

## To Serve and To Learn – Students’ Reflections of the Service Learning Experience in Serving the Migrant Children in Shanghai

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the learning experiences of a service-learning subject entitled “Promotion of Children and Adolescent Development” from the perspective of the students. Based on the reflective journals of 20 students, several perceived benefits of the subject were identified, including enhancement of intrapersonal and interpersonal competence, reflections on attitudes towards life and learning, application of learned knowledge into practice, facilitation of team work, development of passion to help the underprivileged children and adolescents, cultivation of civic responsibility, nurturing of awareness to social problems and issues, and reflections on the roles, responsibilities and contributions as professionals in future. These findings illustrate the importance of an effective university service-learning subject that attempts to promote the self-development of the students as well as cultivate their citizenship.

### KEYWORDS

Service learning, civic responsibility, university students, self-development

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### INTRODUCTION

Learning nowadays is not restricted to the traditional methods of instructional based lectures and tutorials. Active learning strategies such as collaborative learning, use of electronic and interactive media, problem-based learning, experiential learning were used to expand students’ horizon and enhance students’ competence (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999). Among different learning approaches, service learning has become an effective experiential learning approach that develops the students’ interpersonal competence, problem-solving ability and sense of civic responsibility.

Service learning is defined as a “course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such as a way to gain further understanding of course content, a boarder appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112). Under the definition, service learning integrates community service with educational objectives (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999). At one side, the students serve the deprived community by sharing their resources, talents and experiences. At the other side, the students gain the knowledge and experience in providing the service, and build up the intrapersonal and interpersonal competence through the planning, implementation and evaluation processes. The essence of service learning is to integrate “service” and “learning” together so that both the service providers (students) and service recipients (community) are benefited. As suggested by Honnet and Poulsen (1989), “service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both” (p.1).

In theorizing service learning, Giles and Eyler (1994) applied Dewey’s theories of education and citizenship in understanding the missions and components of service learning. Regarding education, Dewey highlighted the importance of experience that constituted to learning by inducing interest in knowledge and effects to later experience (1938). According to his view, experience becomes educative based on two guiding principles: principle of continuity (the previous experience to be directed to growth and development) and principle of interaction (learning results from transaction between the learner and his/her environment) (Dewey, 1938; Giles & Eyler, 1994). Another aspect that constitutes to service learning is based on Dewey’s social and political philosophy. As suggested by Dewey (1897), education is “a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and that the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction” (p. 295). He

argued that education should not be separated from the ideas of citizenship, democracy and social reform (Dewey, 1900). In summary, service learning has dual roles in nurturing the development of the students: (1) to induce interest in knowledge and effects that are directed to growth and development; and (2) to cultivate civic responsibility that may lead to democracy and social reform.

To provide an opportunity for the university students to serve and to learn, a service learning subject named “Promotion of Children and Adolescent Development” was launched at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University during Semester 2 and 3 in 2012-2013. The subject aimed at (1) introducing different perspectives on child and adolescent development, needs and challenges of children and adolescents living in disadvantaged circumstances to students through design and implementation of service project; (2) enhancing students’ competencies of problem-solving, decision making, communication and team work; (3) cultivating the positive values and strengths orientation among students; (4) nurturing students’ sense of social responsibility, social awareness and promote prosocial behaviors; and (5) nurturing students’ sense of care and compassion towards other people in the community, especially towards underprivileged children and adolescents. During the summer of 2012, a total of 40 students enrolled in this subject. The content and arrangement of the subject is listed in Table 1. The students were requested to plan and deliver a summer camp for the migrant children in Shanghai. The summer camp lasted for five days, with a total of forty hours. They worked in small groups to deliver different lessons to the migrant children out of four major areas: living English, interesting science, health education, and intrapersonal and interpersonal competence. A finale was held to recognize the children’s effort and achievement, to build up team spirit of the children, and to create hope and aspirations to migrant children. There were totally 120 migrant children participated in the summer camp, with their age ranged from 6 to 12.

Format	No.	Content
Lecture	3	Theories of Children and Adolescent Development
Workshop	5	Project-specific concepts and skills – engaging and building rapport with children and adolescents; curriculum plan development and teaching children with knowledge and skills
Direct Service	40 hours (10 days)	Direct service delivered to the migrant children in Shanghai
Post-service Integration	2	Sharing, group presentations and consolidation of experiences

**Table 1: The content and format of the service learning subject**

This paper aims to explore the gains of the students after taking this service-learning subject based on Dewey’s ideas of education and citizenship. Two research questions are addressed:

- (1) What did the students learn from their service learning experience?
- (2) How did the students link themselves to their roles and responsibilities as university students, citizens and professionals-to-be?

To address the questions, reflective journals of the students after the service were analyzed. As suggested by Bringle and Hatcher (1999), experience becomes educative when “critical reflective thought creates new meaning and leads to growth and the ability to take informed actions” (p. 112). Reflection, hence, is an educational tool that turns experience into knowledge and growth. Thus, the reflective journals of the students are useful educational tools to share the insights of the students on their meanings of the service as well as their benefits they obtained from the service-learning subject.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

As the first author led 20 university students in delivering a summer camp to the migrant children in a non-government organization in Shanghai, the reflective journals of the 20 students were analyzed. The students were the first-year students of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, coming from different disciplines including, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, radiotherapy, nursing, accounting, business management, hotel management, building and construction etc. There were 17 local students, and three were non-local students coming from mainland China.

### Data Collection and Analytical Plan

The students were requested to write a reflective journal (around 1,000 words) on what they had experienced and learned from the service. Informed consent on the use of reflective journals for research purpose from the students was sought. To analyze the students' reflective journals, theme analyses pattern coding was carried out. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested that pattern coding is "a way of grouping those summaries into a small number of sets, themes, or constructs...it's an analogue to the cluster-analytic and factor-analytic devices use in statistical analysis" (p 69). Basically, the broad themes in the reflections were extracted from the reflections of the informants. A general qualitative orientation was adopted in this study (Shek, Tang & Han, 2006).

### RESULTS

In general, the students had a fruitful experience in the service learning subject and gained much from serving the migrant children in mainland China. Based on 20 students' reflective journals, eight themes were extracted from the personal reflections. Table 2 shows the themes as well as the numbers of the reflective journals mentioning the themes. All the extracted themes had been mentioned by at least 50% of the students in their reflective journals. The themes are presented in the following sections.

Themes	No. of reflective journals mentioning the theme	Percent <sup>a</sup>
Enhancement of intrapersonal and interpersonal competence	19	95%
Reflections on attitudes towards life and learning	11	55%
Application of learned knowledge into practice	20	100%
Facilitation of team work	19	95%
Development of passion to help the underprivileged children and adolescents	18	90%
Cultivation of civic responsibility	16	80%
Nurturing of awareness to social problems and issues	15	75%
Reflections on the roles, responsibilities and contributions as professionals in future	10	50%

<sup>a</sup> The percentage is calculated by dividing the no. of reflective journals mentioning the theme over total reflective journals analyzed

**Table 2: Themes of students' reflective journal on the service learning subject**

### Research Question 1: What did the Students Learn from their Service Learning Experience?

#### *Enhancement of Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Competence*

The students enhanced their intrapersonal competence such as emotional competence, problem-solving and decision-making capacities, as well as interpersonal competence such as social competence, communication skills. Here are some examples of the students' reflections:

"I am not a very sociable person before. However, after nearly 4-month of collaboration with different people, I learned to think more from other ones' standpoints and now I can express myself more efficiently and properly in communication." (Case 3)

"This subject benefits me a lot, which enhance my cooperation skill, communication skill, emotional quality, build up my confidence, let me be more independent and so on." (Case 6)

"In personal growth, I discovered that I manage my emotion better now. Before going to Shanghai, I am very emotional. It is difficult for me to constrain my feelings. During the service in Shanghai, I learnt to be peaceful." (Case 13)

"Not only consider my strengths, improving my weakness would be one of the concerns when I applied this subject. Although I am a detail-minded

person who is punctilious in making my own schedule, I find it hard to change according to the circumstances and always stick to my plan. Fortunately, I learnt to be more flexible in this service trip.” (Case 14)

“In Shanghai, I have faced many problems and unexpected [circumstances], including the conflicts between classmates, the changes in lesson plan, how to flexibly use available materials and venue etc...I think that giving workable and efficient solutions to problems is a challenging task. Facing real difficulties is a good chance for learning.” (Case 16)

#### *Reflections on Attitudes towards Life and Learning*

The interactions with the migrant children stimulated the students to look into their lives and learning. They were impressed by the resilience and positive attitudes of the migrant children. Here are some examples of the students’ reflections:

“Even though their [the children’s] living environment may not be stable, they still kept smiling faces when encountering difficulties... they never give up the opportunity to learn. Rather than say we brought hope to them, they actually brought inspiration to us. Their positive and enthusiastic attitude made me ashamed. In contrast, we, children in Hong Kong, usually live with our parents in a relatively stable environment. We do not cherish the time being with them and always complain about the living environments....What they brought to us is our own reflections towards lives.” (Case 7)

“I found the things that we have to learn from them [the children] – their innocence and passion for learning...It reminds me that the importance of passion for learning. In the process of learning, we need to act like a child, and keep the desperation for knowledge.” (Case 12)

“Looking at the little boys and girls, I think I am looking at myself. Actually, I was one of the underprivileged children when I was small...I have overcome the major problem from my family and I now study in the university.” (Case 15)

#### *Application of Learned Knowledge into Practice*

The students needed to apply what they have learned in the subject and their knowledge from their disciplines in designing the curriculum of the summer camp. The experience was a fruitful one when they managed to teach the knowledge to the children. Here are some quotes of the students’ reflections:

“In the pre-trip lectures, we learnt to address the needs of children. I found this very important when delivering our service as it can help improving our teaching quality.” (Case 1)

“As we have to design lessons for the children, it is important to integrate our knowledge into practice...I think I can apply my health knowledge into practice efficiently...I reminded them [the children] of their wrong practices every time they did. I am very pleased that my students really learnt what I have taught and started to get rid of those habits.” (Case 4)

“Apart from the academic knowledge (e.g. English and Health Education) conveyed, we also put emphasis on the protective factors which helped facilitate the positive development of the children.” (Case 14)

#### *Facilitation of Team Work*

The students learned to work as a team so as to facilitate the collaborative learning process. Besides, the students also gain friendship in working together. Here are some examples of the students’ reflections:

“The 5-day service there was not an individual mission, but a team work. We helped each other during the lessons...Other than cooperation, I learnt

to seek help in this trip...I learnt to listen, respect and accept others' opinions" (Case 1)

"One of my most important gains from this course is a circle of sincere friends from different faculties with specialized knowledge and skills. We learned from each other, offering help both during and after service and progressed together. I will keep my sincerity towards friendship and continue to expand my social networks by utilizing the interpersonal skills I have developed." (Case 3)

"Working as a team, we discovered each other's strengths and potentials. Being told by my teammate, I found myself to be a patient and observant person." (Case 17)

## **Research Question 2: How did the Students Link Themselves to their Roles and Responsibilities as University Students, Citizens and Professionals-to-be?**

### *Development of Passion to Help the Underprivileged Children and Adolescents*

The students became more passionate in interacting with the underprivileged children, and shared their love, concerns and aspirations with the children. Here are some quotes of the students' reflections:

"I enjoyed the moments with children and helped them with my love, care and passion." (Case 3)

"I have given out my warm heart to migrant children to encourage them to be brave and hardworking. I hope what I have done can be something to their life." (Case 5)

"My passion in helping the underprivileged children and adolescents has soared... This makes me more passionate to teach them what they want and help them with my ability." (Case 11)

### *Cultivation of Civic Responsibility*

The experiences helped the students to explore their roles and responsibilities as a university student and a citizen, and motivate them to continue to serve the deprived community as a mission. Here are some quotes of the students' reflections:

"In the future, I would seek for more opportunities that I can work on with my greater passion in helping them, for example, I have already registered to be a voluntary tutor helping the underprivileged students in Hong Kong. I would also remind myself how lucky I am." (Case 2)

As a university student, I have the responsibility to serve the community and help those in need. In this trip, my role is not only a teacher or a big brother to migrant children, but a role model. My situation of coming to Hong Kong from hometown is similar to their [the children's] coming to city from villages. So I myself is a model for them: no matter where you come from, once you want, you do, then you make it." (Case 5)

"As a global citizen, I perform my task by showing others love and care should have no geographical boundary." (Case 8)

"University students should act as the role models. The word 'role models' implies two meanings. One is applied in the service, which means that we are the role models of the underprivileged children and adolescents...The other means that we should be the role models among the society. Being regarded as the group having critical thinking and care on social issues, our actions like fighting for the rights of the underprivileged would arouse public attention in concerning the needy." (Case 14)

"With the identity of a citizen, I think I also have the responsibility to offer a helping hand to people in need in China. More than that, I can share my experience to my family and friends around me to arise more concerns for them [the children]. Hopefully, [I can] offer more helping hands for them."

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(Case 17)

*Nurturing of Awareness to Social Problems and Issues*

Through understanding the needs and situations of the migrant families in China, the students became more sensitive and aware of the social problems and issues underneath the phenomena. The students became more critical in understanding and analyzing the social issues. There are some quotes of the students' reflections:

"It is important to be sensitive with our surroundings and the events happening worldwide...There are a lot of different groups that need our support." (Case 2)

"As a Chinese citizen, I understand that urbanization, though advancing Chinese economical competence, makes these children from migration family sacrifice. Therefore, I treated these children with empathy and avoided any of them to be marginalized." (Case 3)

"Experience of doing the service in mainland China provides me a platform to learn how to embrace the cultural diversity, such as respecting their lifestyle and local policy." (Case 8)

"Apart from the different mode of education, I also understand more and discriminate less about the act of Chinese...I try to look from other angles." (Case 20)

*Reflections on the Roles, Responsibilities and Contributions as Professionals in Future*

The experiences also touched their reflections on their roles, responsibilities as a professional in the future. They developed the ethical perspectives in their professions to serve the community. There were some examples of the students' reflections:

"As a nurse to be, my roles and responsibilities would be promoting and educating the importance of prevention of diseases, protection and rehabilitation of health. I have to take care of their [the children's] safety." (Case 2)

"I began to reflect...Being a radiographer three years later, it is my role to care for every patient. To understand their needs and then make the most appropriate treatment. Although I cannot cure them, but the most needed for patient is actually support. Thus, this service trip helps me in developing compassion to care for people which is one of my roles in future career." (Case 4)

"I am a nurse in the future, I may face numerous unexpected situation. It is important for me to know how to overcome difficulties and make decision soon." (Case 6)

**DISCUSSION**

From the reflection journals of the students, the research questions were addressed. The students learned rewardingly while serving the migrant children and adolescents in Shanghai. They have undergone self-development that have enhanced their intrapersonal and interpersonal competence, improved their problem-solving ability and decision-making capability, develop friendship and team spirits with their group-mates, and apply what they have learned in the practice. More importantly, the students have good reflections on their attitudes towards life and learning. The experience helped the students reflect on their beliefs, lifestyles and interest, which may result in the cultivation of one's characters and aspirations. The service learning experience went beyond self-development and self-cultivation, it connected the students with the society where they belong. The students reflected on their roles and responsibilities as university students, professionals-to-be and citizens. The learning and serving experiences built up the passion of students to serve the underprivileged children and adolescents, cultivate their civic responsibility, developed awareness to social problems and issues, and built up professional rigors to serve the community and mankind.

It has been criticized that the outcomes in tertiary education concentrate much on academic

and occupational domains, with holistic development of young people being ignored (Shek & Wong, 2011). Chickering (2010) also strongly commented that universities “have generally ignored outcomes related to moral and ethical development as well as other dimensions of personal development” (p.1) and “have failed to graduate citizens who can function at the level of cognitive and moral, intellectual, and ethical development that our complex national and global problems require” (p.3). Under these criticisms, service-learning subject carry special mission in the universities nowadays. It helps to nurture the positive development of the students, and cultivate the sense of civic responsibility in serving the community with passion and ethics. As suggested by Dewey (1900) that the schools should share the mission that “introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious” (p. 44), the service learning experience offers holistic development to university students in their transformation to adulthood, and prepare them to become ethical and responsible citizens in the future.

There are some strengths of the study. First, it describes the effectiveness of a novel service learning project that helped a vulnerable community of migrant children in mainland China. Through the project, the university students taught knowledge and skills, induced hope and aspirations, shared love and care to the migrant children. Second, the reflective journals give long, detailed and vivid reflections of the students involved in the subject. Third, the use of qualitative study gives rich content and insightful thoughts on understanding the meanings of the subject to the students, through its naturalistic research design and inductive logic of analysis (Leung & Shek, 2011). Last but not the least, the study focused on the reflections of the Chinese students on their involvement of a service learning subject, which was very limited in the Chinese community.

There are several limitations of the study. First, as the data were collected from only 20 students, the generalization problem of the findings should also be noted. Second, since the students wrote their reflective journals as an assignment of the subject, there may be positive biases in the students to give constructive feedback. Third, besides reflective journals, more interactive forms of qualitative evaluation strategies such as individual interviews or focus groups were encouraged to understand the personal views and subjective experiences of the students. Nevertheless, the service learning experience of the students has provided thoughtful insights for educators and scholars in formulating and implementing educational strategies to nurture the self-development and civic responsibilities of the students. As recalled by a student in her reflective journal, “[I] still remember the last day before parting, children are crying and telling that they do not want us to leave. That is a really touching moment and I know that we, the volunteers have already made a difference on them [children]. In the future, as a responsible university student, I will continue to join voluntary service. Not only because I have to, but I want to” (Case 4), we do believe that the rewarding experience would continue to brighten up the life of the migrant children, as well as the university students.

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