

Community psychology and the spirit of service learning

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ABSTRACT

Community service learning (CSL) is getting widespread attention and someone even argue that it is an international reform movement (Butin, 2006). Combining both academic study and community based service, CSL is envisioned as a transformative pedagogical practice and philosophical orientation towards change. Its beneficial influence is not only on the population served, but also on students, teaching staffs as well as the wider community. For example, service-learning has been demonstrated to be associated with various positive effects in students, including academic performance, civic responsibility, as well as self-efficacy and moral development (Astin et al., 2000; Conway et al., 2009; Eyler et al., 2001; Singer et al., 2002). Furthermore, it may even have the potential to change the fundamental policies and practices of the academy (Butin, 2006).

Despite its potential, Battistoni (1997) reminds that whether the potential of CSL can be realized quite depends on how the programs are conducted and whether the democratic spirit is in place. According to Battistoni, three critical components of civic learning are respectively intellectual understanding, civic skills and attitudes and civic action. In other words, the successful service learning has to provide the students with situations and opportunities to think critically, to nurture civic attitudes and participation skills, and to engage in direct services. These invaluable experiences prepare the person to be a responsible citizen who can face the societal challenge and make civic decision.

By analyzing the reflection report of 36 students participating in a community psychology service learning subject in Hong Kong, this paper is to demonstrate why community psychology is an ideal partner with service learning approach, and how the subject could facilitate the students' civic learning through promoting critical thinking, nurturing civic skills and attitudes, as well as providing direct serving opportunities. Furthermore, the potential and challenge of integrating both the knowledge and practice will be discussed, particularly in reference to the recent debate of "disciplining service learning".

Key Words: Community Psychology, Service Learning, Civic Learning

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