

The 4Es Empathy Model for Nurturing Empathy in Service-Learning

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1. Introduction

Many educators, taking up service-learning programs, have the attitude of “taking it for granted that students are naturally equipped with empathy” in conducting social services. Also, among the research which contribute to cultivating empathy, most studies are confined to conceptual model building without devoting much efforts in developing a practical pedagogical model in nurturing empathy. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) point out that education should be directed to pursue the mission of teaching students to be able to demonstrate empathy and also be a responsible citizen, rather than merely educating students for completing a task. Although empathy alone will not help generate interventions to alleviate the difficulties and poverty that disadvantaged groups face, it acts like a compass guiding the engine driving the community toward social and economic justice (Gerdes et al., 2011). However, the education system seems lack a well-articulated and driving strategy that we can apply reliably and utilize effectively. To fill the knowledge gap, the objective of this study is to develop a signature pedagogy which can help students develop empathy by interacting with the community. The 4Es (namely Exposure, Explanation, Experience and Evaluation) Empathy Model will be built, on one hand, to communicate the importance of empathy to students by linking the theoretical knowledge to application in field work, and, on the other hand, to evaluate the effectiveness of a social education program in cultivating empathy.

Keywords: Service-Learning, Empathy cultivation, Living condition

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2. A Literature Review

Kohut (1959) is one of the pioneers to articulate how unconscious affection-sharing integrates with conscious affective-response to others in achieving a true empathic reaction. Hoffman (2000) advocated empathy as an innate and involuntary response to an affective signal, whereas behaviorists focus on empathy as a learned communication and a conscious role taking (Gerdes et al., 2011). Miller et al. (1995) distinguished empathy between two kinds of responses, they are: emotional contagion which is an affective response of “feeling with” the emotion of another; whereas, empathic concern is an affective response of “feeling for” the emotion of another. Decety and Lamm (2006) advocated that, by linking the non-social-cognitive processes to social-cognitive processes, the three mandatory and functional components, namely affective-sharing, self-awareness and mental flexibility, will interact dynamically to form signature ingredients of empathy. Segal (2007) proposed a 3-tiered model for teaching people the experiences and realities of others. They include:

- (1) **Exposure** – to become aware that there are differences between ourselves and others,
- (2) **Explanation** – to understand what makes people different, and
- (3) **Experience** – to get a deeper understanding by participating into the day to day lives of others

Despite all the rich literature stating the importance of empathy leading to a success of social services, the education of empathy remains a neglected area in service-learning programs.

3. Methodology

To fill the gap, this study builds on Segal’s model and proposes a 4-tier pedagogical model, namely the 4Es Empathy Model, for cultivating empathy among students to lead to lead service-learning a success.

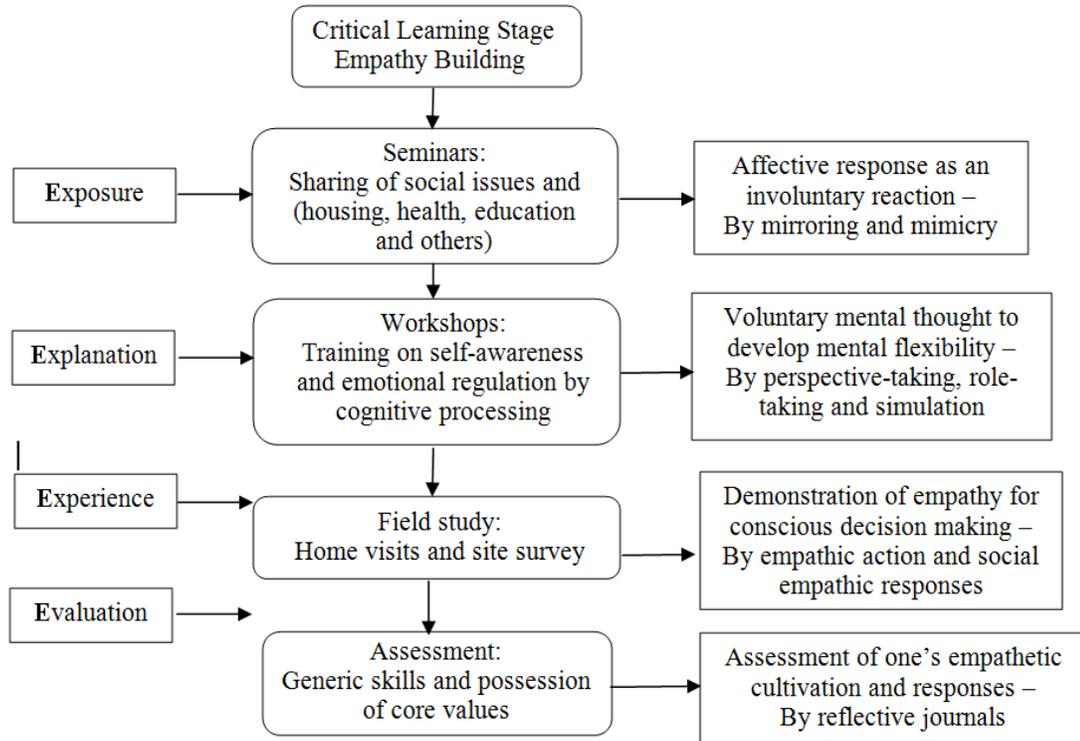


Figure 1: 4-E Empathy Building Model

The cultivation of empathy has to take place progressively in the 4E stages (Figure 1). In ***Exposure Stage***, students must first acquire the critical learning of empathy by exposure to the social issues including housing, living, education and health of the disadvantaged groups which will be discussed in seminars. As proposed by a socio-cognitive neuroscience approach (Hoffman, 2000), involuntary reaction to the exposure would generate affective responses from students to start “feel what another person is feeling” through mirroring and mimicry of the vulnerable groups.

In ***Explanation Stage***, apart from learning how others feel and looking for an explanation of diversity, students also learn to explore self-awareness and mental flexibility by processing voluntary mental thoughts through perspective taking and role-playing and simulation. Perspective-taking ability allows us to overcome our usual egocentrism, tailor our behaviors to others’ expectations, and thus make satisfying interpersonal relations. Emotion regulation creates the capacity to regulate one’s own emotions through the process of initiating, avoiding, inhibiting, maintaining, or modulating the occurrence. As such, the best response to other’s distress may not be distress, but efforts to soothe that distress.

In the ***Experience Stage***, students are assigned to social services to interact with

the community members facing different extents of social issues. Students need to cognitively modulate their experience of empathy and control their emotional state when connecting with others whose socio- economic and cultural background are different from their own. In the field work, students should be able to demonstrate their empathy by taking appropriate empathic responses and prosocial actions if required.

Upon completion of the services, it comes to the *Evaluation Stage*. Students will reflect upon their experiences in the community, synthesize the information collected, evaluate the situations encountered and contextualize their empathic responses in both sharing seminars and reflective journals. More important, it can be revealed from the reflective journals whether appropriate empathic responses can be made in coping with the situation based on the understanding of the service recipients.

A project-based service-learning subject investigating the living condition of the disadvantaged groups including singleton, elderly and low-income families was developed to validate the 4Es Empathy Model. Apart from home visits, small household repairs were also conducted for households.

4. Results and Discussion

Apart from the findings reported in the seminar and reflective journals, comments were collected from students, instructors and NGOs. Pre- and Post-program questionnaire surveys were also conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the pedagogical design of the subject developed based on the 4-E Model.

Design of the Service-Learning Project

In regard to the arrangement of the program, students found the lectures and workshops very useful which offered the knowledge, techniques and insights for critical thinking on the contemporary issues and for conducting the home-visits. As cited by students in their report:

“By getting ourselves to home-visiting the elderly has helped me get into understanding the real needs of disadvantaged households. We have always been sitting in classroom, getting lectured and studying issues that others have raised, so what is better than getting into a real situation, knowing what people need, and finding out the problems and solutions by ourselves?”

Development of empathy and social responsibilities

The interactive activities had been able to stimulate students with intense cognitive,

emotional, and behavioral experiences for developing new “tracks” of empathy in their brains. Here is a quote of reflexion of a student in her submission which was typical of the views of most of the students enrolled in the project:

“In our case study, our respondents clearly reflected that living in a small cubicle is not the type of living that they want, but they have no choice ... Being students, we have no power and no money. Although we cannot give them tangible support, we would like to help and fulfill our roles.... As a member of this society, we should act rather than just sitting in a classroom, go and seek for changes.”

In regard to social responsibility, students were more aware of social issues in the community after taking the subject, more concerned about the well-being of people and are willing to help others even if they didn’t get paid for it. As cited by one of the students in the report:

“Getting myself enrolled in this course and workshops given by different parties has broadened me with new perspectives when looking at housing problems. ... These problems could not be alleviated unless different parties bear their own responsibilities and take up these tough jobs.”

5. Conclusions

Many studies studying empathy building are confined to conceptual model without linking the signature ingredients to a practical model in educating empathy. Even worse, many educators adopt the attitude of “taking it for granted” that students are naturally equipped with empathy and thus tend to fall short in communicating the importance of empathy to students. To fill the knowledge gap, this study proposes the 4Es (namely Exposure, Explanation, Experience and Evaluation) pedagogical model which provides a comprehensive strategy to cultivate empathy among students. The study reveals that the 4Es pedagogy, which has been adopted in a university’s service-learning course studying the housing issues of disadvantaged residents in urban in Hong Kong, is capable of not only educating students about the signature ingredients of empathy by linking the theoretical knowledge to application in field work, but also evaluating the effectiveness of the program by reflection of their empathy and civic responsibility.

The findings reveal that students treasured the learning experience of the subject and were able to demonstrate empathy for the vulnerable groups that they visited. The interactive activities in the project were able to stimulate students with intense cognitive, emotional, and behavioral experiences for developing new “tracks” of empathy in their brains. In regard to social responsibility, students were more aware of social issues in the community after taking up the project, more concerned about the well-being of people and are willing to help others even if they didn’t get paid for

it, and ready to take up prosocial actions.

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