Subjective outcome evaluation of a service learning subject in a Chinese context

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Abstract

The present study reports the evaluation findings based on 37 university students who enrolled in a service learning subject entitled "Promotion of Children and Adolescent Development" at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The Student Feedback Questionnaire (SFQ) was used to gauge the views of students on the subject and the teaching performance of the teaching staff. Both qualitative and quantitative results showed that the students generally had positive perceptions of the subject and teachers, with an overwhelming majority of the students perceiving the subject as helpful to the development of their professional competence, citizenship, and personal growth. Overall, the study underscores the effectiveness of service learning in promoting holistic development in university students.

Keywords: Service learning subject; student feedback; citizenship; personal growth; Chinese context

Introduction

Traditionally, the purpose of higher education is to advance the professional competence of university students and give them better career prospects. This traditional emphasis on "professional nurturance" has generated a heated debate regarding the mission of the university. Some colleagues argued that it is important for universities to educate students to be responsible citizens rather than solely focus on their careers (1-3). Rodin (4), the former President of the University of Pennsylvania, asserted the importance of university-community relationship and proposed to reorient the social responsibility of the university with the view that "the university can plan a lead[ing] role in urban transformation by changing its perspectives and making a commitment to alter its ways of interacting and transacting" (p. 118).

With valuable resources and the traditional mission of addressing the needs of the community,

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universities are particularly well-suited for the development of service learning (1). By emphasizing the importance of serving the community, service learning can enrich students' learning and re-connect their academic learning to the needs of the real world. Service learning can be seen as an important mechanism in the universities to bridge the gap between universities and the community. Service learning has become an increasingly popular pedagogy, with a focus on "experiential learning" and educating university students about life. Service learning could help convey such messages by giving students the opportunity to play a more engaged and active role beyond the classroom setting. However, some scholars question the learning objectives of such opportunities as those experiences may not explicitly convey the importance of university students' civic responsibility and service to the community (1).

Studies in the Western and Asian contexts generally showed that service learning in higher education benefitted the students in various ways, such as by cultivating the students' civic responsibility and helping students become more compassionate and empathic, by enhancing their ability to solve social problems, by achieving greater efficacy to make the world a better place, and by having better cognitive, attitudinal, moral, social and personal development (2, 3, 5-7). Some evidence also shows that service learning has modest positive effects on students' psychological, social and cognitive development (8). Although evaluation studies on service learning exist, they are not systematic and in-depth (2, 3, 9). Besides, an important question left unanswered is to know whether the pedagogy used in service learning increases students' learning outcomes. Warren (9) attempted to answer this question by conducting a meta-analysis of 14 studies in the United States. The analysis suggested that service learning has a positive influence on student learning outcomes. As the studies under review were conducted in the Western context, it would be useful to examine if similar findings were obtained in the Chinese context.

As a long-established and widely known university focusing on applied knowledge, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) has created numerous experiential learning opportunities for the students, including world-wide internships, exchange programs, field experiences and practicums to advance their professional knowledge and skills. Under the new 4-year undergraduate curriculum commencing in the 2012/13 school year, students are required to complete at least one 3-credit subject on Service Learning to nurture the students' civic responsibility and "learn to serve" attitude. This move does not only offer the students opportunities for participation in community service and enhance their awareness of applying their learnt professional knowledge to cater the needs of the community and society but it also nurtures students' leading role in making commitment to the society or the country.

To contribute to the development of Service Learning at PolyU, a service learning subject entitled "Promotion of Children and Adolescent Development" was offered at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The subject, one of the six pilot Service Learning subjects, was offered in the academic year 2012-2013 from semester 2 to 3 (summer semester) at PolyU. Before taking the subject, students were required to attend an interview to test their Putonghua proficiency, their views on the service in mainland China and the expected learning outcomes after completion of the subject. Out of over 150 applicants, 40 students were selected and successfully enrolled in the subject.

The subject attempted to introduce different psychosocial perspectives in understanding children and adolescent development as well as the needs and challenges of children and adolescents living in disadvantaged circumstances, to cultivate the positive values and strengths orientation among students, to nurture students' sense of social responsibility and social awareness and to promote prosocial behaviors. Before the service learning trip, three lectures and seven workshops (each lecture and workshop lasted for three hours) were organized during the above-mentioned period. As the service recipients were deprived migrant children in East China, the lectures began with a general understanding of the developmental needs of children and adolescents; then covered how the ecology affects the development of children and adolescents under disadvantaged circumstances and the promotion of positive youth development in the face of contextual changes and challenges. The workshops introduced practical skills for interacting with children and adolescents such as

skills in engaging children and adolescents, classroom management skills and problem solving skills in dealing with situational problems on site.

In addition, ethical and moral issues when serving others, especially children and adolescents, were discussed in the workshops to better protect all stakeholders concerned. Students were arranged in small groups consisting of different disciplines to maximize the students' professional disciplinary knowledge and creativity within groups. Feasible service proposals that best cater the needs of the service participants were devised according to topics of 1) Living English; 2) Interesting Science; 3) Promotion of health; 4) Personal development and 5) Preparation of the performance in the closing ceremony. An example based on "Living English" can be seen in Appendix 1.

The subject was one of the offshore service learning subjects and the service took place in Shanghai in East China with the collaboration of East China Normal University (ECNU) and a non-governmental organization named "HandsOn Shanghai." A total of 160 migrant children were recruited from the schools for migrant children in Shanghai and a 5-day summer camp was held in a local community centre (Wujing Voluntary Center) and offices of HandsOn Shanghai. Students of PolyU were accommodated in the hostels of the ECNU and this arrangement provided PolyU students opportunities to have some cultural exchanges with the ECNU students and the serving migrant children who also stayed in the hostels.

As a routine evaluation mechanism, a Student Feedback Questionnaire was administered at the end of the subject. Student feedback questionnaires are administered in many universities worldwide and constitute the most widely used form of teaching evaluation in higher education (10). It serves as a means for quality management in higher education and helps students reflect upon their learning (11). As an increasing number of educational institutions in higher education are providing service learning subjects, there is a need to evaluate and analyze the outcomes and impacts of these subjects on student learning and teachers' professional development (12). According to Honnet and Poulsen (13), "because people are often changed by the service and learning experience, effective programs must build in

opportunities for continuous feedback about the changing service needs and growing service skills of those involved. Ideally, participation in the service partnership affects personal development in areas such as intellect, ethics, cross-cultural understanding, empathy, leadership, and citizenship" (p. 10). As such, it is clear that there is a need to conduct systematic evaluation to assess students' feedback on their service learning experience. However, there is a "scarcity of replicable qualitative and quantitative research on the effects of service learning on student learning and development, the communities in which they serve, or on the educational institutions" (14, p. 2). Therefore, this paper aims to evaluate the impact of the subject "Promotion of Children and Adolescent Development" on student development.

Methods

In the 2012-2013 academic year, a total of 40 students from different disciplines enrolled for the subject. In order to gauge students' perceptions of learning experience in the subject and the achievement of the intended learning outcomes, all students who enrolled in the subject were invited via electronic mail to complete a Student Feedback Questionnaire (SFQ) online upon completion of the subject. A total of 37 questionnaires were received. The response rate was 92.5%.

Instruments

Upon completion of each subject, a Student Feedback Questionnaire (SFQ) was administered to collect the students' views and perceptions of the subject. Broadly speaking, there are two major parts of the SFQ, which are the students' perceptions of (1) the subject and (2) the teaching staff. In the present context, the SFQ focused on 13 items. Those included students' perceptions of their learning experience (4 items), the achievement of learning outcomes (5 items) and the achievement of specific learning objectives (4 items). The respondents were invited to rate their level of agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Two open-ended questions, such

as the most helpful aspects of the teaching staff and suggestions for improving teaching, were also asked. These qualitative comments enrich and substantiate the understanding of students' perceptions on the subject and the teaching qualities.

Results

Quantitative findings based on the closed-ended questions and summarized qualitative comments are presented in the present paper. For the quantitative findings, several observations are highlighted based on the percentage data. The findings revealed that the students' perceptions of the subject were highly positive. Overall, in terms of learning experience, the students reported that they had a clear understanding of what they were expected to learn from the subject (97.3%), and that the teaching and learning activities

had helped them achieve the learning outcomes (97.3%). With particular reference to the achievement of learning outcomes, the students reported that they were able to link the service learning activities and experiences with the academic content of the subject (97.3%), and that they learned to apply the knowledge and skills acquired at the university to deal with the complex issues in the service setting (97.3%). Most importantly, this subject achieved the overarching goal of service learning as students reported that the subject enabled them to develop a strong sense of civic responsibility (100%), reflect on their roles and responsibilities both as a professional and a responsible citizen (97.3%), and develop a sense of empathy towards people in need (97.3%). Lastly, students reported that the subject had enriched their overall development (100%) and the subject had promoted their understanding of the needs of the service participants (100%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of students' perceptions toward the subject (N = 37)

	3 No Strong Views		4 Agree		5 Strongly Agree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Learning experience						
1. I have a clear understanding of what I am expected to learn from this subject.	1	2.7	24	64.9	12	32.4
2. The teaching and learning activities (e.g. lectures, discussions, case studies, projects, etc.) have helped me to achieve the subject learning outcomes.	1	2.7	23	62.2	13	35.1
3. The assessments require me to demonstrate my knowledge, skills and understanding of the subject.	1	2.7	23	62.2	13	35.1
4. I understand the criteria according to which I will be graded.	3	8.1	23	62.2	11	29.7
Achievement of learning outcomes						
5. I can link the service learning activities and experiences with the academic content of the subject.	1	2.7	25	67.6	11	29.7
6. I have learned to apply the knowledge and skills I acquire at university to deal with complex issues in the service setting.	1	2.7	20	54.1	16	43.2
7. This subject has enabled me to reflect on my role and responsibilities both as a professional and as a responsible citizen.	1	2.7	19	51.4	17	45.9
8. I have felt more empathy towards people in need as a result of studying this subject.	1	2.7	17	45.9	19	51.4
9. I have developed a stronger sense of civic responsibility.	0	0.0	23	62.2	14	37.8
Achievement of Specific Learning Objectives						
10. This subject has promoted my understanding of the needs of the service participants.	0	0.0	23	62.2	14	37.8
11. This subject has promoted my competencies, including self-confidence, problem solving ability, decision-making capability, and interpersonal skills.	1	0.0	20	54.1	16	43.2
12. The subject has promoted my compassion about those who are in need.	2	5.4	15	40.5	20	54.1
13. This subject has enriched my overall development.	0	0.0	19	51.4	18	48.6

Note. All items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale with 1= strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = no strong views, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. All respondents reported ratings of 3 or above.

Table 2. Mean, SDs, Cronbach's α, and Correlation coefficients among the variables (*N* = 37)

Variables	Mean (SD)	1	2	3
1. Learning experience (4 items; α = .91)	4.29 (.48)	-		
2. Achievement of Learning Outcomes (5 items; α = .90)	4.39 (.45)	.82**	-	
3. Achievement of Specific Learning Objectives (4 items; α = .88)	4.44 (.46)	.77**	.51*	-
Overall (13 items; α = .94)	4.38 (.42)	.87**	.97**	.84**

Note. ** p <.001, *p<.01.

In order to examine the relationship between the learning experience and the achievement of learning outcomes, correlation analyses were performed. Reliability analysis showed that the SFQ was internally consistent (Table 2): 4 items related to the learning experience (α = .91), 5 items related to the achievement of learning outcomes (α = .90) and 4 items related to the achievement of desired learning objectives (α = .88). The results of correlation analyses showed that the achievement of learning outcomes (r = .82, p <.001) and the achievement of specific learning objectives (r = .77, p <.001) were strongly associated with learning experience (Table 2).

In addition to quantitative feedback, students were also invited to provide qualitative comments on what aspects of the subject were most useful to their learning, and how the subject could be improved to help them learn better. The summarized qualitative comments with some distinctive examples are presented in the present study. For the "subject" part, the students reported that the knowledge and practical skills learnt during the course and the experience of providing a service were viewed as the "most useful." One comment stated explicitly that the team (i.e., the small group formed during the class) was "one of the greatest harvests in this opportunity." Regarding the improvements of the subject, students perceived that the workload (lectures, workshops and assessments) was a concern. Interestingly, some students suggested having more workshops before or during the service for the relevant open-ended question.

Discussion

Although the present investigation is based on the data collected in a single Service Learning subject, the results shed some light on the effectiveness of the service learning pedagogy and help generate some insights into the learning and teaching process of the service learning subject. In addition, this investigation provided a useful case study to illustrate how the SFQ can possibly help understand a newly developed pedagogical service learning subject in the local context.

The findings of the present investigation are highly positive, especially as they help understand what the students were expected to learn from the subject and the teaching and learning activities that have helped them achieve the learning outcomes. The findings strongly suggest that service learning is an appropriate pedagogical approach for helping students reflect on their growth through the experience of service learning. The positive feedback also suggests that the subject was helpful to nurture students' civic responsibility and their overall development. The findings are consistent with the previous studies (1, 7, 9) in showing that service learning provides a platform for students to consolidate their serving and learning experiences and they illustrate how these experiences nurture the students' competencies and civic responsibilities. The teachers' caring attitudes and professional teaching skills, which are perceived as the strengths of the teaching process, were also pointed out in the students' feedback on the teaching quality, though the data were not directly collected from the teachers.

Eyler and Giles (5) suggested that successful and effective service learning experiences should satisfy the following four criteria: 1) personal and interpersonal development; 2) understanding and applying knowledge learnt in class; 3) perspective transformation, and 4) developed sense of citizenship. The present investigation showed that the subject has provided students with such service learning experiences. Upon completion of the subject, the students stated that the subject had enriched their overall development and had promoted different psychosocial competencies such as increasing their

self-confidence and enhancing their problem-solving abilities as well as interpersonal skills. The qualitative feedback of perceiving the team formed as "harvest" could serve as an example showing the "interpersonal development" of students.

In addition, the students mentioned in the SFQ that the course reading and learning were closely related to the specific community (i.e., the migrant children) they were serving which might help maximize the impact on students and service participants (2). Besides knowledge acquisition and personal development, the subject had promoted students' empathy and compassion towards people in need. The students served migrant children in Shanghai and this exposure provided them opportunities to interact with different cultural groups. This exposure thus helped students develop cultural sensitivity and empathic understanding of migrant children (15).

In addition to the insights drawn from the quantitative analyses, the qualitative comments from the students were also worth noting. One of the participating students wrote in her reflective journal,

"I believe that we should be the change agent. We want to see as a change in attitude and mindset can transform [their] lives. That is why I should be the 'powerful push' which makes people believe that change can be seen some day by behaving ourselves and attending more to social issues. I used to escape from politics but it is now my turn to manage the social issues, to take care of the underprivileged, to take part in the revolution process. Children's hands are small but their dreams are big. Their power can be nurtured until they are confident enough to make changes by themselves. This is also a key to their growth since aspiration, resilience and competencies are major elements composing their adolescence. It does not mean that we should not do anything. This service learning trip is [definitely] a start."

Through experiencing the serving and learning process in the subject, the student realized that it is time for her to "start" taking responsibility and caring for the community and the underprivileged, which she was hesitant to do before the enrolment in the subject. This student's realization also represents a "start" for the service learning subject as well in awakening the need to provide students opportunities to experience and explore the importance of serving the community.

Despite the positive findings of the study, the limitations of the study should be realized. Although using SFQ is a cost- and manpower-efficient means to understand students' learning outcomes in specific subjects, some scholars still have doubt about whether Likert-type standardized evaluation method is adequate to provide detailed information that can help researchers understand the strengths and weaknesses of the subjects and lead to relevant revisions of each individual subject (16). Although the present study attempted to yield multi-layered meanings by combining the qualitative data with the quantitative data obtained, other qualitative measures such as students' reflective journals or teachers' self-evaluations could be included to substantiate the understanding of how service-learning impact on both students and teachers.

In addition, Kember, Leung and Kwan (10) doubted that performing SFQ is only an act of "formality" without improving the overall quality of teaching. The performance of the lecturers "is more or less the same [after the evaluation]…and could not see any effects of the evaluation" (10, p. 416). It is possible that inadequate attention has been paid to utilizing the SFQ data effectively to identify areas for improvement in teaching. However, the depth of data analyses could be deepened by incorporating the teachers' self-evaluations of their teaching (17). More data from the teachers, for example by having the teachers fill in the subjective outcome evaluation (18) or individual interviews, could help deepen the understanding of the pedagogical arrangements administered and the personal growth of the teachers in the process of teaching and learning the service learning subjects.

Acknowledgments

Appendix 1. Lesson Plan of "Personal Development"

Lesson Plan

(1) Topic: Get Set Go! Dream Big, Act Big!
(2) Theme: Dreams (Category: Personal Development)
(3) Learning Objectives

In this lesson,
- students can try to create and have an initial preparation for their own dreams
- students will learn that dream is feasible to them.

(4) Expected Learning Outcomes

Through this lesson, student can:
- Define their dreams and competences or skills required to realize the dreams
- Learn qualities like perseverance, confidence and courage are significant in achieving dreams.
- Understand "taking action" is important

(5) Lesson Plan
Basic information of the class:
Level: <u>P4-P5</u>
No. of children served: <u>20 children for each class</u>
Duration of lesson: <u>45 minutes</u>
Format of conduction: <u>In-class teaching, complemented with case study, game and video clip for children</u>
Classroom size: <u>Middle size</u>
Class facilities: <u>Computer with Internet Connection (for PowerPoint and playing video on Tudou/Youku)/Computer without Internet but have video player (for opening video file-avi), sound equipment, projector and screen, game sheets (Labyrinth Game) for 60 children, sufficient tables, chairs and stationery, 60 small cards (Size: 10.5cm x 7.5cm)</u>

Activity	Procedures	Teaching materials
<u>Warm-up Activity</u> (5 minutes)	a. Divide students into groups of 5 b. First two PowerPoint slides will be used to illustrate the meaning of a "dream" c. Teacher will show the 1st slide and ask whether those 4 choices are dreams (i) Students show their decision by showing "tick" or "cross" using their fingers (ii) Teacher will then randomly ask several kids of the reasons for choosing specific choice as dream or not d. Little conclusion using 2nd slide, dreams: (i) Can be developed from occupations known or hobbies (ii) Should also be realistic and <u>pragmatic</u>	-PowerPoint slides (1-2)
<u>Core Activities</u> I. Quick Case Study (5 minutes)	a. Students remain sitting in groups. b. 3rd PowerPoint slide will be shown with illustration c. Teacher will show one of the dreams (i.e., Nurse) and analyze the competences or skills required – What is the meaning of <u>pragmatic</u>? (i) Students have to choose right competences required by showing "tick" or "cross" (However, there will be no choice for "<u>Perseverance</u>") (ii) Teacher will then ask them "What are the common competences for dreams?"	-PowerPoint slide (3)

Appendix (Continued)

Activity	Procedures	Teaching materials
II. Labyrinth Game (10 minutes)	a. Students remain sitting in groups b. Helpers distribute Labyrinth game sheets to each student c. Invite students to play it (3 minutes) (i) The quickest student to finish can have a sticker (ii) When the majority of students finish, teacher will show the solution on 4th slide d. Short discussion and conclusion about *perseverance* (i) Ask students what they have learnt in the Labyrinth game (ii) Use encouraging quote from Nick Vujicic in his talk "Unstoppable Dream" (5th slide) (iii) Bring back to game. Teacher will reveal the relationship between the Labyrinth game and perseverance	- Labyrinth Game -PowerPoint slides (4-6) -Pencils
III. Video Clip Playing (13 minutes)	a. Students remain sitting in groups b. Teacher will play an video clip (5:44) – China's Dream(中國夢想秀) c. Teacher then ask children what they have learnt from it – Reflection (i) When you are pursuing a dream, do not forget those who supported you. (ii) Action instead of saying (iii) Do not give up even if you face failure	-Video clip (Browsing online/using video player) -Sound equipment -PowerPoint slides (7-8)
IV. Write Down Your Dreams (5 minutes)	a. Students remain sitting in groups b. Helpers will distribute a small card and ask students to draw or write down their dreams. c. Remain silent in class d. During thinking time, teacher will invite them to write down their own dreams *Need not share, just keep it *Often reflect your dream during your life	-Small cards (Size: 10.5 cm x 7.5 cm) -PowerPoint slide (9) Pencils
Wrap Up (2 minutes)	a. To remind students they should carefully create their dreams and make clear about competences or skills required b. To emphasize perseverance, confidence and courage are essential for pursuing dreams c. To encourage students to act for pursuing their dreams	-PowerPoint slide (10)

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