. Themes were extracted from the reflective journals using content analysis approach. Their reflection indicated in-depth learning like engagement in a real-life situation, development of empathy and empowerment of service-recipients in area of gaining knowledge and skills in practicing healthy lifestyle.

Key Words: Learning through reflection, Service-Learning, Lifestyle modification, Health assessment, Health promotion

INTRODUCTION

Service-learning (SL) is denoted as learning to master and apply skill in a real-life situation meeting community need (Groh, et al, 2011). The Service-Learning course titled as “Healthy Life-style Challenges in Developing Community” focused on lifestyle modification to health consequence. The SL subject recruited students from different faculty worked together to support the service-learning project. The targets are villagers living in slum of Sen Sok in Cambodia where health care resources are limited. The SL subject includes 10 hours of e-learning on concept of Service-Learning, 52 hours of generic and specific training on health assessment and health promotion, 23 hours on project related learning like historical and cultural visits, students’ self-study, group-work and team building activities. The service component includes 5 full days of a total of 40 hours including 2 days of home visits in the slum performing health survey and assessment, 1 day of visit to local markets to understand the food choices, 2 days of the second home visits to the service-recipients discussing about the proposed tailored-made health promotion plan on healthy lifestyle. Throughout the process of the service, students develop their attitudes, skills and knowledge in interpersonal skills as well as the professional competence. This paper aims to highlight the themes of students learning as emerged from students’ reflective journals.

Phyllis Pang, School of Nursing, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR, China, e-mail: Phyllis.pang@polyu.edu.hk; Cynthia Wu, School of Nursing, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR, China, e-mail: Cynthia.wu@polyu.edu.hk.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Service-Learning is a rich and innovative pedagogical approach for effective learning and teaching where students have intentional learning goals and reflects actively through service delivery (University of Reading, 2015). Classroom learning, laboratory practice and other interactive activities serve as a media for experiential learning through embedded activities with constructed intentions for learning (Faculty Innovation Center, 2016). SL is putting beneficiary focus on both service providers and service recipients through experiential supervised practice in real world situations. Experience alone may not lead to learning, it requires the instructor coaching and facilitation in learning (Wu et. al 2013, 2014). The outcomes of experiential learning will be captured and assessed by students’ reflective writing.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Students are required to critically reflect on their performance, especially on issues and difficulties they have encountered, the strategies they have undertaken to solve or deal with those difficulties, their own learning and development, and how they could improve in the future performance. The reflective journals aim to provide them with opportunities in linking the SL experience with the academic/discipline-related content of the subject, reflecting on their SL experience to identify the learning gains as well as areas for future improvements and reflecting on their roles and social responsibilities as a professional and a global citizen. They are required to submit two reflective journals: pre-service and post-service journals. The integrated guideline designed by the service team for the reflective writing was made available to students according to Gibbs reflective cycle (1988).

1. **Description**: To describe the facts and events of the service experience;
2. **Feelings**: To recall your emotion and express your feelings that were going inside your head;
3. **Evaluation**: To discuss how well you think things went during the service project;
4. **Analysis**: To examine what, how, why, when and which of the experience that generate the meanings and impressive feelings to the students;
5. **Conclusion**: To sum up the key things that you have learnt from the reflective process; and
6. **Action plan**: To think about what you would do to improve if you were to encounter the event again.

Themes were extracted from the reflective journals using content analysis approach.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

29 and 20 students provided service to 168 and 98 villagers in 2015 and 2016 respectively. Themes were extracted from the reflective journals using content analysis approach.
Engagement

*Developing skills in home-visit planning* - my skills have been consolidated and sharpened through home-visit teaching with the health promotion plan (Student A).

*Enhancing preparedness in communication skills* - an older people living in slum suffering from eyes and hearing problems. It is noted that being aware and prepared for specific communication skills in situation with double language barrier and talking to older people with physical disability are essential (Student B).

*Familiarizing cultural context* - it was a norm that (local) people would not consider this was problematic of excessive drinking (24 cans of beer) in party time occasionally. It required us to be cultural and social sensitivity can facilitate better outcomes (Student C).

Empathy

*Developing empathy skills in planning* - as a future nurse, being sensitive to social, cultural and economic situations in the planning process can better enhance the outcomes of health promotion. Thus putting ourselves into their shoes (situations) may generate significant outcomes (Student D).

*Developing passion from teachers* - from their (teachers of Learning Village) facial expressions, body languages and the teaching materials that they have prepared for us, I know from the bottom of my heart that they did prepare the best for us. I could actually see the passion in them when they teach us. This made me feel so impressed (Student E).

Empowerment

*Developing the willingness to give* - the condition where we lived in homestay was much better than our house owner lived. From them, I learnt that it is not about how much we can give, but how much we are willing to give. Therefore, from now on, I will devote all myself to help the needy in the world as long as I have the ability to do so (Student F).

*Developing sense of forgiveness* - If we can focus more on what we own, but not being stubborn highlighting what we had lost, we would be happier and satisfied, so we can enjoy and make the most from our life. I also learnt forgiveness from him (a deaf service-recipient). His deafness is doubted to be caused by the doctors, but he did not blame anyone. Our living attitude determines what we deserve. Forgiving others means setting myself free from misery and constraints. We put ourselves in jail if we keep reminding ourselves of the past (Student G).

**CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY AND PRACTICE**

The SL project engaged faculty students in critically evaluating and in-depth reflecting through the experiential learning. They learnt to be mobilizing and optimizing resources, communication, developing empathy, learning from role model from people they encountered in Cambodia. Impressive reflections were being collected indicating their in-depth learning and development throughout the SL project. The enhancement of
experiential learning through service-learning program enable students to be engaged to learn in a real-life situation, develop empathy and empower the needy community for benefits of gaining knowledge and skills in practicing better health.

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