Applying Self-determination Theory to Exploring Students' Perception towards Learning Modes of Service-Learning

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1. ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS

This research applied self-determination theory (SDT) to investigating undergraduate students' perceptions of the effectiveness of blended-learning approach in equipping them with the necessary skills to cope with international service-learning, in the aspects of autonomy, relatedness and competences. Qualitative research in form of focus groups was adopted to collect students' opinions about blended-learning activities, and comparative analysis was used to discern their manifested and latent views in relation to competence, relatedness and autonomy. Results showed that the students perceived having been well-equipped with the competences and skills required for the service delivery through the blended-learning activities. They also perceived that their relatedness and autonomy have been enhanced, which resulted in better preparation to face uncertainties in the service trip. It is suggested that teachers, researchers and administrators could contemplate how to fine-tune blended- learning activities to better integrate into the service-learning class for students' learning facilitation.

Keywords: Service-Learning, Blended-Learning, Self-determination Theory

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2. INTRODUCTION

Blended-learning approach was used as the main pedagogical mode in an international service-learning course in a university in Hong Kong to prepare students for serving the foreign communities. The diversified components incorporated into blended-learning enabled students to equip with the necessary skills and develop independence while fostering positive team relationships to cope with the service delivery. These primary qualities required aligned with the main domains of self-determination theory (SDT), which had its attention focused on the constructs of competence, relatedness and autonomy. This research thus adopted SDT as the conceptual framework to investigate undergraduate students' perceptions of the effectiveness of blended-learning activities in equipping them with the skills required to manage the service trip.   Two main objectives framed this paper follows:

1) To investigate students' perceived effectiveness of the blended-learning approach as a learning tool in service-learning;

2) To examine students' perceived effectiveness of various blended-learning activities in developing students' competence, relatedness and autonomy.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

SDT maintains the three fundamental psychological needs of competence, relatedness and autonomy will support or undermine people's holistic development within the dialectic between individual growth and social contexts (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2002). In the educational field, SDT contributes to understanding these basic needs in defining those contextual factors facilitating students' study engagement, learning motivation and academic achievement (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2002; Hospel & Galand, 2016; Ruzek et al., 2016). The three main domains of SDT aligned with the core requirements of service-learning, including the necessity for equipping students with competences in hospitality skills (namely food service skills and housekeeping skills) to serve the service-recipients, for developing their independence to manage the service trip, and for fostering positive group relationships to cope with any challenges faced. By understanding the main constructs of SDT, this would facilitate our assessing the perceived effectiveness of blended-learning in preparing students for the trip and serving the recipients.

Competence refers to feeling effective in expressing one's abilities during ongoing interactions with social environment (Ryan & Deci, 2002). This prompts individuals to continuously seek optimal challenges to enhance their capacities (ibid.). The focus is thus concerning the feeling of effectance in enacting the desired behaviours (ibid.). Competence need will allow us to comprehend the importance of not only equipping students with specific hospitality skills in serving the service- recipients, but also

cultivating a feeling of efficacy of coping with the service delivery.

Relatedness refers to a sense of belongingness to one's community (Ryan & Deci, 2002). The felt- secure interpersonal relationships not only is congenial to self-development, but also serves as impetus for self-motivation and buffer against stress (Ryan & Deci, 2002; Ruzek et al., 2016). A supportive community is associated with positive motivational climate, emotional and behavioural engagement, self-efficacy beliefs, and goal achievement (Ruzek et al., 2016). Having a strong sense of relatedness and belongingness among the students then became crucial in allowing them to engender a feeling of safety, security and support. The discussion of relatedness in this paper hence focused its attention on the group dynamics among the students, rather than that with the service-recipients.

Feeling of autonomy enables an individual to experience a sense of volition and an expression of the self (Ryan & Deci, 2002; Hospel & Galand, 2016). Teachers play an important role in creating a learning context to support autonomy, contributing to enhancing students' engagement and academic attainment (Ryan & Deci, 2002; Hospel & Galand, 2016; Ruzek et al., 2016). The effectiveness of service-learning in promoting students' autonomy and independence in coping with the service trip, managing the service delivery to service-recipients and overcoming challenges was explored.

4. METHODS

Qualitative research design was applied to this exploratory study of service-learning. Empirical data were collected through pre-service and post-service trip focus groups [1]. The interviews explored students' perceived effectiveness of the blended-learning activities in facilitating their development of competence, relatedness and autonomy. Transcripts were coded and analysed. Open codes were then compared and contrasted by comparative analysis, allowing us to discern students' manifested and latent views of blended-learning approach to preparing them for international service-learning. The specific blended-learning activities were examined in relation to competence, relatedness and autonomy to different degrees.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The credit-bearing international service-learning subject took place in Semester 3 in a Hong Kong university. The subject required students to provide hospitality operations training for a non-profit organization in Vietnam. Twenty-eight year-2 or year-3 undergraduate students from different faculties were enrolled in the subject.

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[1] One student could not joined one of the scheduled focus groups, and hence an in-depth interview was arranged for the student concerned

Thirteen of them agreed to participate in this study.

Most of the blended-learning activities were collaborative in nature, so students participated in many of the activities as teams. One student acted as project manager, while all others were organized into four teams: waiter, housekeeping, bakery, and chef. The four teams usually trained and practiced in different laboratories with the related technician, and so the teacher spent limited time with each team at a time. Attendance was required for all blended-learning activities of the subject (See Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of Blended-Learning Activities in this International Service-learning Subject

Assessment		Weightin
1.	E-learning Module	10%
2.	Project-specific Seminars and Workshops	
3.	Semi-final and Final Plans/Proposals	10%
4.	Service Simulation	5%
5.	Meeting and Product and Service Testing	5%
6.	Performance Rendering Service	50%
7.	Reflective Journal	15%
8.	Oral Assessment	5%
Total		100%

Students agreed that their competence, relatedness and autonomy were developed through the blended- learning activities in the 7-week summer semester. Many students felt they could deliver the required services as expected of this service-learning subject, including training the service-recipients in Vietnam to perform the new hospitality skills they had learned during the service-learning class in Hong Kong.

Due to modest supervision during skills training, students were proactive in peer observation and feedback. Students knew they were responsible for learning and were committed to mastering the skills. The service simulation (Item 4 in Table 1) allowed students to have a trial run, facilitating them to reflect on improvements in their service level. The product-testing component in Vietnam (Item 5 in Table 1) reinforced students' competence by testing their ability to perform training tasks in an unfamiliar setting. Being able to see positive results motivated and further engaged students in the service-learning.

In terms of relatedness, the blended-learning activities offered plenty opportunities for bonding within the team. Congenial peer relationships were promoted as students supported each other in completing tasks. Students admitted to feeling anxious about the service trip because of travelling to an unfamiliar place and about the service delivery, but such feeling of helplessness was mitigated

by being together with the teams. One setback of strong relatedness was for students who were slower to learn. They would feel lack of opportunities to practice and a sense of awkwardness, because the other members were so quick in extending help. The instructor assumed an important moderator role in creating independent learning opportunities to students while harnessing the benefits of collaborative learning integrated into blended-learning activities.

Although the teacher was present throughout the semester, students did not experience enhanced relatedness with the teacher. It was enough for students to feel the teacher was available for help when needed. Students felt that relatedness with their peers were more important. However, students admitted that the blended-learning activities only helped with bonding among teams but not across teams. For example, some of them did not recognize their classmates until they were in Vietnam for the service trip.

Students felt there were many opportunities for them to act autonomously. While they followed the standard task guidelines, they could test and propose new ideas. This bonded the team together with a sense of pride towards the work produced. Local students felt critical thinking and problem-solving skills were improved. International students however did not perceive that autonomy or relatedness had been notably improved by the blended-learning activities, because they were independent in their everyday university experience in Hong Kong.

Students indicated that they were least attracted by the Blackboard online module, compared with other blended-learning activities. They completed the online modules with very little engagement with its contents. They could not understand the importance of this assessment. Students focused on the skills but not the theories behind service-learning. It may be deemed necessary for teacher to manage students' expectations for a better learning experience.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The students perceived that they have been equipped with the skills required by means of blended- learning for serving the Vietnamese community. They perceived that their competence, relatedness and autonomy have been enhanced, which has resulted in better preparation to face uncertainties in the service delivery. The blended-learning activities motivated students to take responsibility for mastering skills, gave space for them to make decisions, and encouraged them to bond and to be accountable for each other. Connectedness of the teams played an important role in sustaining students throughout their service trip in Vietnam. Some students gained insight into the importance of having peer support and feeling of belongingness in their future work and life. Applying SDT to understanding students' perceptions of blended-learning approach in service-learning thus allows teachers, researchers and administrators to contemplate how computer-aided

instructions could be integrated in a variety of pedagogical modes to address students' learning needs and knowledge levels for learning facilitation.

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