

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 underscore the importance of an effective university service learning subject that can promote the self-development of the students as well as cultivate their citizenship.

Keywords: Service learning, civic responsibility, university students, self-development, adolescent

Introduction

During the past two decades, adolescents by and large grow up in a nurturing environment. The advancement of information technology brings comfortable lives to people, and globalization facilitates the diverse lifestyle among individuals (1, 2). From the life course perspective, the "Baby Boomers" generation (born in 1943-1961) as well as the "Generation-X" (born in 1961-1980) generation have become grandparents and parents who provided numerous support and involvement in their children's lives (3). Inevitably, adolescents in this generation develop in a unique way that is different from the previous generations. Generation theorists used different terminologies to describe this cohort, such as

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Generation ME (4), the Net Generation (6), Generation Y (5), and the Millennials (7). While the Millennials are described as special, confident, team-oriented, sheltered, achieving, and conventional rule-followers (7), the “Generation ME” adolescents are portrayed as egocentric, narcissistic, cynical, depressed, and lack of empathy towards others (4).

Twenge (4) indicated that the “Generation ME” students showed high expectations on their academic, professional and economic aspirations. On the contrary, there was higher narcissistic characteristic found in contemporary university students when compared with the students in the nineties (8). Furthermore, Konrath et al. (9) found that there was a sharp decline of empathic concern and perspective taking in American college students during the period of 1999 to 2009. Echoing the research findings, Loeb (10) suggested that college students in the United States (US) were more inclined to become passive, apathetic citizens who focused mainly on their personal gains rather than social benefits.

The situation in Hong Kong is no more different from the situations in the US. The low birth rate of Hong Kong and Mainland China created the “4-2-1 indulgence” culture for the children (i.e., four grandparents and two parents spoiling one child, 11), and the popularity of employing foreign domestic helpers to do housework and childcare tasks has helped to create the “little emperors” in the family. The children growing up in a “greenhouse” were found to be more egocentric and narcissistic (12, 13). The adolescents today were labeled as the “spoilt generation” who were “unable to look after themselves, have low emotional quotient and even lower adversity quotient” (14).

Facing the growing trend of globalization and rapid changing ecology, university education also face “revolutionary” changes that foster the emergence of McDonaldization of the university (or McUniversity, 15). “McDonaldization” is a term to describe the phenomena of over-emphases of “efficiency,” “calculability,” “predictability” and “control” that triumph over different aspects of life (16), and one of the features of McUniversity is that knowledge has been become a “commodity” for the students to “consume” in the university (15, 17). This trend favors a university to “produce” technocrats and professionals that fit the labor market demand (15,

17), rather than provide a nurturing environment for the holistic development of the students and cultivation of their civic responsibility. Chickering (18) strongly commented that universities “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).

In response to the rise of McDonaldization in higher education that emphasizes heavily on “productivity,” “efficiency” and “calculability,” but at the same time our adolescents are becoming more egocentric and less empathetic, we may need to revisit the roles of higher education in this era. Dewey’s (19-21) theories of education and citizenship remind us the essence of higher education. At the heart of Dewey’s educational philosophy, there are three core principles: 1) education must bring forth personal growth; 2) education must result in humane conditions; and 3) education must lead to citizenship (22). In his view, education must begin with psychological insights of the students’ interests, capacities and talents. However, this power, interests and capacities should be translated into their social equivalents, i.e., the capacities to provide social service for the good of the society (19).

Among different learning approaches in the higher education, service learning has been regarded as an effective experiential learning approach that nurtures 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” (23, p. 112). Under the definition, service learning integrates community service with educational objectives. 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 (24), “service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both” (p. 1).

In theorizing service learning, Giles and Eyler (25) 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 (21). 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) (21, 25). Another aspect that constitutes to service learning is based on Dewey’s social and political philosophy. As suggested by Dewey (19), 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 (20).

Eyler (26) identified several ways through which service learning contributes to engaged citizenship, including students’ engagement in authentic services to the community, development of positive values towards community engagement, development of personal efficacy and commitment, better understanding of social issues, enhancement of lifelong learning and problem solving skills, improvement of skills for community action, and nurturing of formal reasoning capacities to deal with complex social problems. 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.

The subject covered four parts. The first part highlighted the theoretical framework in understanding children and adolescent development from different perspectives, including the life span theories, the ecological perspectives, and positive youth development perspectives. This is important for the students to acquire more knowledge related to children and adolescent development, especially on how the social environment influences to the wellbeing of children and adolescents living in underprivileged circumstances. The second part prepared students to plan and provide community service that cater the needs of the underprivileged children and adolescents. The attitudes of serving, ethical and moral considerations, practical skills in engaging children and adolescents, preparation of the summer camp curriculum were included in this part.

The third part is the implementation of the service. 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. The final part worked on consolidation of the service experiences of the students, including their gains from the service delivery, rooms for improvement, and their critical analyses on the related social problems.

The content and arrangement of the subject is listed in Table 1. During the summer of 2012, a total of 40 students enrolled in this subject. The service totally served 120 migrant children with their age ranged from 6 to 12. The children and adolescents were recruited from two non-government organizations in Shanghai.

This paper attempts to understand 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 after the service? To address to the above questions, qualitative research design was used to understand the views and experiences of the students who participated in the service learning subject.

Table 1. The content and format of the service learning subject

Format	No.	Content
Lecture	3	Theories of children and adolescent development
Workshop	5	Project-specific concepts and skills – Attitudes of serving; ethical and moral concerns; 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

In contrast to quantitative research method that has been criticized on its nomethetic nature of knowledge inquiry (27), oversimplification of the complexities of real-world experiences (28), and neglect of the subjective experiences and interpreted meanings of the 'actors' (27), qualitative research method focuses on how people perceive, experience, interpret, and create the social world (29). It emphasizes on the interpretive understanding (*verstehen*) of one's experiences and how one creates the subjective meanings with the experience (30). Patton (28) highlighted ten themes of qualitative inquiry, including naturalistic inquiry, inductive analysis, holistic perspective, qualitative data, personal touch of the researcher, capturing the constant and ongoing changes of dynamic systems, unique case orientation, context sensitivity, empathic neutrality and design flexibility. The methodology allows researchers to have a detailed and holistic understanding of social reality that is "emic," idiographic and context-specific (31).

In this study, reflective journals of the students after the service were analyzed. As suggested by Bringle and Hatcher (22), 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 the benefits they obtained from the service-learning subject.

Methods

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 first-year students of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University who came 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 as one of the assignments. 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 (32) 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 (33).

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.

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

Themes	No. of reflective journals mentioning the theme	Percent ^a
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%

^a The percentage is calculated by dividing the no. of reflective journals mentioning the theme over total reflective journals analyzed.

Research Question 1: What did the students learn from their service learning experience?

To address Research Question 1, four main themes were extracted from the reflective journals, including enhancement of intrapersonal and interpersonal competence, reflections on attitudes towards life and learning, application of learned knowledge into practice and facilitation of team work. Each of the themes is discussed in details.

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 after the service?

To address Research Question 2, four main themes were extracted from the reflective journals, including 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. Each theme is discussed in the following paragraphs.

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 them. 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 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." (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 and 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 students learned rewardingly while serving the migrant children and adolescents in Shanghai. Kendall et al (34) suggested that students improve their personal, social and intellectual characteristics necessary for civic engagement. From the personal aspect, the students have undergone self-development that have enhanced their intrapersonal and interpersonal competence, and improved their problem-solving ability and decision-making capability. Intellectually, they 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 their characters and pursuit of new knowledge. The students also applied what they have learned in the classroom to help the children and adolescents in the community. The integration of theories into practice was a meaningful experience of the students, as the process would help them identify the needs of the children and adolescents, formulate the intervention objectives and design suitable service for them. This also helped them identify and frame the social ills of the society (35, 36). From the social aspect, service learning helped the students develop friendship and team spirits with their group-mates.

More importantly, the service learning experience connected the students with the society where they belong. They reflected on their roles and responsibilities as university students, professionals-to-be and citizens. The learning and serving experience built up their passion to serve the underprivileged communities, cultivate their civic responsibility, developed awareness to social problems and social issues, as well as built up professional rigors to serve the community and mankind. The self-development and self-cultivation resulted from service learning address Dewey's (20) idea of education that aims at inducing the interest in knowledge and leading to growth and development, and cultivation of civic responsibility and community engagement aroused the students' social consciousness and civic awareness which Dewey (19) advocated.

The decline of traditional Chinese value of collectivism and rise of individualism create

adolescents who are more self-centered (37). Career prospect and professional status has become more important for adolescents in their selection of disciplines and choice of universities. Knowledge is increasingly regarded as a private good that will generate wealth and prestige rather than a public good (17). At the same time, universities perform as an "industry" rather than as educational institution (16). Specialization, professionalism and competitiveness are highly stressed in higher education. Shek and Wong (38) criticized that universities nowadays pay primary attention to academic and occupational domains, ignoring the focus of holistic development of young people. Chickering (17) also commented that universities "have generally ignored outcomes related to moral and ethical development as well as other dimensions of personal development" (p. 1).

In face of 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 (20) 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, university students taught knowledge and skills, induced hope and aspirations, and shared love and care to the migrant children. Second, the reflective journals give in-depth, 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 (26). 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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