

## Factors Affecting Teachers' Continual Engagement in Service-Learning

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### 1. ABSTRACT & KEYWORDS

This qualitative study aims to identify the factors that motivate and deter faculty's continual engagement in service-learning (SL) in an Asian context.

The results showed that 21 out of the 24 respondents (87.5%) indicated their willingness of continual engagement in SL. The three key motivations were 'facilitating student learning and development', 'personal commitments to their service recipients, their own subject, colleagues or the University', and 'personal interests or growth'. On the other hand, heavy workload and lack of recognition from department deterred few teachers from continuously engaging in SL. It was interesting to find that very few respondents mentioned their motivation for continual engagement was related to the benefits of SL to the community even though it is a key beneficiary of an SL subject. Future studies can focus more on the community dimensions of SL.

This study provided some insights to address the gap of scanty research on teachers' continuous SL engagement in Asian contexts.

Keywords: service-learning, faculty, continual engagement

### 2. Introduction

Service-learning is a form of experiential learning that integrates meaningful service to the community with academic study and reflection. Research has shown that service-learning is a powerful educational practice that impacts student learning and development (Furco, 2001). The equal emphasis on student learning and the community service component makes it vital to manage and teach a service-learning subject well, ensuring less harm to be caused to the students and the community (Wood, Banks, Galiardi, Koehn, & Schroeder, 2011). As Bringle and Hatcher (1995) pointed out, faculty roles and engagement are fundamental in service-learning as implementing this pedagogy is a curricular decision and teachers are primarily responsible for the direction and design of the curriculum. To promote or institutionalise service-learning, it is essential to understand faculty motivation for using service-learning (Driscoll, 2000).

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Previous research suggests that the primary motivation for faculty's engagement in service-learning is their belief that it will increase students' understanding of course materials and enhance student learning (Hammond, 1994; Blakey, Theriot, Cazzell, & Sattler, 2015). Some embrace service-learning as they value the experiential element of this pedagogy (Hesser, 1995) or see respected colleagues' active participation (Gelmon, Holland, Shinnamon, & Morris, 1998). Commitments to social changes, social issues or social justice have been cited as personal motivations for some faculty (O'Meara & Niehaus, 2009). On the other hand, the time commitment and logistics required to engage in service-learning are cited as the most significant hindrances (Abes, Jackson, & Jones, 2002, Blakey et al., 2015). Another common deterrent is the lack of recognition and support, such as lack of promotion and tenure recognition, budgetary constraints (Abes et al., 2002, Blakey et al., 2015). Students' different levels of readiness and willingness to participate in service-learning also deter some faculty to use service-learning (Banerjee & Hausafus, 2007).

Nonetheless, as Abes and colleagues (2002) noted, the existing research regarding faculty members' motivation and deterrents to incorporate service-learning into their courses was insufficient and much of the research utilised relatively small samples. "Though still relatively nascent, research focusing on service-learning as it relates to faculty is becoming more sophisticated" (Blakey et al., 2015, p. 4). It is therefore imperative that more studies explore faculty's experience in service-learning. This study, based on a wide spread of the participantstratums, aims to identify the factors that motivate and deter faculty's continual engagement in service-learning – among the teachers who have planned and/or implemented a service-learning subject in an Asian context.

### **3. Methods/analysis**

The study was conducted in a large public university of Hong Kong which has introduced service-learning as a mandatory graduation requirement for its undergraduate students. It used semi-structured individual interviews as the main method of data collection. Target participants were teachers who had planned and/or implemented a service-learning subject during the 2012/13 and 2016/17 academic years. They were invited for the interview through a two-stage purposive sampling. Firstly, 65 service-learning teachers were identified based

on their years of experience in service-learning and discipline nature. Secondly, 4 teachers were randomly selected from each stratum. A total of 24 were selected and invited by an invitation email. Non-respondents were followed up twice by reminder emails, phone calls were also made to ensure the response rate. If the selected participants rejected or neglected the invitation, others from the same discipline nature and with similar years of service-learning experience would be invited. Altogether 24 teachers were interviewed, yielding around 15 hours of material. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in Chinese for further analysis. The data was content analysed by the researcher using a grounded theory.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

##### **Motivators to faculty's further service-learning engagement**

Twenty-one out of the 24 respondents (87.5%) indicated their willingness of continual engagement in service-learning. Analysis of the interviews revealed three key motivations, as follows:

##### **Facilitating student learning and development**

The most mentioned motivation that drives faculty's continual service-learning engagement is their belief that service-learning can bring about benefits or positive impact to students. On the one hand, faculty thought that in service-learning, students were required to complete some experiential tasks in a real-world setting, this could help hone their multiple skills, such as problem-solving skills, critical thinking and enhance their personal development through the process of learning by doing. Most of them, on the other hand, found motivation and satisfaction from witnessing the growth and transformation occurring within their students. Faculty also found their students were becoming responsible, caring or contributing members of the society. In these cases, students' learning outcomes and development from service-learning positively influence the faculty's desire of continual service-learning engagement.

##### **Personal commitments to their service recipients, their own subject, colleagues or the University**

Many noted their motivation for further engagement in service-learning related to their commitments to the service recipients, the subject they had created, their

colleagues or the University. Faculty found it meaningful or worthy to utilise education as means to serve the underprivileged students. The sustainability of a service-learning subject also drove some teachers to continually engage in service-learning. Interestingly, two experienced teachers shared a broader motivation to their continual engagement in service-learning. One said service-learning provided resources, a chance to cultivate new teachers for the department, and the other considered service-learning was one of the strengths of the University and therefore wanted to continually engage into it.

### **Personal interests or growth**

Teachers expressed their motivation for continual engagement in service-learning was related to their personal interests or growth. Some embraced service-learning as they were interested in the experiential element of this pedagogy that matched their desire to improve student learning through practical learning tasks. A few teachers pointed out service-learning provided them an opportunity to embed their research interests into the subject. Some less experienced service-learning teachers shared they also learned alongside with the students throughout the service-learning experience.

### **Deterrents to faculty's further service-learning engagement**

In terms of the remaining three teachers, two were reluctant and one expressed reservation to continually engage in service-learning because of heavy workload and lack of recognition from their department. They commonly shared that the workload of teaching a service-learning subject was nearly as twice as that of teaching a non service-learning subject. The heavy workload mainly originated from the interaction with community partners to confirm the service details and the efforts put into supervising students in the service setting. They thought their department did not understand the time and efforts they had put into service-learning and recognition was scarce.

Consistent with the findings of previous studies (Hammond, 1994; Blakey et al., 2015), this study also reflected the intrinsic motivation to improve student learning and development was the most prevalent driving factor. The high percentage of teachers' willingness of continual engagement reveals that the majority of the participants were engaged and devoted, they could help advance

the service-learning provision of the University with their continued engagement. This study has also identified new motivations that are related to cultivating new teachers for the department and reinforcing the University's strength through their continual engagement while these are not mentioned in the previous research. Future research can adopt a more representative sample to have a much comprehensive understanding of faculty's motivation for continuous engagement in service-learning.

Heavy workload and lack of recognition impeded a few faculty from continuously engaging in service-learning, this has been confirmed by the previous studies (Abes et al., 2002, Blakey et al., 2015). However, these teachers valued the understanding and recognition from their departments rather than the funding, tenure or promotion recognition cited in the existing research (Blakey et al., 2015). Indeed, doing service-learning well is time-consuming and its impacts are not easy to measure (O'Meara, 2008). It is therefore recommended to instill not only faculty, but also senior management and the supporting staff with a deeper understanding of service-learning, including its nature, challenges involved and efforts required to plan and deliver a service-learning subject, and ultimately they can realise the endeavor that the service-learning faculty has to make, and its impact on students and the community.

Based on the reciprocity principle of service-learning, the community is a key beneficiary of a service-learning subject. However, very few participants of this study mentioned their motivation for continual engagement was related to the benefits of service-learning to the community. It may suggest that faculty members mainly focus on students rather than the community when planning and delivering a service-learning subject or regard the community as a social classroom to facilitate student learning instead of a beneficiary, and thus the community is not in their service-learning agenda. The existing studies on the value of service to the community in the service-learning literature are also sparse (Cruz & Giles, 2000). Teachers should have a balanced view towards this reciprocity rule. Future studies can focus on the community dimensions of service-learning to address this significant gap in the literature.

## **5. Conclusions and contributions to theory and practice**

The study sought to explore the factors affecting teachers' continual engagement

in service-learning. It provided some insights to address the gap of scanty research on teachers' continuous service-learning engagement in Asian countries by investigating 24 teachers' willingness of continuous service-learning engagement in a university of Hong Kong. Nevertheless, the qualitative study only examined service-learning faculty in one single university in Hong Kong. More studies are needed to understand deeper about faculty's service-learning experience in different contexts so universities or relevant parties will have the strategies to promote teachers' use of service-learning and address the barriers impeding some faculty from embracing service-learning.

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