

Can Service Learning Cultivate Empowering Experiences for Students? Insight from Empowerment Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

The critical pedagogy advocated by Shor (1992) aims at providing empowering educational experience for students which is participatory, democratic, affective, problem-posing, dialogic and inter-disciplinary. The teaching and learning methods of the service learning subject “You can make a difference to our planet” were very much inspired by this critical, student-centered approach. By direct participation in the collection and distribution of consumable food, students experienced first-hand the magnitude of the food waste problem and came face-to-face with low-income elderly, food vendors, and community volunteers whom they seldom met in their daily life. Grounded in their direct community service experience, students were then given the opportunity to choose and to work on a problem which they had identified through brainstorming and contextual reflection. The service learning experience was empowering since students, tutors and the agency worked together as equal partners to co-create solutions towards environmental sustainability. The engagement with community stakeholders and inter-disciplinary teammates have enabled students to learn the art of compromising and democratic decision-making. The tutors played the role of a facilitator who help students draw upon their diverse knowledge and skills on problem-solving, while maximizing their learning through teamwork, reflection, and actualization of their project plans under practical constraints.

Key words: Empowerment Pedagogy, service learning, Environmental sustainability

1. BACKGROUND/OBJECTIVES

Very often, higher education is being criticized for the lack of connectedness between traditional curricula content with the needs of the society. The “banking model” of education is often teacher-centered with a more or less fixed curriculum. Service learning is thus perceived as an active response for higher education to reconnect with societal needs, foster civic responsibilities, and nourish university students into innovative problem solvers. Educators of service learning should take advantage of the flexibility in curriculum and to transform education into a collaborative venture between students and teachers (Giroux, 1983). In this paper, I shall argue that service learning adopting Ira Shor’s Empowerment Pedagogy may generate very positive learning outcomes, even if the subject is mandatory.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK/LITERATURE REVIEW

Empowering education, according to Shor (1992), is a critical democratic, student-centered pedagogy for self and social change. In essence, the critical pedagogy advocated by Shor (1992) aims at providing empowering educational experiences for students which is participatory, democratic, affective, problem-posing, dialogic and inter-disciplinary. It is the process through which students learn to critically appropriate knowledge existing outside their immediate experience in order to broaden their understanding of themselves, the world, and the possibilities for transforming the taken-for-granted assumptions about the way we live (McLaren, 1989).

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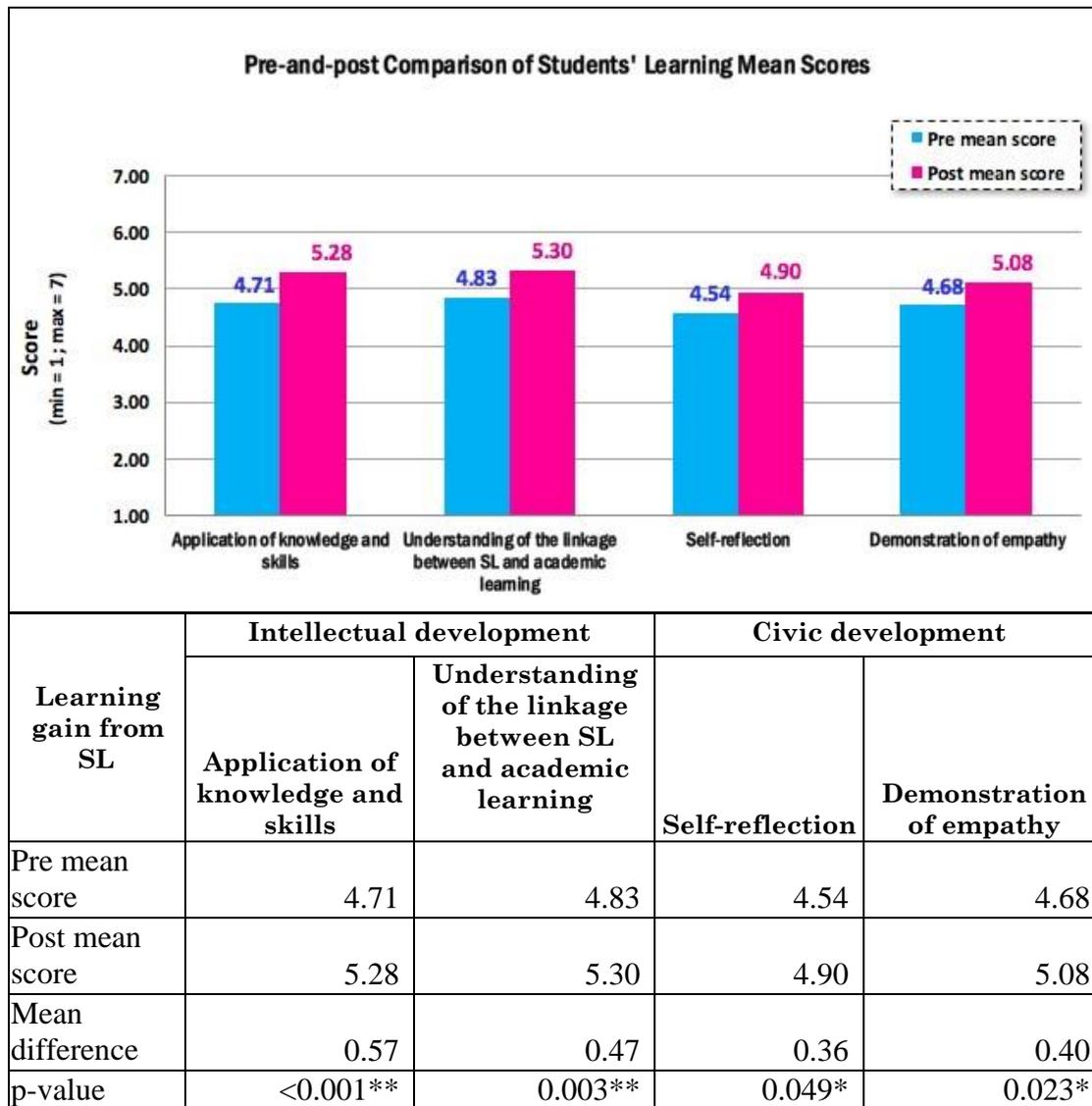
The service learning subject “You may make a difference to our planet” addresses the paradox of excess and deprivation, exemplified by abundant food waste and poverty, through campus-community partnership with a local NGO. Given the flexibility in curriculum and the close connection with societal needs, the student-centered and participatory learning approach of this subject match well with the empowering pedagogy.

3. METHODS/ANALYSIS

To show the learning outcomes of students, we gathered quantitative and qualitative evidence from the pre-and-post service learning survey conducted by the university, students’ reflective journals, as well as the verbal feedback collected by the tutor during reflective seminars.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The pre and post service learning survey showed significant improvement in both the intellectual and civil development of students who enrolled in the course (Figure I). A majority of students (87.5%) indicated “much” overall learning gains in this learning process.



** Significant at the $p=.01$ level; * Significant at the $p=.05$ level

Figure 1: Comparison of students’ learning before and upon completion of the Service-Learning (SL) subject/project:

Items		N	Mean	SD	Percentage distribution (%)		
					1-3	4	5-7
					Little	A fair amount	Much
Intellectual learning outcomes							
2-1	Deeper understanding of the linkage between service-learning and the academic content of the subject.	40	4.80	1.114	12.5%	17.5%	70.0%
2-2	Applying/integrating knowledge to deal with complex issues.	40	5.18	0.903	2.5%	20.0%	77.5%
2-3	Solving challenging real-life problems.	40	5.25	0.981	2.5%	17.5%	80.0%
2-4	Thinking critically.	40	5.25	0.870	0.0%	20.0%	80.0%
Social learning outcomes							
2-5	Working effectively in teams.	40	5.75	0.954	2.5%	5.0%	92.5%
2-6	Communicating effectively with peers, collaborators, and service recipients.	40	5.55	0.959	0.0%	17.5%	82.5%
Civic learning outcomes							
2-7	Better understanding of the problems facing underprivileged members of the community.	40	5.43	0.781	0.0%	12.5%	87.5%
2-8	Increased interest/commitment to serve people in need.	40	5.25	1.056	5.0%	17.5%	77.5%
2-9	Becoming a more responsible member of your community.	40	5.30	0.966	2.5%	15.0%	82.5%
2-10	Cross-cultural awareness and skills.	40	5.15	1.001	5.0%	17.5%	77.5%
2-11	Becoming a more responsible global citizen.	40	5.30	0.939	2.5%	15.0%	82.5%
Personal learning outcome							
2-12	Better understanding of my own strengths and weaknesses.	40	5.52	0.987	0.0%	17.5%	82.5%

Overall learning outcome							
2-13	Overall learning gain.	40	5.35	0.864	2.5%	10.0%	87.5%

Rating scale: 1=Very little; 4=A fair amount; 7=Very much

Row percentage totals may not add up to 100% because of rounding of decimal values.

Figure 2: Student ratings on attainment of learning outcomes as a result of attending an SL subject

The learning outcomes in terms of intellectual, social, civic and personal learning outcomes are very encouraging (Figure II). There is a high congruence of findings between the survey data and the feedbacks in the reflective journals from the students.

Given the mandatory nature of service learning in the university, many students enrolled in this service learning subject not out of interest but to fulfil the graduation requirement of the university or to fit their class schedules. Thus, arousing students' interests and motivation to learn is vital. The first few of weeks of direct contact with recipients of food assistance projects exposed students to the issues of food wastes and poverty, issues which caught little attention for them in the past. Students had to step out of their comfort zone and came into contact with elderly living alone, families living on CSSA, food vendors in the wet markets, and other community stakeholders. All (100%) of the students said this enabled them to have "a better understanding of the problems facing underprivileged members of the community" and "increased interest/commitment" to serve people in need.

As reflected in students' written feedback, they appreciated the democratic and participatory approach in the learning process. Students were perceived as equal partners to work closely with the agency to co-create solutions which address the issues of food wastes and poverty alleviation. To the students, the freedom to select one problem from their brainstormed list fostered a dialogic and democratic process of learning. Students had to engage with each other and learnt the art of compromising and democratic decision-making. By working with students in different academic disciplines, bodies of knowledge and skills were drawn upon and synergized to work towards environmental sustainability. A majority of students (80%) reported much gain in critical thinking and solving challenging real-life problem. They felt proud of what they had done to help our community partner attain their goals.

Reflection is an ongoing process throughout the course to integrate cognitive learning with affective learning. Based on both positive and negative experience, students can reflect on the reality, the values behind their own values and behaviors. Plenty of reflective space was given to the students by the tutors, instead of passing on judgements. The dialogic learning environment was created to encourage students to communicate their feelings and thoughts with tutors and the service learning partners. As a result, all students (82.5% much, 17.5% fair amount) students perceived effective communication with peers, collaborators and service recipients. About 95% of them increased commitment to serve the people in need and acquired the mindset of a global citizen.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY AND PRACTICE

In sum, this service learning experience were inspired the participatory, problem posing, and democratic choice-making aspects of Shor's empowering pedagogy. The student-centered, participatory approach of learning may imply less control over the learning process by the teachers involved. Participatory education respect and satisfy the curiosity of students, even though this may not be the first preference of service learning subject. This approach also accommodates the different learning styles of the students and provide

an ideal platform for inter-disciplinary collaboration. Learning is grounded in the experience of the learner and increased students' ownership of their education. Students who gone through the empowering education process gradually acquired a "change-maker" mindset and believe that their actions, whether personal or collective, may make a difference in the larger society.

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